

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 T W E N T Y

T H E S P Y

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 1980 (TWO DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)

“I’ll be apparating to the Pendle area of Lancashire. There are herbs on the moors that I’ll need. They have to be gathered at night.” Severus’s tone showed that he thought the questioning an unacceptable intrusion into the relationship between him and the Dark Lord. The administrative ‘assistant’ recorded the request and went on to other things.

Severus didn’t go home. He went straight to Pendle Hill where he could watch the countryside around him, and where there were indeed herbs that he could take back to London. *If this plan fails, too.* He waited for a while, listening and scanning the area. No one followed him. Leaving his bag in the shelter of a rock so that it would look as if he’d just wandered away, he concentrated on the room at the base of the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade and apparated.

The shack was quiet, and Severus lit a Lumos spell. Through dust upon dust on the floor, through the overlay of Remus’s own marks, human and lupine, he could still make out the traces of his and James’s footprints, and the marks of the werewolf as it chased them back into the tunnel. No one but Remus had disturbed it since.

He eased himself into the tunnel and made his way to the willow. It was evening. Everyone should be at dinner. Pausing to look around to assure himself that nobody was there, Severus left the willow, skirted the edge of the forest and knocked on Hagrid’s door. There was no answer.

Right. I get up this whole scheme, and then he’s not in . . . Why should I expect him to be in at dinner time? He couldn’t stand there in full view of the school, so he slipped the latch and entered. *I’ll sit here at the table ’til he gets back. What if he’s not alone?* Severus looked around for someplace to hide, but there was none. *It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters anymore.*

Severus laid his head on his folded arms. After so many days and nights of worry he was exhausted, and he fell asleep at Hagrid's table.

Hagrid came in fifteen minutes later. He stopped in the doorway, then quietly closed the door and went up the hill to Dumbledore's office. There was no ceremony. "The Snape lad's come back. He's in my hut."

"Why is he here?"

"Didn't ask. Lad's asleep. Looking kind of pasty and washed out, you ask me. Not healthy at all. Thought you might want to know."

"Oh, yes, Hagrid, I do want to know. This must be handled carefully. Go back and find out what he wants. If it is to speak with me, tell him it cannot be here at Hogwarts. It must be somewhere, though, where I can first check to be sure we are alone. I shall let him choose the place."

Hagrid was gone for half an hour. When he returned, he looked worried. "It's got somewhat to do with James and Lily, but he wouldn't say more. He's agreed to meet you, wants to in fact. Said Pendle Hill in Lancashire since that's where his crowd thinks he's going anyway."

"Did he say when?"

"Soon as ya can. He's gone there now." Hagrid paused. "Professor, that lad's scared half out of his mind. I ain't never seen him so scared. What d' ya think it is?"

"I have a suspicion, Hagrid, but I shall keep it to myself for the moment. He is frightened, eh? If my suspicion is correct, his fear may not be entirely for himself. We may be able to use that. We may be able to convince him to change masters."

"I don't quite catch yer meaning. He's one o' them Death Eaters, is that it?"

"That is part of it. You know, it has often crossed my mind," said Dumbledore pensively, "that working for Voldemort may indeed be a frightening thing, and that the prospect of his anger and retaliation more frightening still. And yet Master Snape, terrified as he is, is facing that prospect now. The young man is worth saving, Hagrid, and the only way we can accomplish that is to turn him from this darkness and offer him a way back into the light. But he may be too frightened to accept the offer."

"So what can ya do?"

"Frighten him even more. If the prospect of staying with Voldemort is more terrifying than the prospect of leaving . . . Hagrid, I am off to Pendle."

Cloaked against the cold, Dumbledore left Hogwarts and apparated to Lancashire.

Severus apparated onto the top of Pendle Hill with a storm brewing in the Pennines. Scudding clouds obscured the light of the crescent moon, and wind tore through the branches of the few trees that hugged Pendle's slopes. Severus shivered in the biting chill. It was a horrible night, a terrible night, a night of dark portent and fear, and suddenly, standing there alone, solitary in the vindictive presence of a tempest that howled with the bloodthirstiness of a wolf, suddenly Severus knew himself doomed. Two great wizards — and he'd betrayed them both. It was now only a matter of which descended on him first, the vengeance of the Dark Lord speeding north out of London, or the fury of the white one, reaching south from Hogwarts.

Wand in hand, ears straining for the dreaded crack of apparation, turning and looking every way at once because there was nothing to shield his back, Severus waited. He was trembling uncontrollably, his stomach twisted in knots, visions of Faustino Pembertine and Dorcas Meadows clawing at his mind, at that moment wishing himself dead that he might no longer be afraid...

He came in a blinding flash of lightning, yet in that moment of stark terror and panic, Severus wasn't sure which one. He flung himself forward onto his knees, his wand already blasted from his hand, screaming "Don't kill me!" The apparition that towered over him was eerily illuminated in the darkness, and he realized it was Dumbledore.

"That was not my intention," said Dumbledore, his voice as frosty as the cutting air, his hair and robes swirling in the wind, the personification of the storm. "Well, Severus? What message does Lord Voldemort have for me?"

A sharp, unfamiliar pain shot through Severus's left arm, and he closed his eyes, both for the pain and for shame that Dumbledore would know so certainly who and what he was. He'd never been ashamed of being a Death Eater before. He'd been proud, loyal... but that was before Pembertine and Meadows. Before the birth of Lily's son. The Wheel of Fortune was turning rapidly, and what had been, was no longer.

"No... no message..." he stammered. "I'm here on my own account. I... I come with a warning... no, a request... please..."

At his words, Dumbledore cast a silencing spell. "What request could a Death Eater make of me?"

"The... the prophecy... the prediction... Trelawney..." Severus's stammer was worse than it had ever been.

"Ah, yes. How much did you relay to Lord Voldemort?" And as the

strange pain stabbed through his arm again, it seemed to Severus that Dumbledore was sneering.

"Everything . . . everything I heard! That is why . . . it is for that reason . . . he thinks it means Lily Evans!" Even as he said the words, in that instant Severus understood that his bridges were burnt. He'd betrayed the Dark Lord, and his only hope lay in the man who stood before him. Lily's only hope as well. He did this for Lily.

It was the moment Severus had hoped for, the moment for Dumbledore to spring into action. But he did not. Instead he bandied words. "The prophecy did not refer to a woman. It spoke of a boy born at the end of July . . ."

"You know what I mean!" Severus shrieked, not believing what was happening. "He thinks it means her son, he is going to hunt her down . . ." — he thought suddenly of James and the unknown baby — "... kill them all . . ."

No sense of urgency tinged Dumbledore's voice. "If she means so much to you, surely Lord Voldemort will spare her? Could you not ask for mercy for the mother, in exchange for the son?"

"I have . . . I have asked him . . ." Severus began to explain, but Dumbledore cut him off.

"You disgust me." Severus knew the tone, knew it was his fault. He'd failed Dumbledore as he'd failed his father, as he'd failed the Dark Lord, as he'd failed Lily. Through the pain in his arm, he heard Dumbledore state his error . . . "You do not care, then, about the deaths of her husband and child? They can die, as long as you have what you want?"

No! No! That isn't it at all! Severus struggled to amend his error, to placate Dumbledore. "Hide them all," he begged. "Then . . . keep her . . . them . . . safe. Please."

"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"

"In . . . in return?" The impact of Dumbledore's callousness, his lack of concern for what became of Lily hit Severus like a physical blow. He couldn't speak for the shock of it. *Pay? I have to pay for him to protect his own people? for him to protect Lily?* The enormity of his miscalculation swept over Severus — a tidal wave of renewed fear. He'd thrown everything away for this chance to save Lily, and now there was nothing left for him to cling to but the chance to save Lily. He groveled before Dumbledore. "Anything," he managed to whisper. "I'll give you anything."

There was a moment of silence, and then a deep sigh. "It is well," said

Dumbledore gently. "You and I, Master Snape, need to talk. I believe your home is nearby. Shall we go there?"

* * *

"You have redecorated," was Dumbledore's only comment as Severus ushered him into the tiny sitting room, lodged him on the little sofa, and hurried to the kitchen to boil water on the grate for tea. After that, both were silent until Severus returned with the cups and Dumbledore motioned to him to pull a chair over so that they sat face to face.

"Now, if I may . . ." Dumbledore held out his hand, his gesture clearly indicating that he wished to examine Severus's left arm. Severus turned his face away, but extended hand and arm, silent as Dumbledore pushed back the sleeve of the robe and unfastened the cuff of the shirt beneath, exposing the arm. The silence stretched out while Dumbledore's finger probed the mark.

"It is smaller than I anticipated," Dumbledore said at last. "And less detailed."

"It's not the full mark," Severus explained. "That's only for the inner circle. This one is for those of us who work at headquarters. The lower ranks have no mark at all."

"And where is headquarters?"

Severus opened his mouth to answer, but no sound came out. He tried to think the location, but no image entered his brain. He began to tremble again, for he'd said he would do anything for Lily, and was failing at Dumbledore's first request.

"It is no matter," said Dumbledore quietly. "There is a Fidelius Charm. How was the mark made, and what does it do?"

"It's burned on with green fire. It identifies us. It can summon us. It can punish us. It may be able to locate us — I'm not sure."

"Punish? Can you show me?"

Severus allowed Dumbledore to search his eyes, and let the images of Pembrtine's last moments surface. Dumbledore watched, apparently unmoved, then sighed, rose, and stood for a moment by the window. "It has indeed burrowed its way deep into the flesh," he said at last. "I do not think it can ever be removed. I noticed that you flinched whenever I said . . . his name." He paused. "You came to me after you witnessed this. Do you not fear him? Of course you do. When I first came to the hilltop, perhaps even then you thought it might be him. I was concerned that you had grown so distant that

you would expect me to kill you. But if you were also expecting him . . .” He returned to sit facing Severus. “Will you show me your own punishment?”

It was shorter and less painful to watch than the images of Pembertine. Knowing now how small his own torment had been compared with others, Severus was certain that Dumbledore would despise his weakness and his cowardice. He was wrong.

“So, you did not run to him in triumph, waving the prophecy like a banner of victory. You gave it to him only to escape further punishment. Tell me now of James and Lily’s child.”

Severus explained about the teams searching for reports of birth, and of finding the news about the Longbottoms and the Potters.

Dumbledore looked grave. “And you are certain which baby he is looking for?”

“Yes. The Potter baby. Lily’s baby.”

“Ah. I wish to ask you a question, Master Snape. If this were the other baby, any other baby, would you be here today?”

Severus closed his eyes and thought of the aurors’ child. “No,” he said. “I wouldn’t,” and he was deeply ashamed of his own cowardice.

“Then perhaps we are fortunate that it is the Potter baby, for now we can take action. What is being planned?”

“Tonight. After midnight. Two teams of six. One to the Potter estate, the other to the Evans home in Surrey. There’s something about getting information directly from the Ministry, but I don’t know how that works.”

Dumbledore again went to the window, but this time he opened it, pulled out his wand, and extended arm and wand outside. Something silver spurted from the end of the wand and vanished.

“We shall warn the Potter family and get a crew to Surrey,” Dumbledore continued. “Now I fear you are going to have to prove yourself.”

Severus was grilled on his spells and potions, his defense training, the layout of the interior of headquarters, other Death Eaters, and the fates of Benjy Fenwick and Caradoc Dearborn. The death of Dorcas Meadows was particularly difficult to relate, and Severus wished the earth would open and swallow him forever.

Then Dumbledore said, “Thank you, Master Snape. I believe you have answered all my questions. Now we must find a place where you will be safe.”

“Oh, no. I have to go back. If he finds out I’ve spoken to you, he’ll kill me.”

“You would be safe at Hogwarts.” Dumbledore said.

"I don't think so. I can't take that chance. If I don't report back, he'll know I betrayed him. Maybe he can't reach into Hogwarts, but I can't risk it. I'm not that brave. I have to go back."

"He will know when he looks at you."

"No, he won't. No more than you do unless I want you to. He didn't know anything about Lily until I asked him to spare her, and that's still all he knows."

Dumbledore smiled. "Well, if you are going back anyway, you did promise me anything I asked. I will ask you to consider helping me. Today will not be the end. If you hear more about attacks on the Potters, will you send me word? You do not need to decide now. Are you familiar with Hyde Park? Good. Magic can be sensed and traced, so we sometimes employ muggle techniques. There is a drop point near Marble Arch."

It was now nearly midnight. Dumbledore apparated to Hogwarts. Severus apparated back to Pendle Hill where he hurriedly collected as many herbs as he could, then spent the rest of the night sleepless at home. The following morning he returned to headquarters to report in. No one questioned the time he'd been gone, and no one inspected his herb bag. It looked as if he'd finally been successful at something after all.

The first raids to locate the Potters were glaring failures, and the Dark Lord was not pleased. His anger reverberated through headquarters, and everyone moved cautiously for a few days. Then at the beginning of December word came that the Dark Lord had inside information about the whereabouts of another of Dumbledore's people, one who might be able to tell them where the Potters were. Another raid was planned.

"When are you going out?" Severus asked Rosier with studied casualness.

"Tomorrow night. For some reason it has to be well before the full moon. Strange, but that's what he wants."

Rosier didn't understand, but Severus did. Now there were two in danger, Lily and Lupin. Severus knew Lupin would never betray Lily, but did he want Lupin captured and interrogated? How different might he feel if it were Sirius instead?

And then there was Dumbledore. Dumbledore had listened and trusted. Even knowing that Severus had betrayed him once before, Dumbledore had trusted and acted, and Lily was safe. He'd allowed Severus to go back to the Dark Lord without fearing further betrayal. *I've disappointed him so much, and he still trusts me. Can I fail him again?*

That afternoon Severus left headquarters and, to avoid the traces of apparating, took the Underground to Hyde Park. A crowd was milling around Speaker's Corner listening to a political harangue, so it was easy to mingle and reach the drop point next to Marble Arch without seeming too conspicuous. There Severus left a note telling Dumbledore of the next day's raid to capture Remus Lupin. With a silent prayer that it be found in time, he returned by Underground to headquarters.

As Severus entered his training area, the impact of what he'd done hit him. *I've just chosen sides. I work for Dumbledore, and I'm a spy.*

The raiding team ran into a group of aurors, and Igor Karkaroff was captured. The Dark Lord was furious, and there were rumors that whoever his source of information was, was now in serious trouble. Severus's mood was much lighter. For the first time in a long time he felt as if he'd done something worthwhile, something that made a difference in the world. Lily was safe, Lupin was safe, and Dumbledore trusted him.

It was several days before Severus went back to Speaker's Corner. There, in the Marble Arch drop, he found instructions for a different drop and orders not to use Marble Arch for at least three months. The new drop was outside the zoo in Regent's Park, along the canal near Camden Town Underground station. *How does Dumbledore know I take the Tube?*

When he returned to headquarters, Severus was hailed by a large Death Eater named Crabbe, one of his students who was particularly inept in learning defensive moves. "Hey, Snape," Crabbe called from the end of a corridor, "we need people on a job next week. You never go out. Want to join us?"

Severus was about to say that he had another assignment, then thought that this might be an opportunity to gather information. "What kind of job?" he called back.

"Muggle riot outside Shrewsbury. Interested?"

Severus started to ask what a muggle riot was when Rosier suddenly appeared at the door of one of the rooms. "Get inside here, you big idiot," he yelled at Crabbe, who instantly obeyed. "Sorry about that," Rosier said to Severus. "False alarm. We have a full crew, so you don't have to come."

"Okay."

His curiosity piqued, Severus moved closer to the door behind which Rosier and Crabbe disappeared. He could hear Rosier still yelling at Crabbe.

"How many times do I have to tell you, he doesn't go on jobs like this. He doesn't hear about jobs like this. He doesn't even know that jobs like this exist."

“But he’d be useful, wouldn’t he?”

“Learning we set muggle mobs on wizards? If he ever finds out Wilkes and I lead raids like that, I’ll nail your ears to the Ministry of Magic myself. Don’t you know that’s how we recruited him? That old lady in Lancashire?”

Severus listened no further. In a state bordering on shock, he made his way back to the workroom where he still occasionally made potions and spells. The old lady in Lancashire. That was Nana. Rosier and Wilkes, Death Eaters while still at Hogwarts, had led a muggle raid against Nana to recruit him. *How could I be so blind? How could I be so naïve?* An icy, deadly fury enveloped him.

Vengeance is a dish best served cold. Severus waited three days before going to Camden Town. The message was short. ‘Sometime in the next week a mob of muggles will be incited to attack and possibly kill a wizard in the vicinity of Shrewsbury.’ Discretion being more important than personal satisfaction, he then returned to headquarters to be the quiet, obedient little potions master who also taught defense. He asked no questions and made no outside excursions for several more days.

Both Rosier and Wilkes died in that raid, and another Death Eater named Antonin Dolohov was captured. The leader of the Ministry forces was an auror named Alastor Moody, who was now singled out for the Dark Lord’s wrath, especially as it was learned he’d also been the one to capture Karkaroff. With two major disasters in just a couple of weeks, the mood at headquarters became somber.

Then more shocking news came from above. The source that had provided so much success for nearly a year had informed the Dark Lord that there was a spy within the organization. Operations shut down, Death Eaters were forbidden to speak to each other, permission to return home in the evenings was denied, and everyone was required to be re-interviewed. The entry logs were picked up and movement in and out of headquarters for the last two months was carefully reviewed and analyzed.

As it turned out, Severus’s precautions served him well. None of his exits from headquarters showed any deviation from his habits of previous months, and so gave no cause to suspect him. The interview was another matter. The time before, when his own mind independently concealed information, he’d intended to be open. Now he intended to deceive, and he couldn’t rely on the automatic reflexes of his brain.

Severus’s interview was an hour and a half ordeal. His sense of peril at a fever pitch, his nerves on a razor edge, he still had to appear calm and relaxed

to the Dark Lord. Any image he'd shown during his first interview had to be available. Every moment of his life had to be accounted for. There could be no gaps, no omissions, no inconsistent images or emotions. And through it all he had to convey innocence and obedience. One slip meant a slow and painful death.

Just as he felt his will ebbing, as he was losing his focus and concentration, the Dark Lord ended the interview, pronouncing Severus a good and loyal servant, and not the spy being sought. Severus returned to his workroom and collapsed in a chair. *I can't do this. I can't do this. I'm not strong enough.*

But he knew he was strong enough. The Dark Lord had ordered the deaths of both Nana and Lily, and the best way to avenge the first would be to prevent the second. He had so much to atone for. Severus closed his eyes and thought of Lily teaching him to skip stones. A pure thing, a clean thing, and he would stand between her and the darkness while there was still breath in his body, even if she never knew of it.

Now life had purpose. Life had meaning. All those long years of hiding, turning himself off, retreating from friendship, from involvement were gone. Severus was like a medieval knight. He burned with his mission to destroy the Dark Lord, and worshipped a lady unattainable and pure. He knew now he was no coward, for now he understood that life glows brighter when you live in the shadow of its ending, and he embraced that knowledge with the fervor of the newly converted. Never before had he felt so much alive as he did now, flirting with death.

All that he'd once loved came back to him, books, potions, and spells, mysteries and puzzles, the Pendle moors where he was now able to go only on weekends. Severus even spent a couple of evenings playing cribbage with himself, just to keep his hand in. He snuck back to South Kensington to pick up information on adult education classes and reinvestigate his chances of applying to Imperial College.

Then one cold December day in an Underground station he saw the magazine with the photos of Saturn. *Saturn! How did I miss Jupiter?* The Jupiter fly-by had been more than a year earlier, before he'd gone to Hogsmeade to overhear a prophecy. He bought the magazine, which had pictures of both planets, and pored over the great red storm bigger than the whole earth, active volcanoes on moons large enough to have their own atmosphere, and crisp rings whose beauty and symmetry pierced his heart.

The warning messages continued to come to drop points all over London. 'Attack on Dedalus Diggle in Kent on the 13th.'

‘Muggle riot in Lincoln on Thursday.’

‘Explosion planned in St. Paul’s, London, Easter morning.’

And still the teams of the Dark Lord sought the hiding place of Lily and James Potter, and of the child that had been born as the seventh month died.

Then, at the beginning of August, Severus received a new assignment. Or rather, an old assignment revisited.

“It is our desire that you go to Hogsmeade to apply for a position as a teacher at Hogwarts. We need information about Dumbledore and his plans. As a member of the staff, you will be able to provide us with it. You failed two years ago. Do not fail this year. We must hunt down our nemesis, and we must destroy him. If you fail, you will die.”

Once again Severus made the trip to Hogwarts and waited for Dumbledore at the Hog’s Head, under the watchful eye of the bartender. This time, however, Severus was the one with the appointment.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - O N E

THE NEW PROFESSOR

SATURDAY, AUGUST 1, 1981 (1 DAY AFTER THE NEW MOON)

Minerva McGonagall apparated into the trees on the edge of Hogsmeade a little later than she'd intended. Each year seemed to be worse than the one before it, ever since the rise of this renegade wizard who called himself Lord Voldemort. Now she dreaded coming face to face with both old and new students, never sure which were the children of this Dark Lord's servants. Her only consolation was that she was the Head of Gryffindor house, and the families of Gryffindor students tended to oppose Voldemort rather than support him. For several years now she'd felt sorry for Horace Slughorn, the head of Slytherin house, knowing that many of his students had to be the children of Death Eaters, Voldemort's followers. Slughorn had just retired, however, and was out of the fire. Who would take his place only Dumbledore knew.

It was in this frame of mind, as she passed the Hog's Head Inn, that McGonagall noticed a familiar young man. He was a little on the short side, very slender, and dressed all in black. His pale, aquiline features were framed in shoulder-length black hair, and highlighted by equally black, impenetrable eyes. McGonagall recognized him immediately, even though she hadn't seen him for more than three years.

He saw her at the same time, and stepped to one side to allow her to pass him. "Good morning, Professor McGonagall," he said politely.

"Good morning, Master Snape," she replied, and continued on her way to the Hogwarts gate without stopping. *I need to tell Albus about this*, she thought. *That boy was hand in glove with the biggest group of Death Eater children Hogwarts has ever seen. If he's not a Death Eater himself by now, I'm a silly goose.*

By great good fortune, McGonagall met headmaster Albus Dumbledore on her way up the hill to Hogwarts castle. He was clearly on his way down to Hogsmeade. After the pleasantries of greeting each other was past, McGonagall voiced her warning.

"You will never guess who I just saw outside the Hog's Head," she stated, and continued without waiting for a response. "That strange boy from Slytherin house, Severus Snape. I doubt he's here for anything good. If he hasn't gone over to the dark side, I'm a cockatoo."

"Excellent!" was Dumbledore's response. "Not only on time, but early. He always was punctual."

"You mean you're expecting him?"

"Why of course. I always expect the people that I am interviewing for positions."

"You can't be serious. Headmaster, that boy was dangerous when he was knee-high to a goblin. Surely you remember the trouble he used to cause."

"I remember that the trouble was two-sided, Minerva. Your charges were not always models of good deportment. Especially where poor Severus was concerned."

"Poor Severus! No boy who can do what that boy can do deserves anyone's sympathy. Why he . . . he . . ."

"I know what he did. I also know what Sirius and James did. Now if you will excuse me. Otherwise I shall be late for our appointment."

With that, Dumbledore continued down the hill, and McGonagall huffed her way up to the castle.

As he approached the Hog's Head, Dumbledore slowed his pace. He was not one hundred percent certain that the move he contemplated was wise. *This boy . . . no, he is grown now, and has lived through more than most of the people I know . . . this young man is still very much an enigma. Is he as true as he claims to be? I would be more easy about this if I could read him, but I have not been able to do that since he was thirteen years old. And more to the point, I am not sure that he would be a good teacher. Oh, I know he can teach — he has been doing that for years — but patient with a classroom full of less than sterling students . . . ? Somehow I cannot see that.*

The front room of the Hog's Head was dingy and crowded. Dumbledore caught the eye of the barkeep, his brother Aberforth, and raised an eyebrow. Aberforth swiped a dirty cloth along the bar, then sidled over to Dumbledore.

"Is he here?"

"Came in about fifteen minutes ago. I hadn't realized it was the little sneak you were meeting. At first I wanted to chuck him out of the place."

"Understandable under the circumstances. Where have you stashed him?"

"Room off the back. Want I should announce you, or you want to surprise him?"

"I think I shall surprise him. Probably easier on all of us that way."

Dumbledore made his way across the front room to the door Aberforth pointed out to him.

Severus rose as Dumbledore walked into the tiny parlor. He might have been a trifle nervous, but Dumbledore could not be certain. He crossed to the hearth and sat in one of the great chairs, motioning to Severus to sit as well.

"It has been what? A year since we last saw each other? You are looking well considering the pressure I am sure you are under. I was somewhat surprised to receive your request to interview for Professor Slughorn's old position."

Severus steepled his hands and rested his forehead on his fingertips. After a moment he said, "I've been ordered to get a teaching position so I can spy on you. If I don't get it, I'll be punished."

"Ah. Direct and to the point. To tell the truth, that is very convenient."

"I don't understand." The dark eyes were wary, and Dumbledore noted the fatigue hiding behind them.

"You have been engaged in dangerous work. You cannot hope to escape detection forever. If you are here at Hogwarts, we can protect you. What's-His-Name will think you are working for him, so you will be in less danger. He will be expecting information from you, so we can feed you the information we want him to have. It is a perfect situation."

"I hadn't thought of it like that."

"That is why I am Headmaster."

"I don't really want to teach. I don't think I'll be any good at it."

"At least you have the honesty to admit it. I will not insist that you enjoy the job. I do think you could prepare students for their OWLs, however; you have been doing it for years. As long as that is accomplished, we shall be tolerant of your attitude."

"Thank you, sir."

"This is really the oddest interview I have conducted, you know. Most of

my prospective teachers try to convince me of how well they will do the job and how dedicated they will be.”

“You and I both know that would be a lie.” Severus paused for a moment. “There is one other thing, though. He’s still after Lily. They need protection. If I’m not in London, I can’t learn about all the raids. I won’t be able to warn them. You have to have some way to protect them.”

“We are returning to an old idea. We are contemplating a Fidelius Charm. I shall be the Secret-Keeper. You have no need to worry. Everything will be fine.”

“That’s all right, then. When do you want me to start?”

“You could come back to the castle with me now. Most of the teachers have already arrived. We usually take most of August to clean the classrooms, order supplies, relax and socialize. It would give you a chance to get to know the others.”

“I think I already know them. They were my teachers for seven years.”

“Ah, but you will find being at the head table is much different from being at the Slytherin table. Your perspective changes.”

The two walked up the hill together in silence, Dumbledore reflecting on the young man’s air of melancholy and depression. *Which weighs on him more, the accumulated tension of a year’s living in the shadow of death, the knowledge that he has just become less of a factor in the fate of someone he loves, or does he truly hate this place so much that being here saps the life out of him? At least when this is over he will be free to go. Until then we must both endure what we cannot change.*

Stepping into the entrance hall, the two encountered a small stream of teachers heading into the Great Hall for lunch. Severus hung back a little, as if diffident in the presence of all his former instructors, but they recognized him, and most of them nodded a polite, if somewhat formal greeting.

Once the other teachers were seated around one of the lower tables, Dumbledore presented Severus to them. “Almost all of you remember Mr. Snape, who was a student here not so many years ago. He has applied for the position recently vacated by Professor Slughorn, who retired at the end of last year, and I have considered his application and approved it. Henceforth he is Professor Severus Snape, teacher of Potions. I know you will all give him a warm welcome.”

The murmured welcome was anything but warm. Dumbledore set his mouth in impatience. He knew Severus had never been popular, either with

the teachers or with the other students, but they were barely even being polite. Severus himself simply stared at the surface of the table.

Finally Professor Kettleburn spoke up. "No offense Headmaster, or to you Master Snape, but Severus is barely three years older than the seventh year students he'll be teaching. Correct me if I'm wrong, but he tutored a lot of them as a fellow student just before he graduated. What experience is he going to bring to the position, and more importantly, how is he going to maintain discipline? Teenagers don't like having their peers placed in a position to supervise them. They'll walk all over him."

"Well, Severus," said Dumbledore, turning to his newest professor. "There is your first challenge. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Severus looked mostly at his hands rather than at the teachers. *Speak up with confidence, boy*, thought Dumbledore. *You have faced the most dangerous wizard of our day and hoodwinked him. If you cannot handle a dozen teachers, how can you handle a roomful of students?*

"I know that I don't have any experience teaching classes of thirty students," Severus began, "and I know I'm very young, but I think I have more to offer than you're aware of. First, I had seven years studying how you manage your classes, and while it will take time to accustom myself to the situation, I already know some of the theory of classroom control from your example.

"Second, I do have experience teaching. Many of you know that I tutored students in Potions most of my time at Hogwarts. At first it was one on one, but later it was groups, especially each year as the OWL exams got closer. I know there's a difference between teaching people who want to learn and teaching a general class, but I don't have to learn all of it at the same time. I already know part of it. What you don't know is that for the last couple of years I've been teaching... seminars for people older than I am. So the closeness of age doesn't intimidate me.

"Next, I think the age factor would only be important for the sixth and seventh years, the ones who were second and third years while I was still a student. But not all of them are taking Potions, only the ones who got Outstanding or Exceeds Expectations on their OWLs. That means the ones I might have had the biggest problems with won't even be in my classes. Just the most dedicated students. I think I'm enough older than the others that it won't be a problem."

"You don't think any of them would try to take you on outside of class?" asked Kettleburn. "You weren't famous for the number of friends you had."

Dumbledore was not pleased with the turn things were taking, but kept out of it, watching to see how Severus would respond.

"Not from Slytherin house. They know what I can do. I don't believe there's anyone in any of the other houses who remembers me that well or would have cause." Severus paused, then continued.

"Finally, I think any new teacher, regardless of age, would have some of the problems you anticipate for me. How does anyone maintain order in a classroom of teenagers? Until you face the situation, you don't really know how to handle it. That has to be true whether you get your first class at twenty-one or forty-one. How did you handle your very first class, Professor?"

"Well said," called out Professor Flitwick. "You have presence and a quick wit. You'll be fine."

The rest nodded agreement, and the ordeal was over. The newly accepted Professor Snape was invited to sit and join them for lunch.

"Could I postpone that?" Severus asked. "I mean, you are hiring me as of now, right? I'll be staying here at Hogwarts from this point?"

"That's the way it generally works when you are hired after the year has begun," answered Dumbledore.

"I wasn't expecting it to happen so fast. I have a couple of . . . things I have to take care of in London and at my own home. It isn't much. It'll probably just take the afternoon and then I could be back by supper time, but if I don't start now, I know I won't have the time to finish it today."

Dumbledore smiled. "I think it is truly amazing that you can wind up your affairs so quickly. By all means, go now. I'll walk you to the gate."

Severus took his leave of the other teachers and he and Dumbledore strolled down the hill.

"They don't like me," Severus said.

"They'll get used to you."

"No, I mean they really don't like me. Do you think they know?"

Are you just nervous, or are you really picking up something? "I do not think they know. A couple of them may suspect. After all, the colleagues you associated with as a student have gone on to bigger and better things. It is natural to wonder whether you have followed in their footsteps."

"If they do, they're right. I don't have a lot to be proud of."

"I think you do. You have already done something no one else has ever done. Having joined him, you left him. You are the only one to do that. It means something."

"Thank you, Professor."

They reached the Hogsmeade gate, and Severus disappeared as soon as he passed through. *Good luck on your meeting with Voldemort. He should be pleased at the successful beginning of your new assignment. Though I will only be able to relax when you come walking back through that gate this evening.*

"Well," said McGonagall after the two had gone. "I am not ashamed to say that for once something has taken me completely by surprise. I would have thought Albus would mention . . . I mean, since I am Deputy Headmistress. I would have thought I might be consulted."

"Does anybody really know anything about the boy?" asked Dawson. "He never bothered to take my classes."

"He wouldn't have had to, dear," Sinistra told her gently. "I believe he's a half-blood, raised as a muggle. Wonderful student in Astronomy. Took an Outstanding in his NEWT. There were times I was sure he knew more than I did. Quiet, though. Always by himself."

"Took an Outstanding in Charms as well," piped up Flitwick. "Years ahead of his class from the day he was sorted." He turned to Sprout. "I believe he got an Outstanding in Herbology. Mullein, your predecessor, spoke highly of his work. Not that he would have expected any less from Constantina Prince's grandson. And in Potions."

"Well, he got no Outstanding in Transfiguration. He barely managed an Exceeds Expectations." McGonagall narrowed her eyes. "I'm certain he got Outstanding in Dark Arts. That was something he always excelled in, if you know what I mean."

"That should not surprise anyone. I have met that young man before." Everyone turned to Trelawney, who like Sprout was new, having been hired two years before. "Even then, the Inner Eye told me our paths would cross again."

McGonagall, who normally never paid any attention to Trelawney's mystical pronouncements, leaned forward. "Tell us, dear. We're dying to know."

"You know I came to interview with Dumbledore before the end of the first term last year. We met in Hogsmeade. Even before Dumbledore came to see me, I knew that I was fated to get the position, despite there being another applicant — that pushy young man who was just here. Snape, did the headmaster say his name was? He was not above trying to overhear private conversations. Through keyholes. He was apprehended and removed from the premises. I would recommend being careful what you say when he is around."

“My!” exclaimed McGonagall, savoring the tidbit of information. “Now that I think about it, Slughorn never mentioned the boy much. And Slughorn was his head of house. Not unless he was in trouble, of course. He was notorious for casting hexes on other students.”

Kettleburn burst out laughing. “Like the time he turned Sirius Black’s hair Slytherin green? I seem to recall Black and Potter were pretty free with the hexes, too. They kept life interesting around here for a few years, didn’t they? And as for Slughorn, the boy’s family wasn’t rich enough or famous enough for him to interest Slughorn.”

The conversation shifted to the peculiarities of Horace Slughorn, and by the time lunch was over the question of the new Potions instructor had faded somewhat as the teachers went off to their individual classrooms to assess what had to be done to prepare for the coming year.

Right at dinner time, Severus returned to Hogwarts, apparating next to the gate with several cases and a battered old Gladstone bag. He waited for a while as Filch came grumbling down the hill to let him in, then started to gather his things.

“You can leave that, Professor,” said Filch. “You get your traps carried for you now that you sit at the high table. Go on up. They’ve just started supper.”

Severus entered the Great Hall and then paused, not sure where he was to sit. His confusion was resolved by Kettleburn, who waved him over to the table and made room between himself and Sprout. It seemed the memory of Sirius Black with green hair had mellowed Kettleburn considerably, and he was now more than willing to tolerate the newcomer.

During most of the dinner conversation, which centered around the upcoming term, Severus was silent. He listened attentively, which seemed to give Trelawney satisfaction, but had nothing to add. After the meal was finished, however, Dumbledore addressed him in particular.

“In just a moment I shall take our newest professor to his rooms. The classroom you already know well. You have an office, which I am sure you have seen before, and an adjoining bedroom. There is, however, a matter of some importance that we need to discuss. We are still missing one teacher, and until the position is filled we do not know who it will be, but as of this moment we have only one teacher on staff who was in Slytherin house. That, my dear Severus, is you. Traditionally the head of a house should be a teacher who was in that house as a student. It is unusual to have a head of house who is so young, but Professors McGonagall and Flitwick will be able

to assist you, as will Professor Sprout, who became head of Hufflepuff house last year.”

Severus opened his mouth, closed it again, and looked at his hands. Then he turned to Dumbledore. “If you think I can handle it, I’ll certainly try. But I don’t know all the things a head of house is supposed to do. I’m going to need the help.” He glanced around at the other teachers, who nodded encouragingly.

“Good. Now I am sure you want to see your rooms. And you need to unpack your things. And you are probably very tired. So let us wish you good night, and I shall take you to your rooms and let you familiarize yourself with your new domain.”

“Before we check your rooms,” continued Dumbledore as they started down the steps and into the passageway to the left of the great marble staircase in the entrance hall, “we need to visit Slytherin house.” The corridors beyond the Potions classroom became labyrinthine, but the way was still familiar to Severus, who’d come this way every day for the seven years of his school life. In front of the blank wall that was the entrance to the house, they stopped.

“Wall of Slytherin, do you know who I am?” asked Dumbledore.

The stone hissed in reply.

Pulling Severus forward, Dumbledore continued. “This is Severus Snape, no longer a student but the head of Slytherin house. You will answer to his command as long as his authority remains in effect.”

The wall hissed again.

“Good. Now all you have to do is tell the wall to open and it will. You can set the password, or delegate that job to a prefect. The others prefer to do it themselves.”

“Are there any special commands to give?”

“No. Just talk to it the same way you would talk to anyone. It does like to be addressed as ‘Wall of Slytherin.’ Even a wall has its pride.”

They returned to the Potions instructor’s office, where Dumbledore handed Severus a huge set of keys on an enormous ring. “For the doors and all the cabinets and such. Once you’ve opened them, you can set your own locks, mechanical or magical. You are required to keep them locked, however. Poisons and such, you know.”

“Yes, Headmaster. Thank you.”

“Well, good night. Enjoy the evening. If you need anything, you know

where my office is.” Dumbledore then left Severus standing in front of the Potions office door.

Severus waited until the headmaster was gone before opening the office door. For this he wanted to be alone. The office was as Slughorn had left it — jars on the shelves, papers on the counters, ashes in the fireplace. It would definitely need to be straightened and cleaned. The bedroom was the same. A rather small room, it contained not just a bed but also a table, three chairs, two wardrobes, a bureau, a nightstand, lamps, and a hat tree. There was barely room to move around.

Leaving the office and the bedroom, Severus went next to the classroom. Here again, there was some untidiness and disorder. It was also clear that many ingredients would have to be ordered, as the supply cabinets were sparsely stocked. *That’s my first big job tomorrow.*

Finally, Severus went back to the Slytherin wall. “Wall of Slytherin, do you know who I am?” he asked.

The wall hissed.

“Let me in, please.”

The wall slid open, and Severus stepped into the familiar common room. Here there was neatness and order, for the house-Elves kept the area swept and tidy. Severus spent nearly twenty minutes exploring the various dormitories, seeing for the first time where his older colleagues had lived. His own former room was now occupied by students who would be fourth years in September. It didn’t look any different, but that was likely due to the house-Elves.

At last Severus returned to his office and room.

“There you are,” snarled a voice in the corridor, and Severus saw Filch with his various boxes and cases. “You can have the taking of them into the rooms, unless you want me to do it.”

“No, no. I’ll handle them from here.” The truth was that he’d far rather do everything himself. Severus was really looking forward to making the inner space his own, and the presence of Filch was an impediment.

After first dragging all his things into the office, Severus went back into the adjoining bedroom. There he opened every door, drawer, lid, and cover, checking how much space there was for storage. He immediately determined that he didn’t need all the furniture. Just the bed, one wardrobe, the nightstand, a lamp, one comfortable chair, and a smaller table from the classroom. The rest he shifted into the office with a few flicks of his wand. *I’ll ask Dum-*

bledore tomorrow what to do with the extra furniture I don't need. Another few flicks, and the room was swept and dusted.

Then came the very pleasant task of unpacking and arranging his things. *This is my space. It was Slughorn's, but now it's mine, and I can do anything I want with it. It's better than Spinner's End. There are no memories. No one yelled at or cuffed me here. No one threw up a night's worth of gin. There's no bloodstain in the wood under the carpet. This is a place where I'm free of the past. The rest of the school has memories. Even the office has a few memories. But this room that I never saw before in my life, this room is where I can be myself.*

Severus had already decided that he would add a small bookcase and bring some of his favorite books here — here where he could read them in peace.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 2, 1981

Professor McGonagall was buried in *The Daily Prophet* as she absent-mindedly ate her oatmeal porridge and sipped her tea. *More fighting, she thought, and no one is sure if that multiple vehicle accident was just that, or some of You-Know-Who's doing.*

"Excuse me, Professor."

McGonagall looked up. Professor Snape had approached so quietly that she hadn't noticed him at all. *He moves like a cat. I shall have to remember that.* "Good morning, Professor. What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't mind if I asked you for some advice later. About being the head of a house. At your convenience, of course. I wouldn't have interrupted your meal except that I wanted to catch you before everyone left for their own rooms."

Now that's a surprise, thought McGonagall. *Who would have thought that such a withdrawn, taciturn boy would grow up to be such an articulate young man? Well-mannered, too.*

"Why don't you join me for breakfast instead? It's a good topic of conversation during a meal. Interesting and diverse, but with nothing to quarrel over. Sit down here. And when the students are not around, we generally go by first names. You may call me Minerva if you don't feel too awkward about it. May I call you Severus?"

"Of course," he replied, slipping into the chair next to hers, "though I fear it may take me a while to be comfortable with anything less formal than Professor or Ma'am."

"It will come. Now, help yourself to anything you want, and tell me what you want to know."

Snape took a kipper, some toast, and a cup of coffee. "I don't even know enough to know what I want to know." He thought for a minute. "What should I be doing now so that nothing catches me by surprise? What are my precise duties after the students arrive, and what do I have to do with them during the first week or so?"

"You want to know everything, in other words. I would suggest you spend a lot of time looking at the students' files. Learn their names, study their pictures, find out who's taking which classes, especially in the upper levels. It always impresses them more if they can see you've done your homework."

"Do we already have files on the new first years?"

"Already done. I made one up on each of them as I got the replies back from the letters. Normally after they arrive we interview all the first years, but you might want to stretch it out and interview all of them. Just to get to know the students better. It will reduce problems in the long run. Then there are the rules."

"Rules? Aren't they the same for all the houses?"

"Some are. Some are peculiar to each house. Don't you remember Slughorn's speeches?"

Snape looked a bit embarrassed by the question. "They were long-winded and a touch . . . boring. I didn't always listen."

"Well now you have your chance to be boring as well. But you have to do the speech. You also have to work with the Quidditch team."

"Oh, no. I don't like Quidditch."

McGonagall smiled to herself. *Looks like the cup is safe with Gryffindor.* "Nevertheless, you are the supervisor of the team. Not the coach, of course, but the formation of the team has to be under your control and you monitor the players' behavior."

"What else?"

"Later in the year you'll be advising the second years on their electives for third year, and the fifth years will need career counseling. Other duties are patrolling the halls in the evenings, supervising Hogsmeade excursions, contacting parents from time to time. You do have to live on the grounds. Heads of houses must be here all the time."

"We don't have any free time?"

"An evening a week. Back by eleven. It isn't so bad unless you have a family that you can't see but once a week."

"No, no family."

McGonagall remembered then that Snape's parents were dead, that everyone in Snape's family was dead, and she felt like slapping herself for having brought the subject up. She looked down at the table and noted that they'd finished eating as they talked. "I think that's the most important points," she said.

"Thank you, Profess . . . uh, Minerva . . . I think I shouldn't take up more of your valuable time. I also have a lot to do this month."

"You're very welcome, Severus. If you have any more questions, feel free to ask."

Snape rose and walked softly from the hall. *Like a cat. Smooth and quiet . . . I do believe he was blushing, too, at calling me Minerva. Maybe he isn't such an unpleasant young man after all.* McGonagall picked up her newspaper and resumed reading.

Severus went straight from the Great Hall to the Potions classroom. There he pulled a copy of every textbook used by every level and opened them on the desks. *These are the potions I have to teach. I'm going to have to figure out how many ingredients I need and in what quantities.*

He started with the first year book, then stopped at page five. *No. First I have to inventory what I have. How do I know what I need if I don't know what I have?* That proved no easy task, since the jars and flasks seemed to have been put back into the cabinets haphazardly. Severus started taking everything out of the cabinets and arranging them on the desks, but then he found three small tins of powdered aconite. *Aconite is poisonous. It needs to be under stricter control. I wonder how Slughorn did this.*

A lengthy search of all the drawers and cabinets in the office revealed no files, no inventories, no records of previous orders, nothing. Back in the classroom, Severus looked around at the new disorder. He'd been working for a few hours without accomplishing anything, only making it worse; the enormity of the task at that moment seemed almost overwhelming.

There was a heavy thumping at the door, and a very large, hairy head thrust itself into the room. "It's just about lunch time, Professor. Ya ought t' be getting t' the Hall t' get somewhat t' eat."

"Hagrid!" Severus cried, happy at that moment to see any friendly face, but especially that friendly face. "I don't think I deserve lunch. I haven't gotten anything accomplished."

“Looks like ya done a lot of work, pulling stuff out of cupboards. Ya got t’ have sustenance. Y’re not careful and Dumbledore’s going t’ put me onto watching your feeding schedule again. We wouldn’t that, now would we?”

“No, we wouldn’t.” Severus locked up and followed Hagrid to the Great Hall. “It would be easier if I knew where to start, but I don’t even know that.”

“Well, that’s by way of being the nature of Potions, now ain’t it? Ol’ Slughorn, he always did order more by way of supplies than all the other teachers put together. Here.” They stopped by the Slytherin table. “Let’s sit and talk here. I’ll go get the grub. We got a lot t’ catch up on, and the rest of them won’t mind.”

Severus sat at the end of the long table, glad to be off his feet and sitting anywhere, until Hagrid returned with two heaping plates.

“Now, tell me all what ya’ve been doing this past year,” Hagrid said after he’d dulled the edge of his hunger. Severus was eating much less and far more slowly. “Ya didn’t never get in no trouble ’cause of us, did ya?”

“There was just one time, when he first suspected a leak. All of us at headquarters were interrogated. My session lasted an hour and a half. I made it, though. Obviously, or I wouldn’t be here.”

“Humph. Dumbledore didn’t tell me ’bout that. Prob’ly thought I’d go running down t’ London t’ rescue ya. And I would, too, if I knew where t’ go.” And they talked a bit about spying and drop points, and the self-defense lessons Severus taught to half the Death Eaters in Britain. “Maybe ya could show me what ya teach them,” Hagrid suggested. “Then ya could show me how t’ block what ya teach them.” It was a good idea, and Severus agreed to meet with Hagrid for lessons.

The conversation shifted to the Potions class and Severus’s quandary about how to handle the job.

“That’s easy,” said Hagrid. “It don’t really matter what ya do first. Any one of them jobs could be first, second, whatever, just as long as at the end ya know what ya got, what ya need, and what ya have to order. Ya just do first what ya like best. The rest ’ll follow. And it don’t all have t’ happen today. Ya got a month. The supplies come in a week after ya order them.”

It was useful information and good advice. Severus returned to his task with a better feeling for what he was doing. The cabinets on the long side of the room would be for herbs and other plant material—leaves, stems, roots, flower, fungi. The narrow side of the room was for animal parts—

eyes, spleens, dried blood . . . Anything poisonous, rare, or expensive would be stored in the office.

Severus first moved out all the cabinets, cleaned the area, cleaned the cabinets, and put them back in, rearranging with an eye to both utility and aesthetics. Then he set up tables in front of the cabinets to begin sorting the ingredients, cleaning the exterior of each container, and moving some from the class to the office and others from the office to the class.

By supper time, every jar, flask, bottle, and tin had been looked at, wiped, and put into the correct room on the correct table. Severus was assembling sheets of parchment, quills, and ink to begin his inventory when Dumbledore looked in and reminded him it was again time to eat.

Supper was Severus's fourth meal as a teacher at Hogwarts, and at none of them had the teachers sat at the high table. Breakfast was random, with each coming in and eating at leisure, frequently alone. Lunch was scattered through the Hall in groups of two or three generally. Only supper was eaten at one long table, but this was in the middle of the hall where they could sit on both sides and face each other. It was then that Severus realized that the teachers sat at the high table not from preference or pride, but in order to monitor the behavior of the students.

Now he sat at the foot of the table where McGonagall presided, with Flitwick to her right and Sprout and Severus to her left, and they talked house business. Most of it was meant to fill Severus in on the details of his job, and to give him a taste for its trials and rewards.

Later, in the staff room, the three older teachers met to chat, Snape having returned to his rooms to continue working.

"I wish I knew what was in that lad's head," said McGonagall, and the other two knew instantly who she was talking about.

"Personally, I don't see why you're all so suspicious of him." Sprout responded. "He seems quite nice to me. Maybe a little shy."

"Shy! There's nothing shy about that one. At school he was withdrawn, secretive, moody, unpredictable, I'd even say vindictive and vengeful because . . ."

"No, Minerva," interrupted Flitwick, "now you're showing your prejudice. You just liked those rascals James and Sirius so much it blinded you to their shortcomings. My students tell me that it was more likely Gryffindor to start something, and then Slytherin just gave tit for tat, and I never heard that young Severus ever hurt anyone. Embarrassed a couple, but no actual damage. I couldn't say the same for your charges."

"No? What about the fight in fifth year? I disarmed the whole bunch of them, and he attacked James like a little wildcat. An actual fist fight right there on the front lawn, kicking and punching and rolling in the grass..."

"That quiet, polite young man started a fight?" Sprout was entranced.

"I'd say James started the fight," said Flitwick. "He attacked Severus without provocation, and he and Sirius humiliated the boy in front of the whole school. At least that's what my students told me. They rather admired Severus's spirit, still ready to fight after being whipped so soundly. Ravenclaw hasn't quite trusted Gryffindor since. Come to think of it, our incoming seventh years would have witnessed that fight in their first year. I hope they don't give him trouble over it."

"Do you remember their sorting, Filius? You wouldn't know it now because he's grown up so much, but he was one of the smallest students we ever had, short and skinny with those black eyes... Like a changeling child. And spooky? He wouldn't give anything away, not even that young. Locked up tighter than a Gringotts vault, and hard and sharp as obsidian."

"But without equal in Charms. He could do anything I gave him. Years ahead of the others."

"Mostly hexes and jinxes from what I hear."

"Not your usual ones, though. He actually created his own."

"I still don't know how he did the green hair."

"Or made the bats attack Sirius, even in the daytime."

Soon the memories of the curse fights between Slytherin and Gryffindor houses had all three teachers laughing merrily. It was late before they left the staff room and went to bed.

McGonagall had, by that time, renewed her determination to keep a close watch on this former student who had already proven himself such a delinquent. Flitwick, on the other hand, treasured the realization that he might finally have the opportunity to ask Snape how he'd cast some of the more famous hexes. And Sprout was now thoroughly convinced that anyone with a mischievous streak in him as strong as that, was certainly worth getting to know better. Especially since he was reported to be such a good herbologist.

MONDAY, AUGUST 3, 1981

Severus woke the following morning to pounding on the door of his office. He was still sleepy, not having gotten to bed until two in the morning, but he rose and went to the door, rubbing his eyes and yawning. It was Filch.

"Sorry to wake you, Professor," said Filch, who was clearly not sorry at all, "but Professor Dumbledore would like the entire staff to be at breakfast by seven. There's to be an announcement." He turned and walked back along the corridor to the entrance hall.

Severus returned to his bedroom and dressed quickly. *Is this normal for Monday mornings? Maybe they always gather early during the week for a staff meeting. It is the same time breakfast is served to the school during term. If so, it was good of Filch to let me know. Then again, it might be something special...*

Before leaving the dungeons, Severus checked his rooms. The sheets of parchment with the inventory he'd finished the night before lay neatly on their respective tables. He'd be able to put the various ingredients away and start making his list of what he needed as supplies for the school year. He had a comfortable sense of accomplishment.

Other teachers were passing through the entrance hall on the way to breakfast when Severus stepped out of the underground corridor. *Am I the only one down on this level of the castle?* he thought, then saw Professor Sprout leaving the corridor on the other side of the marble staircase. *Of course, Hufflepuff is near the kitchens. So there are two of us.*

This morning the staff was breakfasting at one long table, just as at supper. Severus took what appeared to be his regular place at the foot of the table with the heads of houses. Far away, next to Professor Dumbledore at the head of the table were two men he'd never seen before.

The first, on Dumbledore's right, was a tall, athletic-looking man around forty with a mane of reddish hair. His resemblance to a lion was heightened by his eyes which, though hazel, had more of yellow in them than green or brown. The other man was truly unusual, much older and shorter, heavy-built and powerful. His face was misshapen, craggy, and scarred, and it looked as if someone had bitten off part of his nose. His eyes were small and beady, and seemed to be trying to look at everything at once.

When the entire staff was seated, before the food was served, Dumbledore rose. "Ladies and gentlemen, I should like to introduce to you this morning's guests, one of whom will be a colleague as of today. They have made a special effort to come up this morning from London just to be able to spend some time with the entire staff at the beginning of the day. On my right is Mr. Rufus Scrimgeour and on my left Mr. Alastor Moody. Both are employees of the Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Auror Division. Mr. Scrimgeour has been sent by the Ministry to take the position of Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, as the Ministry feels

the situation in the country is currently dangerous enough to warrant the presence of an auror at Hogwarts. I am sure that both these gentlemen will wish to address you as a group, but first we shall eat.”

Dumbledore then clapped his hands and took his seat. The table was immediately filled with food for breakfast, more ornate than usual as a tribute to the guests. Severus tried to ignore the men at the other end of the table and focus instead on the food. Of particular interest was a dish that looked like some kind of bread topped with ham, egg, and a sauce. “What’s that?” he asked Sprout.

“Eggs Benedict,” Flitwick answered for her. “Very rare to see it here. Must be due to them. That’s Canadian bacon and Hollandaise sauce.”

Severus took the eggs Benedict and was surprised at how good it was. *I don’t know anything about food*, he thought. It could be a profitable line of study.

From time to time Severus glanced up at the head of the table, and each time he had the impression that one or other of the aurors had been watching him. After the third time, he began to get nervous. *Don’t be silly. They’re probably watching everyone*. Then he turned to say something to Professor Sprout, only to discover that Professor McGonagall was looking at him, too.

When the meal was finished, and the teachers lingered over last cups of coffee and tea, the new Professor Scrimgeour rose to speak to them.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my new colleagues. We live in dangerous times. For the past decade our world has been gradually overwhelmed by the power and ruthless ambition of the dark wizard who styles himself Lord Voldemort. Though we have made some major advances against him in the past year, his threat is still very real and very immediate. The Ministry fears that it may extend to the safety of our children here at Hogwarts.”

At the mention of the Dark Lord’s name, Severus had winced, pain stabbing through his left arm. He hoped it had gone unnoticed in the general gasp of surprise from people used to hearing, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, or You-Know-Who, but when he looked back at the head of the table, Mr. Moody was staring at him. Then, unnervingly, Moody smiled. It wasn’t a friendly smile.

Just when life was starting to get bearable, Severus thought. *Now I have aurors to deal with*.

The rest of Professor Scrimgeour’s speech was predictable — how he wanted to get to know each and every one of the others personally, and how he was looking forward to working with them. When it was over, the staff

rose and moved toward the head of the table to be individually introduced to their new colleague and his friend.

Coming from the foot of the table, Severus was near the end of the line when he took Professor Scrimgeour's hand in greeting. Then Dumbledore said his name, and Scrimgeour's grip tightened. For an instant, Severus's startled eyes met Scrimgeour's, but Severus quickly looked down.

"Pleased to meet you," said Professor Scrimgeour.

"Likewise," Severus murmured.

"Snape," Mr. Moody said when Severus was introduced to him, rolling the name in his mouth as if savoring its taste. "You wouldn't happen to know a chap named Dolohov, would you? Antonin Dolohov?"

"No," said Severus, a bit too quickly.

"Odd. He knows you." Moody turned away from Severus to greet Professor McGonagall, though his eyes continued to glance back in Severus's direction and a little downward toward the left arm.

Severus turned and hurried from the Great Hall, finding safety in being among the others who were also heading to their classrooms. He felt as if he was going to be sick. He slipped quickly down the dungeon corridor to his office and, once inside, locked the door. Then he went into his bedroom, locked that door as well, and lay down on the bed, his heart pounding.

This is what 'out of the frying pan into the fire' means. I thought I was safe from the Dark Lord, and now I have aurors after me. Aurors who're going to send me to Azkaban. Send me to Azkaban and feed me to dementors. Severus didn't have a clear idea of what dementors did, but everything he'd read or heard sounded terrifying.

A half hour later, Severus calmed down a bit. He reminded himself that Professor Dumbledore would handle the aurors. Dumbledore would take care of him. His heart back to normal and breathing more regularly, Severus rose and unlocked his doors. He opened the office door and looked into the corridor. No one was there. *Work will help calm me down*, he thought, and went into the Potions classroom to put away the bottles and jars of ingredients.

The work did calm him down. Severus had a quiet and abiding love for putting things into order, and would have been content at this moment if his whole job consisted of rearranging and taking inventory. By mid morning everything was put away, and Severus sat down at a table in the classroom — there being more room to spread papers out there than in his office — and

began to go through the textbooks figuring out how much he would have to order in the way of supplies.

It was almost noon when a shadow obscured the doorway, and Severus looked up to see the auror Moody standing there watching him. Severus stopped writing, staring up at the bulk of the man, his forgotten quill making ink blots on the page.

"You're making a mess of that parchment," said Moody after a moment.

"Drat!" Severus exclaimed, sticking the quill back in its bottle and cleaning the blots with his wand. He rose then from the table. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Just looking around. It's been a while since I've been here. Thought I'd see what's changed and what hasn't. Potions room looks a lot neater than it did with Slughorn here. That your doing?"

"I've been working a little."

"More 'n a little if what Dumbledore says is true. That this is just your second day on the job, I mean. Interesting that you should want to come back to Hogwarts right now. What kind of work are you leaving?"

Severus didn't answer, not being prepared for the question. As each second lengthened the silence, Moody began to smile again, his eyes flickering back and forth between Severus's face and the left arm. "I... did... private tutoring," Severus stammered at last.

"I can imagine," said Moody.

"Here now!" thundered Hagrid's voice from the corridor. "What're you doin' here, Moody y' old goat? Botherin' the professors at their work an' all?"

"Hey there yourself, Hagrid," Moody replied cheerfully, "Professor Snape and I were just having a friendly chat."

"Yer going t' have to chat some other time then, 'cause I come t' take the Professor t' lunch. He and me got some school business t' discuss. Ya ready, Professor?"

Immensely grateful for Hagrid's appearance, Severus said brightly, "Coming right now. Give me a second," and tidied up his papers. He then followed Moody out of the room and locked the door. Hagrid put a great arm around his shoulders and led him toward the Hall, leaving a frustrated Moody standing alone in the corridor.

Moody watched as the enormous hulk of the groundskeeper and the slight figure of the Potions teacher disappeared down the corridor. *I don't know what Albus is playing at*, he thought, *but that little lad is as deep into this*

Death Eater business as they come, and Albus knows it. Why else would everything behind those black eyes be locked down so tight I can't find a crack in it to slip through? That boy has been trained to hide secrets, and I'll wager not even Albus can get through his defenses. When he's a bit older, the façade 'll be perfect. Gad, what a weapon! And he's Voldemort's weapon, not ours.

The best tactic at this point was to go in to lunch and talk casually to Dumbledore. Moody considered it fortunate that the teachers didn't sit in one group at lunch. It made it easier for him to join Dumbledore, who was eating with Scrimgeour away from everyone else, and discuss what interested Moody most. He had to return to London that evening, so there was a lot to talk about. Some of it about Professor Snape.

Not everything could be discussed in front of Scrimgeour. Business of the Order of the Phoenix, for example. Scrimgeour was Ministry through and through, a rising star in the bureaucracy, and the Order was quasi-legal. But they could talk about physical security at Hogwarts, and about background checks for the staff.

"Where'd you pick up the new one?" Moody asked after they'd talked about everything else.

"Severus? He was the brightest Potions student we have had at Hogwarts, certainly in all my years. A natural for the job. Do not tell me you found something on him."

"No, not in the check. Nothing at all. I'd like you to pay close attention to those three words, Albus. Nothing. At. All. No family, no friends, no one knows where he's from except he went to Hogwarts..."

"I can tell you where he is from, Alastor. I have been to his home. It is in Lancashire. You have found nothing on his family because he has none. His last living relative died about four years ago. As for friends, he was always a lonely boy. That he has no friends does not surprise me."

"What about employment? For the last three years he hasn't been working anywhere."

"Pish-tosh! That young man spent most of his years at Hogwarts tutoring all of Slytherin house for their OWLs and NEWTs. Yes, Alastor, in fifth year he was tutoring seventh years for their NEWTs in Potions. He was that good. Made a fair bit of money, too, I understand. Go ahead. Ask him what he has been doing. I would wager he will say private tutoring."

"All right, Mr. I-Have-All-the-Answers. I'm a better than fair legilimens. Why is he hiding? Why has he shut his brain down like a ship's hatches in

a storm? Tell me that.” Moody looked over at Scrimgeour who, though not taking part in the conversation, was following it with great interest.

“Now you have hit upon my greatest secret.” Dumbledore lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Dare I confide in you? I believe I can have faith in your discretion. I am in the process of preparing a monograph, a scholarly paper, on a highly disputed topic. I intend to prove the existence of congenital occlumency, and that young man is the subject of my study. You have no idea how long I have been working to get him to return to Hogwarts. You must not tell him, however, as his awareness of my observations will compromise their validity.”

The two aurors stared at Dumbledore for a moment in total disbelief, and then Scrimgeour spoke, his voice struggling to hide its scorn. “There’s no such thing as congenital occlumency. It’s a biological impossibility. The whole world will ridicule your ideas.”

Moody managed to hide his amusement. Scrimgeour had fallen for Dumbledore’s ploy and allowed the subject to change. Aside from his interest in the occlumency question, Moody wanted to watch the two spar.

“No, no, Rufus — and I may call you Rufus now, for you are a member of my staff — no, Rufus, there is congenital occlumency, and Professor Snape is living proof. Ask any of the professors who were here the day he was sorted. Ask McGonagall or Flitwick. Ask Hagrid. That little eleven-year-old brain was sealed off like a pharaoh’s tomb. Hagrid and I worked for months just to help him break out. We have never been able to break in.”

“That may be as you say,” said Scrimgeour, having no argument to counter Dumbledore with, “but I’ll still reserve my opinion.”

“You may reserve what you wish, my dear fellow, but please do not interfere with my research.”

Moody leaned back in his chair, grinning. He still thought young Professor Snape was knee-deep in Death Eater business, but he was somewhat appeased by the occlumency explanation. If there was even some truth in it, then Moody’s inability to read the Potions instructor wasn’t as sinister as he’d first thought. He’d be sure Scrimgeour kept an eye open, but it looked like they didn’t have to sweat the small stuff.

After lunch, Moody poked around a little more, talked to a few more people, then said his goodbyes and returned to London. Scrimgeour remained, to spend at least that night at Hogwarts, though many of the staff commuted from their homes on a daily basis, apparating into Hogsmeade each morning. Only the heads of houses were required to stay on the grounds at night.

Severus spent all Monday afternoon and evening working on his supply lists, taking time off only to go to supper where he gleaned as much more as he could from the others about supervising a house. It seemed that every day one or the other of the three would come up with a new piece of advice or a new anecdote that gave him useful information. Once again, Severus didn't get to bed until after midnight.

The next day he was working on his lists, having gotten almost to the end of fifth year, when Severus had another visitor. This time it was Rufus Scrimgeour.

Having learned from his mistakes, Severus this time carefully placed his quill in the inkwell and rose as soon as he saw who it was. "How can I help you?" he asked.

"Just looking around and getting reacquainted," said Scrimgeour. "It looks different from when Slughorn was here."

"So I've been told."

"Would you mind letting me see what you've been doing? I'm new at this, too. I could use some hints."

There was no good reason to refuse, so Severus pointed out what he'd changed from Slughorn's arrangement and why, trying to limit the majority of his comments to things that might apply to the Dark Arts position.

"It sounds like you've done this before," Scrimgeour commented. "You know, organized a classroom — or a potions work area."

What did Dolohov tell them? Severus thought. *I have to act innocent. I have to be innocent.* "I have," he answered. "I assisted my grandmother in her potions workshop, and I converted a room in my house to my own laboratory. So I have done this before. Just not quite on this scale."

"I hear you're an expert with charms, too."

That was a trap. At the worst it meant knowledge of his work inventing spells for the Dark Lord, but there were other interpretations. "I've been told Slytherin's exploits against Gryffindor are legendary. I personally think it wasn't that spectacular."

"You're modest." Scrimgeour was examining some of the jars of animal parts.

"I'm sensible."

"I hope so," said Scrimgeour. "It's so much easier working with sensible people."

This time it was Dumbledore who rescued him. "Rufus! Rufus!" the

Headmaster's voice could be heard calling as he came into the dungeons. "Professor Scrimgeour, are you down here?"

"Here, Professor Dumbledore," Scrimgeour called back. "Potions classroom."

"Good, Rufus, I am pleased that I have found you. Would you mind coming with me for a while. I need to talk to you about your class schedule." Scrimgeour turned to go with Dumbledore, though somewhat reluctantly.

"Professor," said Severus suddenly. "May I ask you something?"

"Will it take long, Severus? I do need to speak with Professor Scrimgeour."

"Only a moment, sir. I need the answer before I can order supplies. If there's a potion in the book, but I know that there's also a new, improved version of the potion, which do I teach, the book, or the new recipe?"

Dumbledore smiled and peered at Severus over his glasses. *He knows*, Severus thought, *he knows I'm talking about my own experiments.*

"Think for a moment, Severus. What is the goal of the majority of your students?"

"To pass their OWLs."

"And to do that, they must be tested on what they have learned from the book. It would not be fair to teach them something that would hinder them from reaching their goal."

"So I teach to the test?"

"Until they have taken their OWLs. Those who are truly interested in potions will continue into NEWT level work. There you may be more creative."

"I understand, sir. Thank you, sir."

"I am pleased to have been of assistance. Now Rufus, we must go up and look at your classroom. There are certain changes..."

Severus listened as they walked away, then sat down to finish his requisitions.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - T W O

SHIFTING SANDS

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 5, 1981

On Wednesday morning, Flitwick wandered into the Great Hall for breakfast. McGonagall, always the first up and the first downstairs—although, as Flitwick often teased her, this might have something to do with being deputy headmistress with rooms on the first floor instead of up near Gryffindor and Ravenclaw houses on the seventh floor with Flitwick—saw him and waved him over to sit with her.

“We haven’t had a chance to chat since the lightning bolt struck, Filius. Do join me for a spot of gossip.”

“With pleasure, dear lady,” said Flitwick, climbing onto the bench next to her and reaching for eggs, bacon, toast, and tea. “Another shock to your system, I take it. You didn’t know about Monday’s surprise?”

“Know? I am seriously considering accosting Albus in a crowded corridor, accusing him of trying to drive me from the school through public humiliation, and resigning after an emotionally charged and highly dramatic scene that will shame him before his entire staff.”

“Why don’t you?” Flitwick said, sipping his tea. “I for one would love to see it.”

“Because the scoundrel would only twist it to his own advantage. But you would think he’d at least give me a hint.”

“I wish he had, Minerva, because then you would have given me a hint, and I could have told Pomona.”

McGonagall stared down at him, a look of feigned horror on her face. “Filius Flitwick! Are you implying that I would spread information of a confidential nature imparted to me in official capacity by the headmaster of this school?”

"Why not? You've done it before." Flitwick suddenly stood up on the bench so that his head was now above McGonagall's. "There's Master Snape. Let's get him in on this."

"Well, I'm not sure..." McGonagall started, but Flitwick was already waving and calling Snape's name.

Snape came over and was pleased to join them. Flitwick let him start eating then asked, "How do you feel about having an auror in Dark Arts?" Black eyes glinted up, then back down at the plate. *Are you nervous about something?* Flitwick thought.

"I suppose under the circumstances it's a wise precaution," Snape answered. "We do live in dangerous times. Best to be prepared."

"I must say, though," said McGonagall, "that I don't envy you at all. Aurors in the school."

"Why should that affect me more than you?" Snape's voice reflected some of his apprehension.

"You're head of Slytherin house! What are you going to do the first time that Scrimgeour person asks to interrogate the students of your house about their parents and their parents' colleagues?"

The look of shock on Snape's face told Flitwick that he hadn't considered this aspect of the situation at all. Flitwick quickly added his own opinion. "I'll tell you what you do, Master Snape. You go right to Professor Dumbledore. You handle the day to day matters of your house, but something that affects school policy goes right to the headmaster. Or to the deputy headmistress," he added slyly.

"There you are," said McGonagall. "I've barely finished my breakfast, and he's heaping me with problems. I've half a mind to suggest that Albus give the position to you and leave me in peace."

There was a lull in the conversation, then Snape said, "I did have a question. It's more of an administrative matter. I need to order supplies, but I don't know how to go about it. Are there forms to fill out?"

"You just make up a list and give it to me," McGonagall answered, only to have Snape pull several sheets of parchment from his robes and lay them on the table. She glanced over the list, written in small, rather cramped handwriting. "You need all of this?" she gasped.

Snape looked embarrassed. "I know it's a lot, but the stores are low, and I don't see how I can get through the year without..." He stopped as McGonagall began to laugh. "I'm sorry. Have I done..."

"No, no," said McGonagall. "It's just that Slughorn was never organized

enough to ask me for more than half a month's supplies at a time. Are you telling me this will last you until June and you won't bother me again all year?"

"I think so. I don't want to make any promises, though."

"Laddie, I'm softening to you already. If you gentlemen will excuse me, I'll leave you to talk. I'm off to take care of administrative matters." McGonagall rose and swept from the Hall, leaving Flitwick and Snape at the table.

Flitwick waited until McGonagall was gone, then leaned across the table. "Truth be known, I've been wanting a private chat with you since Saturday. You are the repository of several secrets that have been eating at me for years." Snape's eyebrows shot up, but Flitwick just chuckled. "Two words—green hair. How did you do it? If it's a professional secret, just tell me to mind my own business."

Snape actually smiled. It was a timid, shy smile, but Flitwick was pleased that the young man seemed to be relaxing. "I'm afraid I'll disappoint you, Professor. That one wasn't a charm. It was a potion."

"Even more mysterious. Feeding them a potion in the middle of the Hall when you weren't even there. Now you have to tell me."

"It was a two-part potion. I put the second half in the morning pumpkin juice. The first half was in a box of candy I owed to myself. They took the candy from me, then drank the pumpkin juice less than twenty-four hours later. Green hair."

Flitwick laughed and clapped his hands. "The beauty is, if they hadn't bullied you and taken the candy, nothing would have happened, right? Dumb Gryffindors!"

"They wanted to blame me for it to Professor Dumbledore, but they couldn't without admitting what they'd done."

"Why did you do it?" Flitwick regretted the question at once as he watched the humor in Snape's face fade.

"They . . . did something to me. If you don't mind, Professor, I'd rather not talk about it."

"That's all right. I don't need to know. I thought it might have been retaliation. Now I have another word for you—bats."

That got them into a discussion of the physiology of vocal cords and the frequency of sound waves, and then they rose from the breakfast table to return to their classrooms and their work. It left Flitwick with a lot to think about, though. *He did that when he was thirteen. Thirteen, and he knew all that*

about sound waves! What does he know now? And why on earth did the Sorting Hat ever put him into Slytherin? He should have been in my house!

Severus went from the Great Hall to McGonagall's office to ask for the files on the current Slytherin students. He hadn't intended to start reviewing them this early in the month, but something they'd mentioned at breakfast was now bothering him greatly. McGonagall was pleased to give him the hundred files for his sixty students and the incoming first years. They were in two boxes, and he levitated them down to his office.

It didn't take two minutes before his worst fears were confirmed. There were Death Eater children in Slytherin house, maybe as many as fifteen of them. Their parents worked in the clinic, in supply, in operations. He'd taught spells and self-defense to fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, and in one case an older brother. Before the welcoming feast was over on September first, all Slytherin house would know he was a Death Eater.

Flitwick's advice was good, though. This wasn't just his own problem. It was Dumbledore's problem, too. Severus left the dungeon and climbed the stairs to the top of the castle and the entrance to Dumbledore's office. He wasn't sure how to knock, but that was apparently taken care of by some system or spell, for as he stood there the stairway began to move, and he went up to speak to the headmaster.

"I would not be too concerned, Severus. I assumed that many of your students would know as soon as they wrote home to tell their parents who their teachers were. That is of little importance, since those same parents would caution them to secrecy. I do see where the presence of Professor Scrimgeour might complicate things. I would in any case never countenance the interrogation of students."

"One of the things that bothers me is that this didn't occur to me before. How could I not have realized it?"

"My dear boy, you compartmentalize everything. Your brain has been sorting information into sealed sections since you were a baby. You just do not equate Hogwarts with the outside world. They are in separate compartments. You need to consciously focus on these things for your own safety."

"I am going to have to go down to London soon to report. What should I tell him?"

"There is not a lot to tell. About Scrimgeour, of course, and Moody. And the fact that your cover is not secure. He might even caution the parents before the students arrive, so that there will be less gossip."

"I hadn't thought of that. It's a great idea. Professor McGonagall says we get one day a week off. What's my day off?"

"During August, you may come and go as you wish. Once the school year starts, your free evening is on Thursdays."

Thursday turned out to be too far in the future. Almost immediately after Wednesday lunch, Severus's left arm began to sting. It was nothing urgent or really painful, just a gentle nudge, but he went directly to Dumbledore.

"He's calling. I should go to London."

"When?"

"Right now if I can. The longer I delay, the better my excuse will have to be."

"All right. Let me walk you to the gate."

They didn't say much, but Severus appreciated the gesture of concern. As soon as he was through the gate, he apparated to Pendle, and from there to London. Direct apparations were traceable, and he wanted the Dark Lord to know he was being cautious.

He was expected. As Severus signed in, the porter said, "You're to go straight through. He wanted to know when you arrived."

There was no one else in the interview chamber, and the light was soft and diffuse — a conversation rather than an interrogation or punishment. Severus relaxed. The Dark Lord sat in the center and beckoned. "Stand before us," he said.

That he didn't have to kneel was also good. Severus advanced and the Dark Lord searched his eyes. "Tell us now of Hogwarts," the Dark Lord said.

"The Ministry has sent an auror to be a teacher there," Severus said at once, the most important information having to come first.

There was a hiss, then the Dark Lord spoke again. "Continue."

"His name is Rufus Scrimgeour. He came early Monday morning with another auror named Alastor Moody. Moody's returned to the Ministry, but Scrimgeour's still at Hogwarts. I think he plans to commute, though — arrive each morning and return home in the evenings. He's been given the Defense Against the Dark Arts job. The other teachers don't like his being there. They're afraid he'll take advantage of his position to investigate them or question the students. They're all, including Dumbledore, opposed to the idea of interrogating students. I don't think they trust the Ministry."

"This discord among our enemies is good news. We shall try to minimize this Scrimgeour's effectiveness. Continue."

“Lord, I am concerned about the security of my own position and my ability to serve you there. Both Scrimgeour and Moody seemed suspicious of me as soon as they heard my name. Moody asked if I knew Dolohov, and said that Dolohov knew me. I took that to mean that Dolohov has been giving the aurors names since he was sent to Azkaban, though that may not be the case. I’ve also checked the school files and find that several of my future students are from families that serve you. They’ll know I’m one of your servants, and word may spread through the school.”

“We understand your concern. Our people here will instruct their children in discretion. We shall also investigate this business about Dolohov. It is displeasing to us that he may have divulged our secrets. You must move with caution. As you know, the aurors have been given authority to use Unforgivable curses against our people. You may be facing the Cruciatus curse and Veritaserum.”

Severus’s eyes widened with the recollection, and he allowed his fear to wash through him. Dropping to his knees, he said, “Lord, I fear my own weakness. I’m not one of your operatives, a soldier in your army—I’m a potions maker, a spell caster, the humblest of your servants. Please, Lord, let me return here where I can serve you without fear of being forced to betray you.”

“We desire that you remain at Hogwarts. Your loyalty is of great value to us. Your information is of greater value. Be cautious. Be discreet. Is there something that will minimize the risk of your detection?”

“Once the students arrive, I’ll only be allowed off the grounds one evening a week. I’ve found that this will be Thursday evenings. If I’m summoned on any other day, it will look suspicious. Also, I’ll need to be able to tell people what I did with my free time or after a while that will look suspicious, too.”

“Come to us then on Thursdays. Your reports should not take long. Then you will have time to create a story for your . . . colleagues. What reason did you give Dumbledore for coming to us today?”

“I told him I had to go to Diagon Alley to be sure the cauldron shop and the apothecaries had all the necessary equipment our students would be buying, and that the books had arrived at Flourish and Blotts.”

“Then you must do what you have told him you would do. Go now. You need not come tomorrow if there is no news. We shall expect you the following Thursday.”

It was over. Minutes later Severus was back out on the street in the August sunshine with an entire afternoon to spend in London.

One of the first things Severus did in Diagon Alley was send an owl to Hogwarts telling Dumbledore he would be in London for several hours and that everything was all right, then he went to the cauldron shop and the apothecaries as he'd told the Dark Lord he would.

The business in Diagon Alley took but a few minutes, after which Severus stopped at Barclay's bank to get some muggle money. He'd had the account for several years, since the death of his muggle grandmother, and the sum he'd accumulated there was quite respectable. He didn't withdraw much, enough to buy some books and get a meal.

His first stop was Foyle's bookstore, only a short distance away from the Leaky Cauldron, at least as Severus reckoned distance. In the past he'd loved to just browse through floor after floor of books on every possible topic, but this time he had a purpose. He was looking for a cookbook, one with a recipe for eggs Benedict. This wasn't hard to find, Severus being forced rather to choose from a wide selection of books. What he ended up with, in fact, were two books he'd not come for. The first was a simple instruction book on kitchen terms and basics, the second a two-volume boxed set on the history of food with an accompanying volume containing menus and recipes, neither of which had anything about eggs Benedict.

On the way out of the store, Severus's eye was caught by the magazines, splashed with pictures of royal pomp and circumstance. The Prince of Wales had finally married, at the end of the previous month, and Severus had been too concerned with Death Eater affairs to notice. The photographs reminded him of his younger self leaning out a dormer window of the Blacks' London residence watching guests arrive in formal attire. He decided to buy one of the magazines, then noticed the picture on another.

It looked like a funny little airplane, with stubby wings jutting out from its tail, but Severus knew what it was. It was an orbital spacecraft, a spacecraft meant to leave earth and reenter, and then be used again. He flipped through the magazine to the article. *April twelfth. The Americans sent the shuttle up on April twelfth and I missed that one, too.* Severus purchased both magazines.

This gave him an idea. Returning to the Leaky Cauldron, he waited for several minutes to speak to Tom, the barkeep. "You're the tutor chap, aren't you?" Tom said when he got to Severus. "Haven't seen you come in here for quite a while."

"I haven't been here," Severus admitted, "and I won't be around much in the future either. I've got a job up at Hogwarts."

Tom nodded his head, looking pleased. "That's a piece of luck for you now, isn't it? Good position, a little security. What can I get you?"

Severus decided to splurge. "A glass of mead," he said. "And I'd like to ask you something else as well."

"Go ahead," said Tom.

Taking a sip of his mead first, Severus plunged in with what was sure to be an odd request. "If I had a muggle newspaper delivered to the Cauldron every day, could you send it up to Hogwarts by owl?"

"What do you want with a muggle newspaper?"

"These days you have to avail yourself of all sources of information."

"You doing this for Dumbledore?"

"I'll be passing it on to him."

"Sure, as long as you're paying for the service."

That done, Severus had to arrange for delivery, buying a copy of the *Guardian* and then apparating to their offices, but it was something he was able to accomplish in about half an hour.

It was now early evening. Severus wandered through the streets around Leicester Square until he found a little restaurant that seemed interesting, but not too unusual. He didn't want to eat too much strange food on his first excursion. He sat at a corner table, observing the one table with other customers without actually staring at them, and checked the menu, finally ordering something called beef Stroganoff.

The dish was delicious, especially the sour cream sauce, and Severus took out his cookbook to find what was in it, discovering to his surprise that the book included tomato paste in the recipe, but there was no hint of tomato in the food he was eating. Not certain what to do, but intensely curious, he finally asked the waiter, showing him the cookbook. To his great surprise, the chef came out to talk to him.

"I didn't mean to bother you," Severus apologized.

"That's all right. It's early. We're not busy yet." He explained how different chefs prepared things to their own tastes and that as long as certain basics were there — in this case beef, onions, mushrooms, sour cream, and dry mustard — sliced and cooked by a certain method, there could be infinite variations on beef Stroganoff.

Severus returned to Hogwarts fired with the magic of cooking, every

bit as complex and exact — and yet how much more personal — a science as potion making.

“There you are!” called Sprout as Severus passed the open door of the teachers’ staff room, just to the left of the steps leading down to the dungeons and his own rooms. “We were wondering where you were. Is everything all right?”

Severus came over and stood in the doorway, thankful that the twin guardian gargoyles didn’t challenge him. “I had to check a couple of things in Diagon Alley and thought I might make an afternoon of it.”

“And evening,” said Sprout. “Looks like you bought something.”

It was an invitation to come in and open the bag, so Severus did, showing them the two cookbooks, the magazines, and the copy of the *Guardian*. “I should start getting the newspaper in a couple of days,” he said.

“Well, if that’s what you like to read, dear,” responded Sprout, picking up one of the magazines. “Who’s this lovely couple?”

“He’s the son of the Queen,” Severus explained. “Just got married last month.”

“So this is fancy muggle clothing. You know, it’s quite elegant in a way. Minerva, look at this blue gown.”

“What’s this?” Flitwick asked, looking at the pictures of the Columbia.

“It’s a scientific vehicle. It goes into space.”

“Didn’t know you were interested in things like that.”

“I used to follow all the moon shots when I was a student.” Severus noted that Flitwick seemed not to understand, so he elaborated. “The muggles in America were sending rockets to the moon. People were walking on the moon.”

“How clever. Was it cheese?”

“Sadly, no. Just rocks and dust.”

Flitwick glanced over at the two women, who were examining and commenting on the clothes in the other magazine. “Don’t mean to offend, but word has it you grew up in a muggle family.”

“Sort of,” Severus admitted. “My mother stopped using magic at home, and my dad was a muggle.”

“I don’t mind telling you it can get boring here in the evenings. Slughorn was no fit company for anyone but himself, and I don’t always share the ladies’ interests. While Mullein was here we had interesting conversations almost every night, but now sometimes we do, and sometimes we don’t. Futhark comes down from time to time, but all he wants to talk about are runes. And

when those two, Pince, Pomfrey, Hooch, and Trelawney get together . . . well, I'm a little lost. What do muggles do for entertainment?"

"My dad and I used to play cards. Cribbage mostly."

"What's that?"

"It's a two player card game where you peg points according to what you hold in your hand. It's like a race to see who can go around the track on a board first. The math is simple, but the combinations can be complex."

"Could you teach me this game?"

"I'd love to. I haven't played a cribbage game since . . ." Severus paused, then went on. "Well, not since my dad died. Hold on. I'll get the board."

Picking up everything except the magazine with the wedding photographs, Severus hurried to his rooms and collected the cribbage board with its pegs and deck of cards. The rest of the evening was quite pleasant, showing Flitwick how to cut for deal, who got the crib, why thirty-one was twice as good as thirty, how a pair gave you two points but three of a kind gave you six, why it was important who counted first, and why nineteen was the lowest hand you could have.

And then, in the perfect example of beginner's luck, Flitwick skunked him. Twice.

They went to bed after midnight.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 6, 1981

After breakfast the next morning, Professor McGonagall called Snape over to speak with her before he went to his office. "Yes, ma'am?" he said, smoothly and politely as he approached, all respect and diffidence.

"Now that you're finished with those supplies you were working so hard at, I thought I might show you around the school — I can tell you things you have to watch out for, explain some of your duties, and show you places the students never see."

"I'd appreciate that very much, ma'am. It's kind of you to spend so much time on me. When would be most convenient for you?"

"I thought perhaps in an hour. Would you meet me at nine in the entrance hall?"

"With pleasure, ma'am."

McGonagall watched him go, smooth and quiet. Smooth. That was the perfect word for him. *You got to Flitwick last night with that card game, thought McGonagall, and you'll find a way to Sprout soon enough, I can tell.*

You're trying to get to me by buttering me up, but you'll find I don't fall so easily. You may not be as bad as I thought, but I'll still wager you're no saint either.

When McGonagall left her office and walked to the marble staircase at nine, Snape was already waiting at its foot. "Come up with me, then," she called. "We'll start at the top and work our way down."

McGonagall talked as they climbed the stairs. "One of your most important duties, outside of teaching, of course, is to see the children don't get into trouble. Curfew is our biggest weapon, but you'd be amazed at how creative the little darlings can be. Fortunately, we haven't had a pregnancy in the last few years, but that's due to constant vigilance."

There was no response from Snape, so McGonagall looked behind her to find that he was blushing again. She adopted a stern face. "Surely you knew as a student that your classmates were engaged in extracurricular activities? Well, it's your duty to break them up. We owe that to their parents."

"You mean I have to interrupt..."

"You have to hunt them down, chase them out, and deduct points from their houses. Be ruthless." She didn't ask if Snape had ever snuck off to a hidden part of the castle with a girl. She didn't have to. The look on his face was answer enough. *You're more innocent than I thought, laddie. At least about some things.*

"At night, Flitwick is responsible for the seventh floor—Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Sprout handles the ground areas—Hufflepuff and Slytherin. Dumbledore and I check in between. You help us, but you also help Hagrid with the exterior areas. Filch takes over after eleven and roves. By eleven you're usually free to go to bed, since the prefects should have accounted for everyone in their houses by then. In an emergency, the other resident staff are Trelawney, Futhark—though not on weekends—, Hooch, Pince, and Pomfrey, but they don't have regular patrol duties."

Every floor had a small staff washroom with an adjoining rest area. "Just in cast you suddenly feel that if you don't get a moment of peace and quiet you're going to commit murder. And the children will drive you to that point from time to time. The key to survival in the jungle is knowing where your safe areas are."

"I never realized these existed," Snape said when McGonagall showed him the rest area on the sixth floor.

"Of course not. They're here to allow us to escape from the students. What use would they be if the students knew where they were?"

The fifth floor had the storeroom. "Anything you want to put away here

that you'd like on the grounds, but don't want to have cluttering your room, you can put here." McGonagall showed Snape his own store area, which so far held just the boxes and bags he'd carried his things in. "And if there's something you need, we have extra furniture here as well." The whole back end of the store area was filled with chairs, tables, desks, bookcases, even a couple of beds.

The teachers' bathroom was on the third floor. It was a large, elegant room faced in marble with a great rectangular tub, a little like a small pool, sunk into the floor. Around the tub were faucets that provided water and bubble bath of different temperatures and fragrances. Huge towel racks held warm towels. A large window looked out over the lake.

"Most of the teachers have smaller tubs, sinks, and basins in their own rooms," McGonagall said, "so we use this only when we feel the need for some luxury, but Slughorn was in here almost every day. He never could get enough luxury, though I understand, too, that the Potions rooms are the smallest and coldest in the castle, so there was some excuse for it."

It was fascinating to watch Snape's reaction to the bathroom, for he seemed almost frightened by its grandeur and openness. He touched the towel rack with tentative fingers, but made no effort to explore further, and when McGonagall showed him the lockers where he could put his clothes while bathing, he began to blush furiously, his embarrassment so acute that McGonagall felt sorry for him.

At lunch, McGonagall sought out Dumbledore. When the two of them sat together in one of the corners of the Great Hall, the others understood that they were discussing school business and left them alone.

"Bee in your bonnet?" Dumbledore asked.

McGonagall was watching the other side of the hall, where Snape had come in with the cribbage board and cards, and he and Flitwick sat down to play. Turning, she realized that Dumbledore knew she'd been observing them.

"Is there something I should know about Professor Snape," she asked, filling her plate and beginning to eat. "I mean, is there anything wrong with him that could affect his teaching or the operation of this school?"

"Whatever do you mean, Minerva? Has Severus said or done something amiss?"

"Done? No. Said . . . it's more what he doesn't say. And what he doesn't do. He's been here six days, eating with us, joining us last evening in the staff room, and he hasn't said one word about himself outside of his job here and

buying books yesterday in London. And that he played cards with his father. Did you know he's been avoiding Scrimgeour? Just a few minutes ago he was coming to the Hall, saw Scrimgeour, and walked back into the dungeons before Scrimgeour could see him."

"Anything else?" Dumbledore appeared quite serious, but McGonagall could hear the smile in his voice.

"In addition to that, I do not believe I have ever met a more painfully prudish person in my life. You should have seen him, Albus, when I talked about stopping students' trysting, or about using the staff bathroom. It was all very straightforward and matter-of-fact, but I swear he was about to sink through the floor with embarrassment. It isn't natural. There's something wrong there."

"I would prefer not discussing anyone's private affairs, though I can see how you might be concerned for the school. Let me assure you that he will not be a problem."

"Are you so sure?" McGonagall's voice had dropped to a whisper, even though none of the other teachers was near. "You didn't see him, Albus. I swear it was abnormal for a young man of his age."

Dumbledore sighed. "This is in strictest confidence, Minerva, headmaster to deputy headmistress. I shall not go into detail, but prior to his parents' deaths, Severus's home life was sufficiently unpleasant that it left scars, and I am not speaking of emotional scars, though I am certain those are there as well."

McGonagall stared at Dumbledore in horror, forcing herself not to glance across the hall at Snape and Flitwick. "That wee bit-bit of a thing?"

"Indeed. Before he came to us. I discovered it in his second year. He managed through seven years at Hogwarts to avoid any situation where someone else might see the scars. I would not be surprised if he does what he can to avoid seeing them himself. I hope that allays some of your concerns."

McGonagall nodded, for if what Dumbledore said was true, it was surprising that Master Snape had coped as well as he had under the social pressure of a school like Hogwarts.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "Now, if you will excuse me, Minerva, I have some things to attend to."

McGonagall sat alone after that, thinking. *It was the openness and sense of exposure, poor lad. No wonder he was uncomfortable. It would explain the lack of girlfriends, too, the shying away from physical intimacy. And why he's reluctant*

to talk about himself or his family. She felt her heart swell with maternal protectiveness. And to think that I suspected him of more sinister motives. Minerva McGonagall, you should be ashamed of yourself!

Getting up from the table, McGonagall crossed the hall to return to her own rooms, pausing as she did so by the two playing cribbage. She watched the game for a few minutes, then smiled as she asked, "Who's winning?"

August passed quickly. Severus received his supplies and spent a pleasant couple of days putting them away, needing more cabinets from the storeroom on the fifth floor in order to have room for all of them. Desks were cleaned and arranged, equipment set up, and lessons prepared. His office, too, was in order, and he brought books from home for the bookcase. On one of his weekly trips to London, he discovered a new series of murder mysteries, the fourth volume only just published, that set him researching the twelfth century to find out how much of the background was true.

Severus was also getting to know his students, or at least as much as one can know from a file. He knew their classes and their academic abilities, who was on the Quidditch team and who got detention nearly every week, and which parents wrote constantly asking for special treatment for their children. He was beginning to look forward to the start of school.

Even the other teachers seemed to like him including, unexpectedly, Professor McGonagall. Indeed, if it hadn't been for the brooding presence of Rufus Scrimgeour, Severus might almost have thought of his life as happy.

"Do I frighten you, Professor Snape?"

"No, sir."

"Then I would appreciate it if you would look at me. I realize these interviews are unusual and outside the normal routine of Hogwarts, but I find it, frankly, irritating to have to talk to someone whose face I can't see."

"Yes, sir."

Severus looked at Scrimgeour, not exactly into his eyes, but a little past his left ear at the picture of the Minister of Magic on the wall behind him.

"Your full name is Severus Snape?" It may or may not have been intentional, but Scrimgeour sounded like the police homicide detective in a television program Severus had seen as a child.

"Yes, sir."

Scrimgeour noted the question and its answer on a piece of parchment. "Parents?"

"Tobias Snape and Eileen Prince." Severus paused, then added, "Both deceased."

"You're a half-blood then." Scrimgeour seemed to relax a little. "Not exactly top drawer — for the other side, I mean."

"No, sir . . . uh . . . yes, sir."

"How long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?"

"This is my first year. I was hired at the beginning of this month."

"Aren't you a bit young for a Hogwarts professor? Normally Professor Dumbledore requires more experience."

"I understand Professor Slughorn retired rather suddenly. You'd have to ask Professor Dumbledore about that, though. I really don't know myself. But I did have an Outstanding on my Potions NEWT, and I've been tutoring since I was thirteen."

"That's what Dumbledore said. I understand it's the only work you've had since you graduated. Could you give me the names of some of your pupils?"

"Names?" Severus said. "Why would you need their names?"

"We just want to be able to verify your statement. It's routine. We might not even contact them. It depends on the Ministry, really. I just need them for my report."

"I'd really rather not give you any names, at least not until I've had a chance to contact people and ask permission."

"How many pupils are we talking about?"

"I'm not sure."

Scrimgeour looked up from his parchment. "Come now. It was just a couple of weeks ago that you were seeing them regularly and collecting payment. Just run through the list in your mind and give me a number."

Severus looked down at his hands. The problem was, of course, that the tutoring hadn't been in Potions — it had been in self defense. And the pupils weren't paying him — the Dark Lord was. Anything he told Scrimgeour could be proven false. What was the penalty for lying to an auror conducting an official investigation?

"I'm sorry, sir. I've never been in a position like this before. I'd like to help, and I know I'm supposed to answer your questions, but I also have a responsibility to my . . . my clients. I'd appreciate it if you could give me some time to talk to them, or at least ask for advice on my conflicting duties . . ."

"You want to talk to a lawyer? I'm conducting a routine check into Hogwarts personnel, and you want to talk to a lawyer?"

"No. No, that's not . . ." Severus felt his face paling and hoped Scrimgeour

didn't notice. "Just, maybe Professor Dumbledore. If I could speak with Professor Dumbledore..."

"That's all right, Professor Snape. I don't need to ask any more questions. I'll just note for the record that in a routine interview you were unwilling to provide information. I'm certain no one at the Ministry will even notice. You may go now."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Severus rose and left the Dark Arts office. His hands were trembling slightly, and he felt weak. *I need to learn to face times like that. I need to have the answers ready. How do I know the answers if I don't know what the questions are going to be?* He returned to his own rooms, thinking of what he might have said, should have said, already preparing for the next time.

He went straight to Dumbledore.

"I think he knows. I'm sure he knows. It was like a cat playing with a mouse. Dolohov. Dolohov told them. That's what the other one said, the one that went back to London. He said Dolohov knew me."

"Calm down, Severus. This cannot have been the worst of your experiences. After all, you have faced down Voldemort himself... Oh, dear. I am sorry. Does it hurt badly?"

"Not terribly. It's a little like an electric shock."

"How would you know what an electric shock feels like?"

Severus paused in his pacing and glanced over at Dumbledore, sitting at his desk in the tower office. "I stuck a fork in an electric outlet when I was five." He smiled a little at the memory. "Mum had hysterics, but Dad thought it was funny. After he made sure I was all right, of course."

"Such a wealth of experience you have, Severus, growing up in the muggle world. I have a friend in the Ministry who would love to meet and talk with you. If he knew about you, of course. Fascinated with muggles. Now, where were we? Ah! We must have some other way to refer to... him. I refuse to go through life saying 'What's his name,' and you cannot take the other sobriquet. Maybe something classical — Mephistopheles, or some such thing. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Moriarty?" Severus said without thinking, then remembered that he spoke to a wizard. "Sorry, sir. Muggle reference."

"The Napoleon of Crime? Would that then make you Dr. Watson, my dear Severus? Note how I flatter myself by assuming you meant me to represent the incomparable Sherlock."

"Who better, sir? With Professor Scrimgeour standing in as Gregson."

“Not Lestrade?”

“Too pompous. Lestrade at least admitted Holmes was smarter, and kept coming back for help.”

“I shall defer to the expert, Severus. Gregson it shall be. There, see? You can laugh at the incident. Well, maybe not laugh, but at least smile. Do not worry about Rufus Scrimgeour. He knows nothing and can learn nothing, and even if he could, he would have to go through me to get to you. You are perfectly safe here at Hogwarts. They will not touch you.”

“Thank you, sir.” There was another pause, then Severus said tentatively, “May I ask you about something else?”

“Certainly. Why waste this splendid opportunity?”

“What’s happening with Lily?”

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. “I have been wondering when you would get back to her. It has been over half a month, and you have been so circumspect, so cautious, as if there were nothing in the world but potions ingredients, inventories, and student files.”

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s none of my business.”

“You mistake me, Severus. Whose else’s business would it be, besides Lily’s herself — and James’s? I have people who owe their lives to the fact that you consider Lily to be your business. No, I am simply commenting on how you have been able to bottle it up so well over such a span of time. I commend you.”

“And Lily, sir?”

“Is well. For the moment they are in hiding. They have found a place well away from anywhere that Volde . . . Moriarty might look. They are preparing to perform a Fidelius Charm to protect the house. I believe I already told you that they have considered me for the Secret-Keeper. Once that is done, Lily will be quite secure. You have nothing to worry about.”

“It’s good to know. That I have nothing to worry about. Except Scrimgeour, of course.” Severus was looking at his hands again. “Sir, what’s the worst they could do to me? Could they send me to Azkaban?”

“Good heavens, no! Azkaban is for serious criminals, not for fourth-level potions brewers and gymnastics instructors.”

“Gymnastics! I don’t teach . . .”

“You teach people how to fall down. That is gymnastics. You teach a few other things as adjuncts to falling down, but I gather they are peripheral.”

“Sir, falling down is just preliminary to . . .”

"Severus, do you want Rufus Scrimgeour to think you are important? If it comes to it, you teach people how to fall down."

Severus nodded, understanding. "Yes, sir," he said.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 20, 1981 (TWO DAYS BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER)

By the third week of August, all of the teachers were aware that the newspaper Professor Snape received by owl every morning was not *The Daily Prophet*. At first they'd been curious about the pictures that didn't move and the weather forecasts, but the novelty soon faded, and he was generally left alone to read it. Cribbage was relegated to lunch or the evening, Flitwick having decided he wasn't sharp enough in the morning to have a chance of beating Snape.

"Anything happening in the world?"

Severus looked up from the article he was reading. Professor Kettleburn clearly wanted to sit and talk, so he folded the paper and gestured to the bench opposite him. "Please join me, Professor. The news isn't very cheerful anyway. It seems the Americans shot down two Libyan fighter planes in the Mediterranean."

"That sounds serious." Kettleburn helped himself to sausages and toast.

"Just a difference of opinion over where Libya ends and international waters start. What can I do for you, Professor?"

"To put it briefly, young man, what are your plans for Quidditch?"

"I don't play Quidditch."

"No, but Slytherin does, and a lot of us are hoping to see someone challenge Gryffindor's iron grip on the Quidditch cup."

"What have you got against Gryffindor?" Severus was intrigued at the idea that inter-house rivalry extended to the whole staff.

"Not a thing. Hufflepuff myself, though. I just want the matches to get more exciting. Put a little spice into it. More sporting, if you get my meaning. Are you a betting man?"

"No, not really. I don't even go to Quidditch games. Was Gryffindor winning all those years I was in school?"

"Pretty much. Don't get me wrong, they've had some great teams, and they do tend to get players willing to take risks. That's the Gryffindor mentality. Old Slughorn, now, he rather thought of being on the Slytherin team as a reward for the rich and famous."

“Even I can see that’s not the way to get a topnotch team.” Severus sipped his coffee pensively. “What would I have to do?” he asked after a moment.

“That’s the spirit! Take charge and come out fighting!” Kettleburn’s voice became conspiratorial. “Now look, your captain and half the team were seventh years, so now they’re gone. You get to pick the new captain. Doesn’t have to be one of the old players — could be someone completely new. Have tryouts. Be there to show them the old system of favorites is out and skill is in. Learn the game and take an interest. The team ’ll appreciate it and play better for you. The first game of the season is always Gryffindor-Slytherin. You probably won’t be able to beat them with a new team, but you could at least make them sit up and take notice.”

Severus nodded as Kettleburn rose to leave, his breakfast finished. “Thank you for the advice, sir. You’ve given me some ideas.”

“Glad to hear it, Snape. Keep me posted. I’m real interested in learning how the team shapes up.”

“Are you a betting man, sir?”

Kettleburn laughed as he turned away, “Why do you think I was over here talking to you?”

A week before the students arrived, Severus wandered over to the greenhouses where Professor Sprout was sorting through supplies of pots and soil. She was wearing a large apron and heavy gloves, and muttering about mandrakes.

“What can I do for you?” she called as soon as she saw him. “People don’t usually visit my little domain. It’s good to have some company.”

“It’s a nice place. I always liked the Herbology classes. My grandmother grew all her own herbs, though she didn’t have a greenhouse, so she couldn’t raise the more exotic ones. Actually, there were a few specific ones I was curious to see if you had.”

Sprout straightened up, hands on hips. “Go ahead and ask.”

Severus pulled out a list. “Rosemary, bay, oregano, thyme, sage . . .”

“Whoa, there. What potion are you making with those?”

“No potion. I was thinking of doing some of my own cooking, and these are herbs I might need.”

Sprout was intrigued, and she and Severus spent the rest of the afternoon planning a small kitchen herb garden just for him.

MONDAY, AUGUST 31, 1981 (TWO DAYS BEFORE THE NEW MOON)

"I say," said Snape decisively, examining the contents of his goblet, "that the Sorting Hat is the biggest con game in the Wizarding World."

"Do tell?" Sprout replied, adding some more mead to his glass. It was the last evening of August, and the heads of houses were mourning their final hours of freedom. Sprout had just made the enchanting discovery that Master Snape had trouble holding his liquor, and she was experimenting with just how talkative she could make him before McGonagall came to his rescue.

"Of course. We have four houses with fourteen dormitories each, for seven years of boys and seven years of girls. Each dormitory has five beds. Every year we bring in twenty boys and twenty girls, and defying all odds on random chance, each year we get five boys and five girls per house. The Hat may actually be sorting at the beginning of the alphabet, but you get down to the Zs, and they go to the house that still has an empty slot. If your last name is Zoltan, you have no choice at all."

"It can't be that bad, Severus," said McGonagall. "I'm sure the Hat sorts them all very conscientiously."

"Then the admission process is rigged. Students usually go in the same house as their parents, right? So you select students by what house their parents were in and voila! Sorting done before they ever get on the train."

"You forget that I handle admissions. If what you say is true, I would have to know about it."

"Maybe you do, and you're not admitting it."

Sprout ducked her head down to hide a quickly stifled laugh and put a finger to her lips as warning to the shocked Flitwick. Neither of them ever dared challenge McGonagall.

"Are you calling me a liar, boy?" McGonagall's eyes narrowed, and her voice grew cold. She turned to poke the fire, the night being chill and the motion well adapted to concealing the expression on her face.

"Why is it that whenever I make a point against you my age suddenly becomes an element of the debate? You're a lot like my grandmother, you know. She used the same *ad hominem* arguments..."

"I am not your grandmother!" McGonagall snapped as she spun to face him, just in time to catch a glimpse of the mead bottle disappearing into Sprout's robes. Ignoring Snape, she advanced on the unlucky Sprout. "Are you getting that poor lad drunk? Setting him on me like a hound on a bear? Give me that bottle!"

Sprout handed her the mead, and McGonagall took it and Snape's goblet, replacing it with a cup of coffee. "You drink that, child. It's better for you. And now that I think about it, being compared to Constantina Rossendale is not such a bad thing."

Snape took the coffee without complaint. Sprout wanted to focus the conversation on Snape's hitherto hidden family, but McGonagall refused to take advantage of his temporary vulnerability and firmly changed the subject.

"Do you remember what you have to do tomorrow, Severus?" she asked, sitting next to the fire and arranging her robes neatly over her feet.

"Yes. I go out onto the lawn with you three when the carriages come up the hill. Basically we herd the older students into the Hall as quickly as possible so that everyone's in place before Hagrid comes up from the boat dock with the first years. Then I keep an eye on Slytherin house to make sure no one causes any trouble during the feast. By the way, where do I sit?"

"End of the board, right in front of the Slytherin table. It's where Slughorn sat as well. Normally the Dark Arts professor is next to you, but we'll have to see what Dumbledore wants. He may prefer the Ministry wallah next to him." McGonagall motioned to Sprout, who refilled Snape's cup, this time with coffee.

"I certainly hope so," said Snape. "That man makes me nervous with all his questions."

"Has he been questioning you? What about?"

Snape was suddenly alert and wary. "He said he was doing a routine check of the whole staff. You mean he didn't ask you any questions?"

"Nary a one," McGonagall replied. "You, Flitwick?" but Flitwick shook his head.

"He asked me a few," said Sprout, "about where'd I'd been before I came to Hogwarts and things like that. And he talked to Sibyll, I know because she got all huffy about it. I think it was just the newer teachers, the ones they haven't known for years."

Severus relaxed again, relieved that he hadn't been singled out. School was about to start, and he had enough to think about without having to worry unnecessarily about Rufus Scrimgeour into the bargain.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1981

Lunch was served later than usual on September first since there would be no supper, and the Welcoming Feast would not start until after eight o'clock. All the last minute checks of the dormitories and common rooms were over and Severus spent the rest of the afternoon going over what he had to say to the students in his house the following morning. By six-thirty he and all the other teachers were in the Great Hall, waiting for news that the train had arrived.

"I am so nervous," Severus confided in Flitwick. "This does get easier as the years pass, doesn't it?"

"A little bit," replied Flitwick, "but that feeling never completely vanishes. It's the unknown, Severus. We are facing the unknown. One-seventh of it at least. But you know some of them."

"I know nearly half of them, though not well. And they know me. It's going to be interesting."

Then word came that the train was in. "They'll be loading the carriages now," said McGonagall. "Places everyone."

The heads of houses, Hooch, Kettleburn, and Futhark went out onto the lawn. The others were spread through the entrance hall and Great Hall to usher the students to their seats. If they did it right, the students would never realize they were surrounded by shepherds. Severus never had when he was a student.

Down at the bottom of the hill the great gates opened, and the carriages began their ascent. That was when Severus got his biggest shock of the night. "What are those creatures pulling the carriages?" he gasped to McGonagall. The creatures in question were like horses with wings, but with skeletal black bodies, dragonish heads, and glowing white eyes.

"Those are thestrals," McGonagall told him. "They've always been there."

"I never saw them before," Severus whispered. "Is it because I'm a teacher?"

"No, dear. Didn't you take Care of Magical Creatures in school?"

"Only the first year. Then I switched to Arithmancy and Ancient Runes."

"Then I suggest you look it up later, or ask Kettleburn. Here they come! Look lively now, everyone!"

The carriages were upon them, disgorging students in a total chaos of legs, wheels, voices . . . Following the example of the others, Severus maintained

a constant litany of “This way, up the steps, please, you know where you’re supposed to go, quickly now, inside before the feast starts, this way, up the steps, please . . .”

“Hey, Snape!” yelled an almost familiar voice. “What’re you doing back here? I thought you were shut of this place years ago!”

Severus turned to see Algernon Colfax, considerably taller than he’d been in third year when Severus had tutored him in Potions and Charms. It had to be the rarified atmosphere of seventh year that made Algie think he could address someone four years ahead of him in such a familiar way, but Algie had always had more than his fair share of self-confidence.

“Hey, yourself,” said Severus, “but watch your mouth. I’m on the detention/demerit side of the table now, and my eye’s on you. And it’s ‘Professor Snape’ for your information.”

“Ooooo!” exclaimed Algie. “Does that mean Gryffindor falls this year?”

Severus looked keenly at Algie in the light from the carriage lamps. Algie was, in some ways, like him. Not quite famous enough, not quite rich enough, to merit Slughorn’s attention. But a good chap and a decent student — and better than decent on a broom . . .

“There are falls, and there are falls. No curses or hexes, not on my watch, but how are you at Quidditch?”

Algie’s eyes widened in surprise. “I am, without a doubt, the world’s greatest beater . . . But Slughorn would never . . .” He eyed Severus suspiciously, then it hit him. “No! NO! You’re head of house! I don’t believe it! Chris! Marlie! Look who’s head of house instead of old Slughorn!” Algie was waving at a couple of classmates, Christopher Tobin and Marlene Kingsford, and attracting way too much attention.

“Shh! You’re not supposed to find out until later. You want me to look bad in front of the others?”

“You? Look bad? Not you, Cursemaster. And if you’re revamping the Quidditch team, I’ll be your loyal slave for the entire year.”

“Good. I’ll hold you to that. Now get inside where you belong. And Algie . . . it’s Professor Snape to you. Don’t forget it.”

Once the carriages were empty and the students in the Hall finding their seats, Severus and the others entered the castle to join the rest of the teachers, Severus first hurrying into the dungeon area where he’d left his professorial robe. He’d chosen black, a bit like the academic gown worn at a traditional university and, now properly attired, walked into the Hall and to his place at the high table.

To Severus's great relief, Scrimgeour was indeed sitting at Dumbledore's left. Kettleburn was next to Severus. Kettleburn had just managed a quick, "All right so far" when Dumbledore tapped his glass with a spoon and the Hall quieted down. Almost immediately, the great doors swung open and Professor McGonagall entered, crossing half the width of the Hall before turning to walk down the center row, a train of first years following in her wake, eyes wide with wonder.

"Remember your sorting?" Kettleburn asked.

"All too well," Severus replied, and left it at that. This Sorting held no surprises. The house tables erupted in cheers with each new member, and the names Severus expected to enter Slytherin did so with an almost boring predictability. When only three children were left, Severus leaned towards Kettleburn and whispered, "The girl will be in Hufflepuff, as will one of the boys. The other boy will be Ravenclaw."

Kettleburn grinned. "I see you can count. I used to make bets, but the others won't take them anymore."

"Speaking of which, I may have found a beater. If he's as good as he thinks he is."

"Ah, this promises to be a good year."

The last three were sorted into Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, then Dumbledore rose to introduce the two new professors. Scrimgeour got a polite round of applause; Severus got cheers from Slytherin house, some applause from the other houses, and a general murmur among the older students, especially the seventh years who had more to remember about him. At the Slytherin table, students whose parents staffed the Dark Lord's headquarters were exchanging glances and whispering. *Now we find out if the Dark Lord put the fear into them and their parents.*

Part way through the feast, Severus left the dais to speak to his prefects. All of them were students whose faces, if not their names, had been known to him in seventh year. They all seemed genuinely pleased that the new head of house remembered them.

Then the feast was over, Dumbledore gave a few advisory notices, and the prefects escorted the students to their dormitories. The school year was under way. The professors, tired and anxious to get a good night's sleep before orientation began the following morning, wished each other good night, and Severus followed the students of Slytherin house into the dungeons.

He did not, therefore, notice the speculative expression on McGonagall's

face as he exited the Great Hall. *So smooth. So polite. So young and innocent*, McGonagall was thinking. *So tell me, Master Butter-Wouldn't-Melt-In-My-Mouth, whose death did you witness in the last three years that today allows you to see thestrals?*

The next morning at nine o'clock, Severus entered the Slytherin common room to face all seventy of his students. He hadn't exactly memorized his speech, though he had worked on how the different elements would flow together. Before he began, however, Severus realized that a large number of the older students were taller than he was. He had the prefects move a small bench to a position where he could stand on it and be seen and heard by everyone.

First, Severus welcomed the students to Slytherin, spoke briefly of Salazar Slytherin, the founder of the house, and of famous former members. He then outlined the rules, both the 'don't's—teasing, hexing, fighting, cheating—and the 'do's—studying and living together as a family.

"Currently Slytherin fluctuates between second and fourth place among the houses, depending on the year. We haven't won the House cup in five years, or the Quidditch cup in seven. That's going to change. I'll be monitoring your academic performance, and students having trouble in their classes will have to get tutoring help. Students who lose us points through misbehavior—" without being aware of it, Severus had slipped into a rather good imitation of the Dark Lord "—will be . . . disciplined. There will be no leniency and no exceptions."

"Not fair!" called out one seventh year boy. "You got into enough trouble when you were a student!"

"And you, Reginald Fenloper, will not repeat my mistakes. Do you happen to remember what happened to Benjamin Osgood?"

The unfortunate Fenloper's eyes widened, and he grew visibly paler. The older students and the Death Eater children nodded knowingly. The new head of house had a reputation for curses and powerful contacts. It would take a brave student to run afoul of him.

"Another area where we can and will improve is Quidditch. I need to appoint a new captain, and as far as I'm concerned, every position on the team is open to the best players. We start tryouts next week. We may not take the Quidditch cup this year, while our new team learns to work together, but if we assemble the right team and we all pull together, Gryffindor's days are numbered."

His speech out of the way, Severus let the prefects conduct the first year orientation while he began his interviews.

The interviews were incredibly tedious. Hour after hour of the same questions, the same answers, the same concerns and problems . . . It was mind-numbing. Then, on Friday, classes began.

"Don't just dump it in, Carson. Why do you think your parents went to the expense of buying scales?"

"One of you three sent a stinging hex against Pomeroy, and if I don't find out which one, you're all on detention."

"I hope that gesture means you admire Wilkins's taste in music, because if it doesn't I'm taking points from your house."

"Wooden spoon. Do you see here where you stir it with a wooden spoon? Do I have to teach remedial reading as well as Potions?"

"Addison, put that wand away before I take it away."

"Marconi, put that wand away."

"Put that wand . . ."

A crisis of the soul will send us back to our childhood roots. In Severus's case, it sent him back to Hagrid's hut.

"They are absolute little monsters! They don't care about the material, they will not study, they will not do assignments, they care only for the number of points they will make, they are noisy, they are rude . . . Nothing is worth this!"

"I thought you taught people before," Hagrid said calmly.

"I did. But I taught people who wanted to learn. They wanted to learn so much, they were paying extra money for it."

"So now you got the ones whose parents are paying the extra money. 'Cept the parents ain't here."

"Fine. What am I supposed to do?"

"They're kids. You got to either entertain them or scare them."

"Entertain them?"

"Then you got to scare them."

Young Professor Snape stalked threateningly into his next Potions class preceded by a nonverbal thunderclap spell that reverberated off the walls and sent students scurrying to their desks with their hands over their ears. "Now that I have your attention," he said in a quiet, menacing voice, "recess is over. The next student who pulls out a wand in this classroom will be fed to Hagrid's grindylows. And I assure you it will be six weeks before you

parents even notice that you are missing. Longer before they care. Do I make myself clear?"

He had fewer problems after that.

* * *

McGonagall was cornered in the staff room.

"Why me? Why am I the one stuck with the worst combination in every single class! Never, never should you put Slytherin and Gryffindor together, and that's what I get all the time!"

"Don't exaggerate, Severus. You don't have them every class, only half the classes. The other half is Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff. That should be a good combination."

"It doesn't compensate. Nobody else gets that combination, and in hour-and-a-half classes with potentially dangerous chemicals to boot. Most of you have forty-five minutes at a time with only one house. Sprout has Slytherin/Ravenclaw and Gryffindor/Hufflepuff, Sinistra has Slytherin/Hufflepuff. We could at least alternate years. I could have Slytherin/Gryffindor for first, third, and fifth, and Sprout could have them for second and fourth."

"I'm quite content with the way things are," said Sprout. "I think you just have to learn to cope."

"Besides," added McGonagall, "Hooch and Kettleburn get Gryffindor and Slytherin together."

"You are not going to fob me off with distortions and inaccuracies. Flying only lasts a few weeks, and not all the students take Magical Creatures, so the classes are smaller and in any case he doesn't get first and second years. I am still the only one who gets the classes from hell every single day from September to June!"

McGonagall smiled sweetly. "It's tradition, dear. And there's not a thing you can do about it."

It was a measure of how miserable Severus was that the bright spot in his week was Quidditch.

The Slytherin Quidditch tryouts in the second week of school attracted a large crowd, many of them not Slytherin students. The members of the other houses' Quidditch teams were there, as were the heads of houses themselves and several other teachers who were interested in Quidditch. In addition, the stands were full of students of all houses.

Some twenty-five students were trying out for the seven team positions. Partly because Severus preferred the bludgers, and partly for Algie's sake, he decided to start with candidates for the two Beaters. Even Severus with his limited experience could tell after twenty minutes that Algie Colfax and Chris Tobin were far and away his best choices. Both were seventh years, which made the next step easy.

"Remember, I'm also looking for a Quidditch captain. Let's see how you do in the job. Take over the tryouts while I watch how you handle yourselves."

From then until sunset, Algie and Chris were in charge. From the first minute it was clear not only how keen they were on Quidditch, but how long they'd been hoping for this moment. It's a rare day when someone gets the opportunity to live the daydreams and fantasies of six long years, and Algie wasn't going to waste the chance. By the time they were ready to go in to supper, he had his team. Except for himself and Chris, they were all third, fourth, and fifth years, which augured well for the future.

Severus gathered the Slytherin team around him. "I'm making Colfax the captain. Any objections?" There were none, and the team, already beginning to act like a united group, went up to supper together, discussing training schedules and game strategy.

Kettleburn and McGonagall came over to chat for a moment. "A good looking bunch of players," said Kettleburn. "Care to place your first bet, Minerva? I say Slytherin outscores Gryffindor with the Quaffle, and Gryffindor's only chance to win is to catch the Snitch before Slytherin has them down by more than a hundred fifty."

"It's a bet!" exclaimed McGonagall, "and the easiest galleon I ever won. And you, young man. I thought you weren't interested in Quidditch."

"I'm not," said Severus, "but I'm interested in my house."

"Then the gauntlet is down," McGonagall said. "It's you against me now, and may the best house win."

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17, 1981 (THREE DAYS BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER MOON)

After supper on the third Saturday in October, Hagrid stopped Severus on his way down into the dungeons.

"Good you're still here, Professor Snape. Professor Dumbledore's sent for me, and he asked me to bring you along, too."

Upstairs in Dumbledore's office, the news was good. "This evening Hagrid and I are going into the west country to visit James and Lily. Everything is well with them, and they have nearly completed the preparations for the Fidelius Charm. We shall be making the final adjustments. If all goes according to schedule, it should be performed next week. I shall not mention to them that you are here. It is probably best that they not know. Not yet at any rate. There is nothing you can do, but I thought you might like to know for your own peace of mind."

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 24, 1981 (THREE DAYS BEFORE THE NEW MOON)

The fourth Saturday in October was set for the first Hogsmeade excursion. Severus was scheduled to supervise, and at breakfast asked for a review of his duties.

"It isn't hard," said McGonagall. "In fact, generally it's as much fun for the staff as for the students. You just make sure there are no fights and that none of the students troubles the local residents. You remember getting out to Hogsmeade, don't you?"

"Not really," Severus answered. "I didn't use to go." He paused, wondering how much of a response she expected, then volunteered, "I was never interested in candy or in jokes and tricks. Not the kind you buy in shops at any rate."

McGonagall's sudden sympathetic expression told Severus she'd remembered that as a boy he never had enough money. He changed the subject, and they discussed other matters. Dumbledore was not at breakfast that morning, and Severus assumed he'd already left to take care of the business at Lily's home, but said nothing to anyone about it.

Peace of mind was hardly an adequate expression for the way Severus felt that afternoon in Hogsmeade. He was walking on air. Lily would be safe. She had a good place to raise her son, in the clean air of the west country where Mr. Arrogance would have to learn to live quietly and where Lily would feel almost at home. Dumbledore would be Secret-Keeper and Hagrid would be watchdog. Severus could endure any amount of Slytherin-Gryffindor squabbling if Lily was safe.

The next day, without divulging any details, Dumbledore let Severus know that the Fidelius Charm had been performed. Lily's home was now protected even from a chance view by a passing stranger. Hagrid was going down that day to visit, but Hagrid's knowing the secret jeopardized nothing.

Severus was happy. Lily was safe and life was good.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 29, 1981 (TWO DAYS AFTER THE NEW MOON)

The following Thursday, late in the afternoon, Severus made his usual trip to London. His weekly reports to the Dark Lord were short and dull. Scrimgeour had not yet gotten Dumbledore's permission to interview students, so he arrived, taught his classes, and returned home every evening. Nothing was discussed in staff meetings that wasn't school business. The sons and daughters of the Dark Lord's Death Eaters were being circumspect and discreet...

This Thursday was different. When Severus finished his report, the Dark Lord said, "And now we have a reward for you, in recognition of what you have done and of the value we set upon your future usefulness to us. Kneel, and uncover your arm." With wand instead of hot iron, the Dark Lord gently touched and altered the mark on Severus's left arm, elaborating and enlarging the design. When he was done, the mark was that of the third level, one of the inner circles. Severus was rising in the Dark Lord's service.

Then the Dark Lord asked, "Has Dumbledore spoken of the child of the prophecy?"

"No, Lord. He never talks of it or of the child."

"He will soon. When he does, note each word, for we are eager to hear what the wise wizard says."

"Yes, Lord."

Once outside on the streets of London, Severus puzzled about his instructions a little, but reasoned that the Dark Lord undoubtedly knew that the Potters had gone into hiding and hoped to get some clue of their whereabouts through a chance remark of Dumbledore's. He made a mental note to tell Dumbledore of the comment.

This evening, however, Severus had decided on something special. He was still exploring the area around Leicester Square, and had finally resolved to see a play. What better place to begin his theater experience than at St. Martin's with Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*? That meant an early dinner, since he would have to apparate back to Hogwarts as soon as the play was over.

Severus dined in a little Indian restaurant, another daring experiment that left him fascinated with the foods and spices so different from what he'd grown up with, then wandered around Leicester Square until seven-thirty, when he went to the theater, nearby in West Street. The play didn't start until

eight o'clock, but Severus wanted to spend the time observing and learning from the other theatergoers.

The play itself was delightful and enthralling as the little group of strangers at a guest house, snow bound and isolated, tried to identify the murderer in their midst. Severus had the pleasure of being surprised by the ending and, after joining the enthusiastic applause, apparated back north, his head full of footlights, curtain calls, and the joys of being an actor.

Back at Hogwarts, he reported to Dumbledore.

"He expected me to speak about James and Lily? How odd." Dumbledore stared into the fire crackling in the fireplace of his office, its flames casting dancing shadows on the walls.

"Not exactly, sir. He said you would speak of the child. He said he was eager to hear your words, your precise words, and he called you a 'wise wizard,' though I had the impression he was speaking sarcastically."

"Very odd indeed. I shall send a message to the Potters to be cautious, though it is hard to imagine them being more cautious than they are already. Did Moriarty seem to be aware that a Fidelius Charm had been cast?"

"No, sir. He made no mention of it, or anything that might have been an allusion. He's just expecting you to have something to say about the child."

"All right. You get to bed. I shall meditate on this puzzle. Good night, Severus."

"Good night, sir."

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1981

On Friday, after going his rounds in the school to be sure everything was in order, Severus went to bed around eleven o'clock, as usual. Two hours later, he was shocked from his sleep by a stab of pain that pulsed up through his left arm and radiated out from his shoulder. He was out of bed in an instant, but the pain was as suddenly gone as it had come.

First lighting a lamp, Severus pushed up his sleeve and examined the skull and snake mark branded into his arm. It appeared perfectly normal. *What was that? It felt like he was calling all of us urgently, then suddenly changed his mind. Should I go? I'd have to get Filch to let me out, and that would look suspicious. He knows I can only leave on Thursdays, so I have an excuse.*

Severus then thought of Dumbledore, debating with himself whether or not to wake the headmaster. Deciding to err on the side of caution, he went up to Dumbledore's office, was admitted, and described what had happened.

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SHIFTING SANDS

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After verifying that the pain had vanished almost instantly, Dumbledore thanked him and sent him back to bed.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - T H R E E

THE END OF ALL THINGS

HALLOWEEN, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1981 (FOUR DAYS AFTER THE NEW MOON)

Breakfast was normal. Since it was Saturday, both teachers and students filtered into the Great Hall whenever it pleased them to be up and about. Dumbledore came in at about seven-thirty and sat briefly next to Severus, their conversation low so that no one else could hear.

“Any change from last night?”

“No, sir. I don’t feel anything at all. No pain, no itching, all perfectly normal.”

“Perhaps he sent out a general call, then remembered you had to stay here and canceled your summons. I have already notified some of my contacts to be on the alert for increased Death Eater activity. I shall also contact the Minister, who will want to know how I know, but I have no intention of telling him. It is possible that Moriarty is planning something big to ‘celebrate’ Halloween.”

“What about . . . you know?”

“I do not want to attract any attention by activity around the area where they live. Sirius Black is planning to join them tonight for a small holiday celebration. I have been attempting to locate him to ask him to go earlier. Since Moriarty will not be able to find Lily, he may attack someone close to her. I shall send someone to check on Lily’s sister’s family to be sure they are not targeted for anything.” Dumbledore rose to leave. “And do not be overly concerned, Severus. So far your experience of last night is the only indication I have received that anything unusual is going on.”

Severus watched as Dumbledore made his way out of the hall, stopping for a moment to speak to Professor McGonagall, who had just walked in. She immediately left the Hall with him.

More people came in to breakfast, and then the owls began to arrive. This was quite normal except that every child of a Death Eater in Slytherin got an owl, and they each appeared upset and nervous as they read their separate letters. Several of them moved to the end of the table to confer privately.

As Severus was leaving the Hall, one of them, Julius Prendergast's daughter Anna, came over to him. "Professor," she asked, "has something happened? I got a note from my mother about something strange last night, and everyone's waiting, but no one knows what's happened."

"I'm as much in the dark as everyone else," Severus told her. "Don't worry. We'll find out soon."

Severus advised Dumbledore about the messages to the students. None of the parents had said what exactly had caused their concern, not wanting to commit that information to writing, but he and Dumbledore reasoned that it was probably the same as for Severus, the sudden flaring and receding of pain in the mark on their arms.

As the day wore on, though, it began to look more and more like a false alarm. No Death Eater activity was reported. No disasters occurred. Severus still wanted Dumbledore to contact the Potters directly, but Dumbledore managed to calm him down.

"If Moriarty is planning something, he will be watching me especially to try to find out where they are. Owls can be tracked. Magic can be detected. Hagrid stands out like a signpost. Sirius will be arriving at their house in a couple of hours. If anything is wrong, he will send me a message."

The wizard festival of Samhain was probably Hogwarts' greatest feast, with the possible exceptions of the beginning and ending of the school year. That evening the Great Hall was festooned with skeletons and the representations of ghosts (as well as the real articles) for this commemoration of the mingling of the living with the dead at the witches' New Year. The feast was well under way when there was a sudden disturbance at the entrance to the Great Hall, and Dedalus Diggle and Doris Crockford pushed their way into the festival.

"Albus!" Dedalus yelled above the din of student voices, "Albus, we have great news!" The hall became silent as staff and students nudged each other and turned to look at the emissary. "Albus! We have great news! He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has been defeated! The Dark Lord is dead!"

Dumbledore rose majestically in the center of the staff table. "Dedalus!" he called in the silence. "This is good news indeed. Are you sure?"

"There is no doubt! He has been defeated! He is dead!"

In a fraction of a second of uncertainty, Dumbledore glanced to his right. There, at the end of the table, stood young Professor Snape. And there was on his face a look of radiant joy such as Dumbledore had never expected to see. *All is indeed well. He is free.* “You must join us, Dedalus, Doris! Our feast has begun, but you have brought us even more to celebrate.”

“Alas, Albus, there is ill news with the good. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is dead, but at the cost of James and Lily Potter. He reached them first, but as they died, so did he.”

There was then a moment of sorrowful silence, but the release of exuberance that accompanied the news that the wizarding world was no longer at war could not be contained. Hats flew into the air, and students and staff turned to each other with embraces and congratulations.

Joy turned to dust.

Severus came to his feet with everyone else in the Hall, relief beyond measure swelling in him at Dedalus’s news, knowing that the Dark Lord was dead at last. And then the destruction of hope as he learned that the purpose behind all effort had also been defeated. Lily was dead.

The shock of it rolled over him and left him dazed and speechless. *There must be some mistake. They must be talking of someone else.* But they were talking of Lily. And of James. And hats were tossed into the air. And professors and students hugged each other. The incongruity of the joy and the grief cut off his breath, and Severus backed away from the crazed crowd, skirting its fringes to escape the pressure of the Hall.

He needed air. Lily was dead because the Dark Lord feared her. The Dark Lord feared her because of a prophecy. A prophecy that he had overheard and reported. There was no air, and he couldn’t breathe. Lily was dead because he had overheard a prophecy. There would be air at the top of the castle, and then he could breathe and think.

Severus struggled up the stairs, trying to reach the clear air where he could breathe. *My fault. All my fault. I had to tell him. I had to set him on them. If I hadn’t told he wouldn’t have known.* Toby floated at his side and pointed to the future. The empty, bleak future in which each day he would know that Lily was dead, and each day he would know that he’d killed her.

He couldn’t face that future. He couldn’t face that guilt. Severus began to shut off, to close down, to lock all the parts of his brain that forced him to face the cold, desolate, empty future. No one could live in that future. It couldn’t exist. It didn’t exist. The air at the top of the tower existed. There he would be able to breathe.

In the midst of the jubilation, Dumbledore glanced around. Then he went to Hagrid. "Where is Professor Snape?" he asked.

"Was here a moment ago. I thought he looked pleased, thought he'd be celebrating."

"Hagrid, we must find him. We must find him at once."

"I'm sure he's just gone somewhere quiet, sir."

"No, Hagrid. We find him now."

They left the cheering crowd in the Great Hall and ran to the entrance hall with its mighty staircases. Even the ghosts were rejoicing, and Dumbledore called to one.

"Baron! Have you seen Professor Snape?"

"Potions master?" intoned the Bloody Baron. "Up, going up. In a hurry."

Dumbledore climbed, too, as fast as he could go with Hagrid right behind him. Staircase after staircase they climbed, and saw no dark robed figure in front of them. Then they were on the seventh floor, with only the towers to search. The staircase to the Astronomy Tower was in front of them, and Dumbledore raced for it as if the world depended on his speed.

Just as they reached the door out onto the top of the tower, Dumbledore slowed and turned to Hagrid. "We must move quietly. If he is out there, we do not want to startle him." They stepped onto the Tower, shadowed in starlight. To their right, facing west, they could make out a smaller shadow — Severus kneeling in the crenellated parapet.

As they watched, he rose and stood, feet at the very edge of stone, eyes fixed on the waxing crescent of the setting moon.

There is no past. There is no future. There is only now, in the starlight, in the presence of the moon. A perfect launch moon. Halfway between new and first quarter. The moon for every perfect Saturn rocket that ever carried an Apollo capsule into destiny. Severus steepled his hands in prayer to the beckoning siren moon. The only voice he could hear or wanted to hear spoke softly in welcome: *Seven . . . six . . . ignition sequence started . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . we have ignition . . .* and he followed it forward into space.

Hagrid moved first, faster and more quietly than he'd ever moved in his life, and as Severus fell forward, Hagrid's arms wrapped around his waist, dragged him back, and deposited him on the roof of the tower.

"Sorry to be rough, lad, but you just scared the . . . Whoa!"

Severus was on his feet and scrambling for the parapet again. Hagrid flung both arms wide to block him while Dumbledore tried to restrain him from behind. It would have been faster and easier if they were less concerned about

not hurting him, but eventually they wrestled Severus down onto the roof where Hagrid sat pinning his arms as Dumbledore knelt beside them.

Severus buried his face against Hagrid's jacket. "I killed her," he whispered. "I want to die."

"No, no, Severus," Dumbledore insisted. "You did not kill her. You did everything you could..."

Severus wasn't listening. He didn't seem to hear. He repeated over and over, like a litany, "I killed her, I killed her... I want to die..."

Hagrid pulled Severus to his feet and steered him, now unresisting, down the spiral staircase where they met Professor Sprout, who had followed them up on the advice of the Bloody Baron.

"Oh dear," she gasped on seeing them. "Is he all right?"

"He will be fine, Pomona, do not fret. We have had a bit of excitement, but the less said about it, the better. Would you kindly find Madam Pomfrey and ask her to meet us in the hospital wing. We shall need some special arrangements and a sedative."

After a hurried consultation, Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey agreed that the open ward wasn't the best place for a suicidal young man, so they moved one of the beds into her office where he could be more strictly confined. The hot tea they brought him there contained a powerful sleeping draught.

"Drink it down, lad. It'll do ya a world of good." Hagrid held the cup as Severus drank the tea, then lifted him, already sleeping, onto the bed and covered him with a light blanket. "Reckon he'll be okay 'til we get back?"

"I shall make certain that he is," replied Dumbledore, casting a series of binding and restraining spells. "That should hold him. Madam Pomfrey, if Professor Snape wakes before we return, try to keep him calm. Get Professor Flitwick or Professor Sprout to help you if necessary. Professor McGonagall is away from Hogwarts at the moment assisting me."

More information had come in about the terrible, wonderful events of the day, and it was now clear that though James and Lily Potter were dead, their year-old son Harry may have survived. Professor McGonagall was already keeping watch over the home of the boy's muggle aunt while Hagrid went to assess the damage at the Potters' home and see to the boy's safety.

They did not return to Hogwarts for many hours.

Severus drifted in and out of a narcotic-induced sleep for two days, until he was calm enough on waking that Madam Pomfrey decided he could do with just a tranquilizer. He remembered what happened, but it seemed

distant and detached, as if he were wrapped in cotton, all sight, sound, and memory muffled. All he wanted to do was lie on his side staring mindlessly at the wall.

Dumbledore came and sat beside him. "Are you feeling better now?"

"I killed her."

"You did not kill her. You did what you could to save her. We all thought that once the Fidelius Charm was cast..."

Severus turned to look at Dumbledore. "But you were their Secret-Keeper. How could he find them?"

"Ah, alas. I was not, in the end, the Secret-Keeper. James, you see, valued his friends dearly, and for friendship's sake gave that privilege to Sirius Black, who was godfather to his son."

Severus's lethargy was gone now, replaced by a growing sense of apprehension. "Sirius betrayed them? Sirius sold them to the Dark Lord? Why? I'll kill him myself. With my bare hands."

"You will not have that chance. He has killed Peter Pettigrew as well, and has been captured and sent to Azkaban Prison. That, I assure you, will be punishment enough."

Dumbledore left, and Severus lay in the hospital bed, staring at the ceiling.

For friendship's sake? The blind, sentimental fool! To trade certain security on an emotional whim? To sell Lily to the Dark Lord in order to soothe the feelings of an unstable maniac! For friendship's sake? I can no longer touch James, but if Sirius Black is ever released from Azkaban, I'll kill him.

Dumbledore had other problems. Rufus Scrimgeour and Alastor Moody were waiting for him in his office.

"We're starting to round up all known or suspected Death Eaters, Albus," Moody said quietly.

"What has that to do with me?"

"You've been harboring a viper in your midst. We've come to take him off your hands."

"I am certain I do not know who you mean."

Scrimgeour stepped forward impatiently. "Yes, you do. We mean Snape. He's been a Death Eater for three years, and he's going to stand trial with his comrades. We've come to arrest him."

"I fear that will be impossible. Professor Snape is, first of all, quite ill. He is being treated in the hospital wing. Of even more importance, however, is the fact that he is not a Death Eater, and I shall not let you have him."

"Albus," said Moody quietly. "I know you don't like anyone accusing your staff, but Snape is deep into Death Eater business and has been for three years. He's deceived you."

"He has not deceived me, Alastor. He has been quite truthful with me. And he is not a Death Eater."

"Maybe," Scrimgeour snarled, "he hasn't told you that he's been reporting to Voldemort every week, even after you hired him. Maybe he forgot to mention he was spilling his soul to his master as recently as last Thursday. Maybe we should haul his rear end in here and show you his left arm."

"Why Rufus! Have you been spying on my staff?"

"I spy on Death Eaters. We're arresting him, Albus."

"No. You are not. I forbid it. He is a teacher here, and you will not touch him."

Moody shook his head sorrowfully. "I don't hear you telling us why we should trust him, or why we should accept your judgment on the matter. The Ministry wants all Death Eaters in custody. His name is on the list. He's going. If not today, then next month . . . It's just a matter of time."

"There was a time when its being my judgment would have been enough. As for justification, when the time comes, I shall tell you as much as I can. For now, I am asking you to trust me. If you will not, it changes nothing. You cannot have him."

"Then you tell him," said Scrimgeour, "not to set foot outside Hogwarts. He leaves the grounds, he's mine."

Professor Snape was released from the hospital a week later, though he didn't immediately return to his classes, Professor Slughorn having been brought out of retirement to fill his position temporarily. Instead, Snape asked to speak to Dumbledore. Dumbledore agreed immediately, and watched the thin, austere young man with some concern. There was a new, hard edge to him, as if the last fragile trace of his childhood innocence had finally been excised. Dumbledore wanted to console him, wanted Hagrid to console him, but the shell of bitterness was too recent to want or accept comfort.

"You must look to the future," Dumbledore said gently.

"There is no future."

"You still have a life to live."

"You don't understand, do you?" Snape seemed to struggle with opposing needs to talk and be private. The need for privacy almost won. Almost. "I'm not a normal person."

"Of course you are, Se..."

"Don't patronize me! I know you and Hagrid have been trying to help me be normal. It's been a losing battle, hasn't it?" He didn't wait for Dumbledore's reply. "Not for her, though. For her it was easy."

"What do you mean?" Dumbledore said quietly, knowing this moment would never come again.

"I remember the day I shut my mother out. I don't... I never let anyone else in. I don't... think I can. Except... her. When I looked at... she looked at me... It was... all the doors... opening. It... was water... and air... and sunshine."

"Could she read you?"

"No. She didn't have the talent. But with her it was... I actually felt... like a normal... human being." Snape slumped forward in the chair, and he was crying. After a moment he looked up. "I thought... you were going... to keep her... safe..."

Dumbledore sighed. "She and James put their faith in the wrong person. Rather like you, Severus. Were you not hoping that Lord Voldemort..."

The sharp intake of breath wasn't due just to the mention of the Dark Lord's name, and even as his sentence faded to silence, Dumbledore realized he may have pushed in the wrong direction. "Her boy survives," he finished, changing the subject.

Snape turned his face away. It was clearly not an acceptable trade. Dumbledore pushed again.

"Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes." Snape wasn't looking at him, but the tension in his body said he was listening. "You remember the shape and color of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure?" After three and a half years.

"Don't!" Snape lashed out at him. Then he again turned away. "Gone... dead..."

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

Snape ignored Dumbledore's question. It was meaningless, as life was now meaningless. For one year life had held meaning, and now... "I wish... I wish I were dead..."

Dumbledore's voice changed. No longer gentle and sympathetic, it was now the matter-of-fact tone one uses to pull someone away from wallowing in self pity and make him focus on the task at hand. "And what use would that be to anyone? If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."

Snape stared at Dumbledore as at a stranger. *Why is he talking about love? I don't... There isn't any...* “What... what do you mean?”

“You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily’s son.”

It still seemed meaningless, a gesture, but Snape agreed. Agreed even though he couldn’t bear the thought of seeing the boy, seeing his eyes... Agreed knowing that, despite Dumbledore’s fears, there was no real danger. The Dark Lord was gone... The reason for caution and fear was gone...

Snape looked up at Dumbledore again, more in control of himself now. With some dignity, he rose to his feet. “There was something else. I’ve come to tell you, Headmaster, that you’ll need a new Potions teacher. I’m resigning. I’ll leave as soon as you have a replacement. I’ll do what I’ve promised, but from outside Hogwarts.”

“I am sorry that you are not content with us. I fear, however, that leaving is not an option.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The Ministry of Magic is currently rounding up all former followers of Lord Vol... him. Those in custody are being sent to Azkaban for interrogation. You understand, of course, about the dementors. You are known to have been a Death Eater. The aurors have asked me to give you to them so that they can ‘discuss’ your former master and colleagues. I have refused. You are a member of my staff, and as long as you are employed here, they cannot touch you.”

“Maybe Azkaban is what I deserve. Have you considered that?”

“My dear Severus, I see that you do not understand dementors at all. They delight in despair. A person who has lived a life full of love, who has basked in the sunshine of good fortune, and has an abiding sense of innocence can withstand them. One who has suffered cannot. They would feast on you, drawn to your isolation, your sorrow, your guilt... And I am not talking about being a Death Eater. From the moment you turned a wand against your father at the age of nine, you have carried guilt with you like a possessing demon. The dementors would strip every clean memory from you and force you to relive every pain, every sorrow, every fear, every humiliation, every minute of your life until only a shell of you remained. No one deserves that.”

Severus sat down next to Dumbledore’s desk again and cradled his head in his hands.

Dumbledore sighed. “I am sorry to be so blunt. I did not want you to make the wrong decision.”

They sat together in silence for a few minutes. Then Severus raised his head and looked at Dumbledore with dead eyes. "I mean no offense, Headmaster, but there are few places I'd less like to be than Hogwarts. I have almost no happy memories of this place, and those I had are . . . gone. And I'm no teacher. I hate it. The only reason I came back was because I was ordered to. Now you tell me I have a choice of prisons — Azkaban or Hogwarts. Forgive me if I am less than overjoyed."

"I understand, and I am not offended. You think about it."

Severus left Dumbledore's office and stood by the tall, narrow windows in the corridor, looking down at the lake. *I'm twenty-one and my life is over. No hopes, no dreams, no future. Locked in a place I hate, in a job I hate. No family, no friends, no one to talk to . . . No, that's wrong. I can talk to Dumbledore. I can talk to Hagrid. It could be worse . . .*

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 1981

Professor Snape went first to Professor Slughorn to advise him that he, Snape, was prepared to resume his teaching duties, and to thank Professor Slughorn for filling in. Professor Slughorn thanked Professor Snape for the information, then expressed his pleasure at having been able to help and his compliments on the remarkably good behavior of Professor Snape's students. It was all very formal.

The next to be informed were the students of Slytherin house, who seemed to be uniformly pleased at his return.

"It's been hell, sir," said Algie Colfax who, though not a prefect, seemed to have been elected spokesman for the whole house. "Everyone's been acting like we're criminals or something. Even the professors are treating us different, especially Scrimgeour."

"Scrimgeour? I'd have thought he'd have gone, right after the news got out."

"We did, too, sir, and he did go for a couple of days. But then he was right back again telling us that he'd been hired for the year, and he'd be side by side with us until June."

"Side by side?" Snape said. "That's an odd way of putting it."

"And he didn't say that to any of the other houses," chimed in Marlie Kingsford. "We checked. He only said that to his Slytherin classes. Like he was threatening us."

"Okay," said Snape, "I'll keep an eye on it. And if Scrimgeour pushes it further, tell me. If he won't listen to me, I'll go to Dumbledore."

The expressions of skepticism that greeted this could not be ignored. Snape explained it in terms any Slytherin could understand. "Dumbledore doesn't like anyone trying to take over his territory. Scrimgeour's been trying to do that, and Dumbledore's been fighting him. You're Dumbledore's territory. If anyone tries to control you, it affects Dumbledore, and he'll fight back. If Scrimgeour says anything, tell me, and I'll tell Dumbledore."

They nodded, relieved to have the big guns back on their side of the battlefield.

It was Algie, a few minutes later, who told Snape that Quidditch in general had been postponed due to the news, and that the Slytherin/Gryffindor Quidditch match in particular had been postponed due to his 'illness.' Gryffindor was playing Ravenclaw in two days, and the Slytherin/Gryffindor match would be in May.

Then there were the other teachers. After supper, Snape joined them in the staff room. His reception was chilly. After a few minutes, Flitwick suggested cribbage, and then said they might go to the Great Hall where it was quieter than in the staff room. Once in the Hall, however, Flitwick had other things to talk about in addition to the cribbage.

"Do you know what he's been saying about you?"

"What?" Snape asked, already growing wary.

"Everyone knows you collapsed on Halloween right after the news. Scrimgeour's been whispering to everyone that it was because you were distraught that You-Know-Who was dead. He's hinting that you were a Death Eater." Flitwick clearly wanted Snape to deny this.

"Rufus Scrimgeour is about as clueless a personality as I have ever met," was Snape's response.

"Then it's not true?"

"No, it's not true." Snape didn't elaborate on which part wasn't true.

"Well, thank goodness for that," said Flitwick, and they played cribbage until ten, went on their rounds, and retired for the night.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 1981

The next morning, Scrimgeour arrived early and made a point of being at breakfast, something he'd not done all term. Passing up the Hall and down the staff table to his seat by Dumbledore, he paused to whisper in Snape's ear,

“You and I are going to ‘talk,’ Death Eater,” then smiled evilly and took his seat. For the entire meal, whenever Dumbledore’s attention was elsewhere, he would look down the table at Snape. Once he even drew a finger across his throat.

Later that day, right before lunch, Algie Colfax came into the Potions classroom as Snape was clearing up from his last morning class.

“You’ve got to come, Professor, right away. Anna Prendergast’s father was arrested last night, and Professor Scrimgeour just told her she has to stay in his class all lunch hour because she’s on detention, but she didn’t do anything. The others in her class say he was yelling at her like she was under arrest herself.”

Snape was out of his classroom in an instant, heading for the Dark Arts room.

Up the marble staircase to the first floor, then along a corridor, and Snape paused in front of the Dark Arts classroom. He could hear Scrimgeour’s voice inside.

“How old are you! I’ll tell you. You’re fifteen. Fifteen and you don’t know the names of the people who come to your parents’ house for dinner! You never struck me as stupid before, girl, so maybe you’re just a garden variety liar!”

Snape opened the door and entered the room. Both Scrimgeour and Prendergast looked over at him in surprise. The girl was crying. Scrimgeour smiled. “Good morning, Professor Snape.”

“Good morning, Professor Scrimgeour. I see you’ve detained a member of my house. May I ask why?”

“She was insolent to me in class this morning.”

“No, Professor, I didn’t . . .”

“Be quiet, please, Miss Prendergast.” Anna obeyed. “If a professor says a student has been insolent, it is my experience that the professor is usually right. So, Professor Scrimgeour, what task have you decided to set for Miss Prendergast?”

“Task?”

“Detention generally involves setting a task for the delinquent student to perform. A school-related task. Cleaning desks, or copying out new signs and notices, for example.”

Scrimgeour glowered. “Miss Prendergast can start cleaning the desks.”

As Anna rose to comply, Snape sat down at one of the desks in question. “Excellent. Since I need to consult with Miss Prendergast on a house-related

matter, I'll just wait here and watch until she's finished her assignment. I hope you don't mind."

It looked for a moment as if Scrimgeour were about to explode, then he became suddenly calm again. "I've changed my mind. You're released from detention." He crossed to the door and opened it, gesturing to Anna to leave. "Go. I don't want you here."

An immensely relieved Anna scurried from the room, and Snape also rose to go. Scrimgeour, however, closed the door again and leaned against it, his arms folded across his chest. "I don't want you to go, though," he said quietly. "Sit down."

"I prefer to stand, thank you."

"Suit yourself. I gave Dumbledore fair warning. I'm a sporting man, so I wanted to be sure the warning was passed on." Scrimgeour moved slowly away from the door. "You belong to me. I mean that literally. Your name's been on my case list since I got this assignment. I've lost a lot of friends in the past years, and you and your lot are going to pay. Now that lord of yours is gone, your pals are all singing like canaries, and you'll sing, too. A private little concert at the Ministry just for me. You think you can hide under Dumbledore's skirts like a sniveling little rat, but all I need is one whisker outside that gate, and you've said goodbye to Hogwarts."

Scrimgeour was close to Snape now, forcing Snape to look up at his face. He was taller, stronger, more athletic, and Snape fought a powerful instinct to back away from his menace. Then, like the lion he resembled, Scrimgeour pounced and seized Snape's left wrist in an iron grip, wrenching it down onto the desk.

"Why don't we just roll this sleeve up and prove me right?" he said with a smile, and stared directly into Snape's eyes.

The legilimency contact was strong, but Snape didn't care. He was shut down as tightly as he could be, and he let Scrimgeour know it. After a moment Scrimgeour released both his eyes and his wrist. "Dumbledore was right," he said. "You're good."

"Good?" Snape responded. "That was blatant and heavy-handed. No subtlety at all. I wouldn't waste 'good' on you."

"You think I can't get past those barriers? Have you ever tried Veritaserum, Snape?" When Snape didn't answer, Scrimgeour smiled again and continued. "I have. We all have to. You can fight it, you know. You can concentrate on keeping your mouth shut, and you can fight it. You can't fight

what goes on inside your head. Everything starts expanding, pushing, breaking to the surface, like steam in a boiling kettle. Talking releases the pressure, so fighting it is — unpleasant. Painful, even. It isn't too bad for most people, though. Most people have fairly open minds."

Scrimgeour's face was close to Snape's now, grinning again. "There's been speculation on what would happen if you gave Veritaserum to an instinctive occlumens. Imagine your poor little brain struggling to keep all those barriers up, all those doors closed, while the drug in your veins smashes them down. Shatters them. Pressure building until you think your mind is going to explode. Until the wreckage of your defenses lies strewn in pieces in a ruined brain, and you spend the rest of your life in the looney bin at St. Mungo's."

Snape was trembling, his eyes wide with horror, and Scrimgeour stepped away, content with the progress he'd just made. "I wouldn't even ask you any questions. I'd just sit back and watch. Maybe take notes." He turned and walked over to the door. "You've been warned. Don't leave Hogwarts."

The door was open, and Snape was through it, heading down to the dungeons and the safety of his own rooms, fear lodged in the pit of his stomach, a new and now permanent part of his being.

Snape was never sure how he made it through his afternoon classes, with Scrimgeour now a looming threat in the front of his mind. As soon as the last student was out of the last class, he hurried up to the seventh floor with a request to speak to Dumbledore. By the time he was in the office, he was nearly hysterical.

"He threatened me! He detained a student whose father's under arrest so he could interrogate her about her family contacts, and then he threatened me! Look at this! He could have broken my wrist!" Small purple bruises marked the place where Scrimgeour's fingers had pressed into Snape's skin.

"He has left the school for the weekend by now. Why did you not come to me immediately? I should have enjoyed having a word or two with Mr. Scrimgeour." Dumbledore was calm, but his underlying anger was also evident.

"I had classes. No, that's not true. I mean it's true, but it's not the reason. I was afraid. I couldn't think clearly because I was scared. Professor, what happens when you give . . . Veritaserum to . . . to someone like me?"

Dumbledore's eyes reflected his concern. He filled a goblet with mead and steered Snape to a chair. "Sit down. Take this, it will do you good, help you calm down. I take it that Veritaserum was part of the threat. I shall be honest with you, Severus. No one knows. A born occlumens is rarer than hens' teeth. Many people do not believe they exist. I am not young, and I

have known only one in my whole life.” Dumbledore raised his own glass to Snape.

“That does not mean there are not others, of course. I imagine one could be born an occlumens and go through one’s whole life without anyone else ever finding out. The occlumens might never realize it himself. But documented cases . . . So the whole question of what happens when an occlumens meets Veritaserum is more in the realm of philosophical speculation than of scientific experimentation. It is rather like immovable objects and irresistible forces. The currently accepted answer is that the occlumens’s natural instincts would battle the drug, resulting in serious, if not irreparable, damage to the brain. Naturally, no one has stepped forward offering to test this hypothesis.”

“Scrimgeour wants to test it,” said Snape. “He made it sound like he’d enjoy doing it, too.”

“Rufus Scrimgeour is an angry, bitter man. Most of the aurors are. They, more than anyone, have been at the forefront of this war, and they have seen the worst. He was a good friend of the whole Bones family, you know, and of Marlene McKinnon and Dorcas Meadows. He is not likely at this point to respond to requests for clemency. The best thing for you is to stay out of his way.”

“What if he attacks my students again?”

“I shall make a request to the Ministry to have him removed. Do not count on that working, however. I myself have wondered if his appointment here did not have something to do with internal politics at the Ministry. The whole question of placing an auror at Hogwarts was suspect from the beginning.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Oh, I did. Several times. Just not to you or to the other teachers. There is no point in creating discord and conflict when you have no hope of resolving it. I shall, in any case, tell Rufus that if he has need to impose detention on any of the students in the future, he should leave it to Professor McGonagall to decide the proper punishment. Meanwhile, if he goes for you again, come to me at once. And for the time being, I would follow his advice.”

“Which advice?”

“Do not leave Hogwarts.”

The next day was the Gryffindor — Ravenclaw Quidditch match. Scrimgeour wasn’t at Hogwarts, so Snape was able to relax a little and pay attention to the game. Instead of sitting in the teachers’ stands, he joined Algie and

Chris with the Slytherin students and got a personal analysis of everything that happened.

Gryffindor was powerful, as usual, but Ravenclaw was fired with enthusiasm plus two new Chasers and a new Seeker. As Seeker battled Seeker for the Snitch, sometimes crashing into each other in a dive, the score climbed higher and higher until both teams were near one hundred fifty points just scoring with the Quaffle. It was still anybody's game, and the stands were wild with excitement.

"This isn't good for us," mourned Algie. "If we win all our games, we'll get the cup, but if it comes down to two teams with two wins each, the team with the overall highest cumulative score is the cup winner."

Then the Seekers went into a heart-stopping dive that had the whole school on its feet, and the game was over, the Gryffindor Seeker circling the field in triumph, the Snitch raised high in his hand. The score was Gryffindor 290, Ravenclaw 150.

The Slytherin team increased its practice sessions, for they were playing Hufflepuff in December.

For a few weeks, Scrimgeour left Snape alone. Hagrid didn't though. "That," he told Snape at breakfast on Monday morning a week later, "wouldn't keep a sparrow alive, much less a fully grown human being."

"It's perfectly adequate. I prefer a continental breakfast."

"Ya used t' prefer kippers and toast. Much healthier, that. Besides, even in a good year ya never had too much meat on those bones. Ya can't afford t' get any skinnier. I could pick ya up and break ya like a toothpick, I could."

"Hagrid, you could do that with any person here, including Max Kettleburn. If I eat too much I'll get sick."

"If ya don't eat enough, ya'll die. Course, if ya want t' make Rufus Scrimgeour happier than he already is..."

"I am not making Scrimgeour happy!"

"No? Look at ya. Pining away with a nervous stomach. Jumpy as a cat in a roomful of rocking chairs. He's got yer measure, he's pushing all yer buttons, and y're letting him do it."

"I am not!" Snape insisted, helping himself to a kipper and another cup of coffee. "Besides, how would you know?"

"I got eyes, ain't I? Ya should see yerself when he walks into a room. Looking anywhere but at him, melting into the background, escaping as quick as you can... Ya got a classic case of the heebie-jeebies. Not that I blame ya,

mind ya. He's a scary customer, especially for someone as naturally timid as you are."

"I am not timid!" Snape retorted in a voice that was a touch too loud, causing students and teachers at the tables nearby to turn and look at him. He lowered his voice immediately. "I am not timid. I've faced his kind before and come out on top." Which was not quite true, since the only time Snape had faced someone specifically out to get him was as a student against James Potter and Sirius Black, and the teenage Potter and Black were not in Scrimgeour's league at all.

"Ya can keep telling yerself that, lad. And ya can keep telling me in any tone ya want what y're not, but 'til I see it..." Hagrid rose and left, his mission accomplished, for Snape had finished the kipper and two pieces of toast, but Snape was left with more to think about.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5, 1981 (ONE DAY AFTER THE FIRST QUARTER)

The day of the Slytherin — Hufflepuff Quidditch game dawned frosty and clear. Despite the cold, it seemed the entire school was making its way to the Quidditch field after lunch, for rumor had it that this would be an exciting game. Hufflepuff always had highly competent teams, and the new Slytherin team was expected to show more potential than Slytherin house had exhibited in years. Even Professor Dumbledore came down to watch the match.

They were not disappointed. The Gryffindor — Ravenclaw match had been a high-scoring competition between Chasers and Seekers. The Slytherin — Hufflepuff match was an equally tense bout between Beaters and Keepers. Chasers ran play after play at the hoops, only to be met by save after spectacular save. The Beaters kept up constant interference, forcing the Chasers into injury-defying maneuvers to avoid them, and one incredibly aimed Bludger even knocked the Snitch itself away from the Hufflepuff Seeker's hand. The broom work was superb, the precision of the players breathtaking, and when, in a neck-and-neck race, the Slytherin Seeker emerged victorious with the Snitch, the stands erupted in a deafening roar. The score was 170 to 30.

"Whoever would have thought," said McGonagall as she cheerfully paid Kettleburn his galleon, "that a defensive game would be so exciting."

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1981 (THE DAY BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

The term was almost over. Tests, projects, and last-minute papers were being turned in, and with only Friday left for classes, Snape came to the staff room in the hour before supper feeling rather pleased with the way things had gone. The term was successfully completed, all his students had done reasonably well, there would be one more Hogsmeade excursion on Saturday that he was excused from supervising because of Scrimgeour, and then three blessed weeks of the Christmas break. The general atmosphere was one of good cheer and relaxation.

Filch stuck his head in the door. "Begging your pardon, Professors, but Professor Dumbledore would like to see Professor Snape in his office right away."

Snape excused himself and hurried upstairs, feeling only mild apprehension at the summons. He was relieved to find, as he got to the seventh floor, that Hagrid had been called, too, though he was mystified as to why Dumbledore would want to see both of them.

As Snape stepped into Dumbledore's office, however, all sense of ease vanished, for with Dumbledore were four men — Scrimgeour, the auror named Moody, and two others. "Ah, Severus," said Dumbledore, "come in. You know Mr. Scrimgeour and Mr. Moody. These other gentlemen are Mr. Rorbards and Mr. Dawlish, also of Law Enforcement. They are here . . ."

Scrimgeour moved forward, interrupting Dumbledore. "Severus Snape," he said, pulling a piece of parchment from his robes, "you are under arrest for complicity in the attack upon aurors Frank and Alice Longbottom. You are hereby in my custody, and will accompany me to London at once."

"No," said Snape, completely mystified, "that's not right. He didn't go after the Longbottoms, he went . . ."

"Severus!" said Dumbledore sharply, and Snape was quiet. "Rufus," Dumbledore continued, "I am still opposed to this, so I do not see how you can take him to London . . ."

"I am amazed," Scrimgeour said, his voice trembling with emotion, "utterly amazed how you, of all people, can treat this so casually. Frank and Alice are in St. Mungo's and may not live the night. Their attackers remain unidentified and could go after any of us at any time. Do you see this little piece of Death Eater trash?" He took a step toward Snape, but Hagrid came between them. "This piece of dung is holding names and locations in his head, and for four and a half months you haven't allowed us to touch him. If even

one of those names belongs to someone who attacked Frank and Alice, I'm holding you personally responsible for their deaths, Albus. You. Personally."

Moody intervened. "I'm sorry, Albus. Rufus is right. If Mr. Snape is a Death Eater, you should have let us question him months ago. Now we've lost two more people, something that might have been prevented. We have to take him in. If you stand in the way, we may have to take you, too. Move aside, Hagrid."

Hagrid wouldn't budge until Dumbledore said, "Do as he says, Hagrid." Moody stepped forward and took Snape's left arm as Snape looked away from his face and his eyes. Turning the arm so the palm of Snape's hand faced up, Moody pushed back the sleeves of robe and shirt to expose the skull and snake brand.

It was Scrimgeour who spoke. "You can't deny it, Albus. He's a Death Eater."

"I can deny it, Rufus, and I do. Severus was a Death Eater. For the past year and more he has been working for me. He ceased being Voldemort's servant long before Voldemort died."

"You still should have let us talk to him," said Moody.

"Not if he was under arrest," replied Dumbledore.

"This is ridiculous!" Scrimgeour shouted. "You don't stop being a Death Eater! You! Trash! How many people have you killed?"

Snape glanced at Dumbledore, then stared at the floor. "I haven't killed anybody," he said.

"LIAR!"

"Rufus," said Dumbledore quietly, "I do not take kindly to others attacking the integrity of my staff. I must ask you to leave now. Professor Snape stays here."

"You dare!" Scrimgeour screamed. "You dare! With Frank and Alice clinging to life in the hospital, you dare! What about us, Albus? What about the people who've had their lives on the line for ten years? I'm not going to do what his friends did. I'm not going to Cruciate him. I'm going to talk to him!"

Robards laid a hand on Scrimgeour's arm. "Easy, Rufus. This is hard for all of us. Things have changed, Albus. You haven't seen what they did to Frank and Alice. It must have lasted for hours. Even if they live, they're not coming back to us. There's not an auror in the Ministry who won't move heaven and earth to catch the ones who did it. They'll come after you here in Hogwarts. And Rufus is right. If we find that this young man was holding

a scrap of information that could have led to the arrest of these monsters before they attacked Frank and Alice . . . well, there are few who will forgive you. We're not leaving Hogwarts without him."

"Interrogate him here, Gawain."

"We have a warrant for his arrest signed by the Minister. If you hinder us, we'll arrest you, too. Albus, come to London, talk to Crouch. Arrange to have custody, on your recognizance, before his hearing. Just don't obstruct. Make a good faith effort to show everyone you're just as careful about our welfare as you are about his. This could be all over and him back at Hogwarts before tomorrow morning."

There was silence, then Dumbledore said softly, "Do not drag him out as a criminal before the whole school. Grant him some dignity . . ."

"Professor!" Snape screamed, jerking backwards in a sudden desperate and futile effort to flee. "Please, Professor! Don't let them . . ." but the aurors were already moving in, binding his wrists in front of him and taking his wand.

"Severus, listen," said Dumbledore, coming forward and grasping Snape's shoulders, locking their gazes. "They are right. What has happened to the Longbottoms has changed everything. If I do not let you go now, this will never end as long as you are alive. They will hunt you down wherever you are. I will come for you. We shall observe all the rules, and I will come for you. I will not leave you there alone."

The one concession the aurors made was to wait until the school was assembled in the Great Hall for supper before leading their prisoner down the stairs and out of the castle to apparate with him to the Ministry in London. The only one who witnessed Snape's departure in disgrace was, by chance, McGonagall. She watched in silence as the sad little procession passed, Dumbledore and Hagrid in the rear, then went into the Hall, but kept her own counsel about what she had seen.

From the moment they left Hogwarts, Snape was terrified. A large part of it was the physical menace. He was in the power of men who were bigger than he was, stronger than he was, and who hated him, but this had happened before in school with Sirius and James. And yet in school there had always been the knowledge that if authority intervened — a prefect, a professor, the headmaster — that intervention would save him. Now his captors were the authority, and there was nothing outside the pure force of Dumbledore's personality, so recently demonstrated to be weak, that could possibly bring salvation.

Snape was helpless, and they made sure he knew it. Once they entered the Ministry, he was not allowed to simply walk. He was pushed, pulled, dragged, and shoved. To emphasize orders, he was cuffed and slapped. No hand or voice was gentle, and as soon as he was hauled into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, the sleeve on his left arm was pushed up so that everyone who came into contact with him would know that he was a Death Eater. The hatred in their eyes was palpable.

The first formal stop was a tiny office with a long counter and a hard-eyed clerk. "Name?" she asked.

"Snape, Severus," replied Scrimgeour.

"Offense?"

"Death Eater."

"I've got space on the docket for February tenth. Preliminary hearing on the tenth, judicial review on the fifteenth. Trial on March 9. Can't give you earlier than that. Recommendation for bail?"

"None," said Scrimgeour.

"No bail," said the clerk. "I suppose you'll want to hold him here for a few days. You can have room 3B until a week from tomorrow, the eighteenth. After that he'll have to go to Azkaban, block A, cell nine. There's been a sudden vacancy. Suicide apparently."

"Good," said Scrimgeour. "One other thing. Albus Dumbledore." The clerk looked up, suddenly interested. "Dumbledore'll be coming in about this one. Keep him busy with paperwork as long as you can. I need a few hours."

"You got it."

Room 3B was small and entirely white, with a table and a few chairs. Scrimgeour shoved Snape into it with such force that he slammed side and arm against the table and dropped to the floor. The four aurors hauled him to his feet again and pushed him into one of the chairs. At that moment another clerk came by and whispered something to Scrimgeour and Moody. The aurors conferred.

Scrimgeour pulled out his wand and with a flourish fastened Snape's wrists to the table with a binding spell. "That was about Frank and Alice," he growled. "They're going to live, but they'll be in the psychiatric ward at St. Mungo's for the rest of their lives. That's your fault, Death Eater."

"Ease up!" snapped Moody. "We want names, not a witness with a fried brain. You back off 'til we get what we need."

"Then I fry him."

"Please," Snape stammered, "please, I... don't... know any... names."

Scrimgeour thrust his hand into the hair at the nape at Snape's neck and jerked his head back. "No? The names know you. You want to hear what we have on you? You brewed potions for them. Not just medicines, but forgetfulness potions and Polyjuice. They got to Edgar Bones because they bypassed the dog. And we know who created the spell to get around the dog. And the fighting classes — the drop, roll, and come up shooting. I've faced that myself, and that was you."

Robards laid a hand on Scrimgeour's. "Watch it," he said. "We've got a writ for questioning, not for torture."

"I don't want questioning. I want justice. Justice puts him slobbering mindlessly in the same ward as Frank Longbottom."

A messenger came then, and Robards and Dawlish left. Moody leaned in to murmur to Snape. "Names, all I need is names. Look, he's not rational anymore, and all he wants is to hurt you like his friends have been hurt. But if you give me names, I can help you."

"But I don't... know any... names," Snape whimpered. He was beginning to sob with fear.

"You poor, naïve little bastard. Everyone we've had in here has talked about you. You're one of the key people at Voldemort's headquarters. There's not a Death Eater who won't sacrifice you to save himself. When heads start to roll, yours is the first on the chopping block."

Then the messenger came that called Moody away. Before the clerk left, Scrimgeour took his arm. "I want water," he said. "A pitcher and a couple of glasses." The door closed and Scrimgeour struck Snape across the face, backhanded and hard. "Your friends are all gone," he snarled. "It's you and me now."

The clerk returned with the pitcher and the glasses. He left, the door closed, and Scrimgeour slowly poured a glassful of water. "Poor little Death Eater," he crooned. "Couldn't take the strain. They left for just a few minutes, and he cracked." Scrimgeour pulled a small vial out of his pocket. "The dose is three drops," he said, measuring it carefully into the water. "But who cares about doses?" and he upended the entire contents of the vial into the glass.

"I don't know any names!" Snape shrieked, struggling desperately against the bonds, kicking himself from the chair and wrenching wrists and arms in panic.

"I don't want any names," replied Scrimgeour, pulling Snape's head back again, forcing his mouth open to receive the Veritaserum.

Snape broke. "Lestrangle!" he screamed, "Rodolphus and Bella Lestrangle! Rabastan Lestrangle! Walden Macnair! Antonin Dolohov!"

Suddenly the tiny room was full of people, taking notes and pushing him for another name, and another . . . Scrimgeour had melted into the background, but Snape didn't notice.

"Amycus Carrow! Fenrir Greyback! Igor Karkaroff!" Captured Death Eaters, dead Death Eaters, it didn't matter, as long as he could give them names, any names, all the names. "Alecto Carrow! Barty Crouch! Evan Rosier!"

Moody turned to Scrimgeour and Robards. "That's the third one that's named Barty Crouch. I say we send a squad to pick him up."

Robards looked uneasy. "Do we tell Mr. Crouch first?"

"No," said Scrimgeour. "Get young master Barty first. Then we let his father know."

"But Crouch is head . . ."

"Not anymore. Not after this. Barty may be our key to the others. Do you want to risk his getting away?"

Robards shook his head and left to organize the arrest squad.

They unbound Snape and let him crawl to one side of the room, to cower in a corner with his arms wrapped around his head. It was forty-five more minutes before they let Dumbledore and Hagrid through, by which time Snape had become quieter.

Dumbledore was furious. "What have you done to him? Have you no decency? No shame? You would treat animals better than this!"

"We didn't hurt him, Albus. I swear." Moody protested. "We just scared him a little."

"A little! I promised him protection, and you betrayed me. Have you any idea how many years I have worked to gain his trust, and now you make a mockery of my word? I swear, too, Alastor. I swear I will never again allow the Ministry to take any of my people out of Hogwarts. Get out of my sight."

"Albus, we've been friends . . ."

"And maybe with the passage of time we will be again. But not now, Alastor. Not now."

Hagrid had lowered himself to the floor and coaxed Snape away from the corner. "It's all right, lad," he muttered. "It's over now. They ain't touching you again. We're going back home, back to Hogwarts. Ain't nobody touching you anymore."

They got Snape to his feet and, in the shelter of Hagrid's bulk, led him

from the Department of Law Enforcement. One more burden remained, however. Gawain Robards came over to Dumbledore, humble and apologetic. "He has a hearing," he said.

"What?" thundered Dumbledore.

"A hearing. February tenth. And a trial date of March ninth."

Dumbledore didn't deign to reply. Gathering Hagrid and Snape, he swept from the Ministry of Magic in a rage and apparated back to Hogwarts. Snape was taken immediately to the hospital wing and put to bed with a sleeping draught. Hagrid spent the entire night at his bedside, keeping watch.

For two full days, Snape lay on the bed in the hospital, refusing to eat, refusing to drink, refusing to respond to anyone. The only reaction they got from him was when Hagrid tried to get him to take a glass of water. Snape became violent, and attacked Hagrid with as much force as could be expected from someone his size against someone Hagrid's size. At that point Dumbledore relented and contacted Moody for full details, finding out about the threat of Veritaserum and the forced drinking of a glass of water.

"What are we going to do?" Dumbledore asked Pomfrey. "If he will not drink anything, he will die."

"If he would eat, we could keep him going for a short time with foods that have a high water content — certain kinds of melons, tomatoes, soup — but he isn't eating either. Muggles stick hollow needles into veins and force fluids into their patients."

"We may have to resort to force. It is not a situation that can extend over a long period of time."

Sunday morning, after most of the students had left Hogwarts on their Christmas break, Dumbledore came to sit with Snape. Even though Snape would pay no attention, Dumbledore talked, constant repetition on essentially the same theme.

"It is my fault, of course. All my fault. I am a foolish, arrogant old man, and I made promises I could not fulfill. I duped you into believing I could protect you, and then without warning I flung you unprepared into the lions' den. I do not believe you have ever before been thrust into a situation without at least a little warning of what was to come. It was unforgivable of me, and I do not expect you to forgive me. I should be punished."

As the litany continued, it emphasized less and less the question of Dumbledore's promises, and more and more the question of Dumbledore's punishment, until around noon, Dumbledore said, "I shall be punished, and it will be now."

He conjured a brazier and set it where Snape would have to see it if his eyes were open. Then Dumbledore filled it with coals and lit them, letting them burn until the air above them shimmered with heat. When the coals were hot, Dumbledore held his hand over them. Within a few seconds, his face beaded with sweat. A few seconds more, and Snape said, "Don't do this."

Dumbledore withdrew his hand immediately. "You are talking to me again. I am pleased."

"I don't . . . you . . . You don't have to have to prove that you're brave and I'm a coward. I know that."

"You are not a coward, Severus. Please do not think that I could believe that even for an instant. Just now I faced physical pain over which I had total control. At any moment, when I desired it, I could pull my hand away. You faced insanity, total loss of self, in a situation over which, once begun, no one had control. It would have been unstoppable. Forgive me, but the two situations are not analogous at all."

Snape was silent, but his eyes were open and he was watching Dumbledore. It was an improvement. Then he said, "It would have been better if I'd gone mad or died. I'm no use to anyone."

That, Dumbledore reasoned, was a plea for help and understanding. A corner had been turned. "I do not think Anna Prendergast would agree with you. Or Algie Colfax, or any of the students in Slytherin house. You help more people than you realize. And then there is the pleasure you provide—to Professor Flitwick with his card game, and to Professor Kettleburn with Quidditch. Our lives are made of thousands and thousands of little things. If we lose you, it will diminish us."

"But I surrendered to them. I gave other people to them."

"I will admit, Severus, that that part is hard for me to understand. They have arrested Barty Crouch, and it appears he was indeed involved in the attack on the Longbottoms. They are interrogating him now. But it was a monstrous thing he did, to torture another human being into insanity. I do not understand why you wished to protect him. Or any of them."

"They were my coworkers, my colleagues, my mates. You . . . you don't peach on your mates."

"Loyalty. You will forgive me if I lament that so pure a motive might be used in support of so foul a reality. So we return to a central issue. If it had not been Lily that Moriarty pursued, would you have come to me?"

"No," said Snape. "I wouldn't have."

"You do recall that you have a hearing on February tenth, and that I shall be called as a witness?"

"I know."

"At least we base our relationship on honesty. It is more than most people could say. Severus, I am hungry and I am going to have lunch and a nice cup of tea. Would you join me?"

"Yes, sir. I think I would like that."

Word came to Dumbledore from the Ministry that Barty Crouch had implicated all three of the Lestranges, Rabastan, Rodolphus, and Bella, in the Longbottom affair. A massive manhunt was under way. Snape was once again plunged into a black depression.

"If they're caught, it's my fault. I gave them to the aurors."

"They will be punished for what they did to Frank and Alice. You are not responsible for that." Dumbledore watched Snape with some concern. They were in Snape's office since once again Snape had not come to lunch.

"Scrimgeour thinks I am. Moody thinks I am. If they'd been able to question me earlier, they might have stopped it. You should have handed me over."

"Knowing you would resist? Knowing the pressure they would apply? Torture is unacceptable, whether physical or psychological."

"Not even as punishment for crimes?"

"Not even then."

"What about dementors? Don't they count? I've given them to the dementors. I don't deserve to live."

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1981 (THE LAST QUARTER)

Early Friday morning, Dumbledore received an owl from Alastor Moody telling him that the Lestranges had been captured. He met Snape going in to breakfast and passed the news to him. Snape immediately returned to his own rooms, locked the door, and began to pace.

My fault, all my fault. She protected me. She defended me from James and Sirius, and I pay her by giving her to dementors. Because they were right. I am a sniveling little coward, no better than pond scum. Look at me. They push me around a little, shove me in a room, it didn't take them half an hour and I told them everything they wanted. They didn't even have to hurt me.

But there had been the Veritaserum. The fear, the overwhelming fear not of dying but of worse than dying. Of losing yourself and never being able

to come back. *Coward. I'm a coward. I should have let him do it. Should have taken the drug and betrayed no one.*

Snape glanced around the office. *Poisons. I have poisons here. I can finish here what Scrimgeour started. Justice.* He unlocked the cabinet with the poisons and started examining the jars. It had to be the right one. Then he stopped, remembering. Moving a small stool to the cabinet so he could reach the top shelf, Snape shifted tins and bottles until he found the tiny vial he wanted — the school's own strictly controlled supply of Veritaserum.

A small glass, a little water, the preparations took seconds. Snape sat at his desk staring at the glass for a moment, then unstoppered the vial and carefully measured three drops into the water. Scrimgeour had emptied the entire vial into his glass, but the supply belonged to Hogwarts rather than to Snape, and three drops were sufficient. He picked up the glass, looked around the office, then quickly drank the Veritaserum.

Pressure was building in Snape's head as the thoughts pushed their way to the outer edges of his mind, pleading to be released. He fought it, fought to keep his mouth closed, to stay silent. For a moment he lost control, hearing a voice begging, 'Ask me a question, please ask me a question,' and realizing it was his own. He cupped his hands over his face, fearing that the pressure in his head might push his eyes from their sockets, but his hands found no change in eyes or face or head. The pressure was all in his brain, and he knew he could relieve it by talking. He struggled to remain quiet.

And then it was over. The pressure was gone. Snape blinked a few times and shook his head, but the pressure was unquestionably gone. He looked at the clock. A little over an hour had passed from the time he drank the potion.

"Severus! Severus, open this door, please, or you will oblige me to break it down. Severus!" Lunch had started, and a worried Dumbledore was checking on him. Without moving from the desk, Snape pointed his wand at the door and unlocked it.

Dumbledore immediately registered the presence of the glass and vial, and their significance. He bent over Snape, who was sitting hunched and mute, staring at the top of the desk. "What have you done, Severus? Can you hear me? Do you understand what I am saying?"

Snape nodded dumbly, then spoke. "Veritaserum doesn't affect an occlumens any differently from anyone else."

"Thank goodness for that," said Dumbledore. "Please come outside, into the fresh air..."

“Don’t you understand?” said Snape, and his voice was toneless and dull. “It never would have hurt me. If I’d been brave for five seconds that night, I’d have discovered that. Brave for five seconds and strong for an hour, and I wouldn’t have told them anything. All I needed was a moment of courage, and I didn’t have it.”

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - F O U R

TRIALS

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1981

(MIDWAY BETWEEN THE LAST QUARTER AND THE NEW MOON)

The depth of Snape's self-loathing was boundless, a black pit into which he sank with no hope of ever climbing back again. He no longer cared what happened, not to his future, not to his freedom, not to his health. He refused to leave his bedroom and, with the terrible passiveness that always accompanied his intense depressions, he lay hour after hour staring at the wall. Hagrid brought food, finding more cause for worry in the fact that, rather than refusing the spoonfuls Hagrid presented to him, Snape ate them mechanically, like a robot.

Dumbledore was in immediate contact with the Ministry, and owls flew back and forth almost hourly for three days. Then, very early in the morning on Tuesday, Dumbledore and Hagrid came to Snape's room.

"On yer feet, lad," Hagrid said cheerfully. "We got to clean ya up and make ya presentable. Y're going to London today."

"No," Snape said, bewildered, "I'm not going anywhere. I can't leave."

"You are going, and you are going this morning," Dumbledore said. "I have moved heaven and earth. What is more difficult, I have moved the Ministry of Magic. Your pretrial hearing and judge's review have been combined and rescheduled for today, and the trial itself for next week."

"No. That's impossible. That's not until February. It can't be today. I can't go today. I don't feel well."

"And ya ain't never going to feel better lying there moping," said Hagrid. "So ya may as well get this over and done with. Now get out o' those things ya been lying in for the past four days and let me wash ya up and get..."

Dumbledore left the rooms to allow Hagrid to work with Snape as he'd been doing since the boy was nearly thirteen. If anyone could put a spark of life back into Snape . . .

There was the sudden sharp mosquito-like whine of a stinging hex, a yelp from Hagrid, and Snape's voice raised in anger. "Get your hands off of me! I'm not a baby! I'm perfectly capable of washing and dressing myself!"

"Well, then," Hagrid roared, "the rest of us would appreciate ya getting to it! Clear up the atmosphere a bit, I might add."

"I'm not bothering anyone!"

"Oh, no? I got t' come in here three times a day with yer food, and it ain't getting pleasanter. Now ya just clean yerself up and put on some decent clothes or I'm gonna haul ya buck naked down t' the lake and do a proper job!"

"Get out! Get out of my room!" And Hagrid was out, standing in the corridor next to Dumbledore as something heavy made of glass shattered against the inside of the office door.

"I suppose that is one way to do it," said Dumbledore.

Half an hour later, Snape was ready — washed, shaven, his long lank hair still damp — dressed in somber black frock coat and trousers rather than robes. Hagrid inspected him and pronounced him fit to stand trial, then the three went out of the dungeons and to the Great Hall for breakfast.

For a moment, Snape was surprised at the emptiness of the place, then remembered it was the second week of the Christmas break. The other teachers were scattered around in their usual holiday places as Snape followed Hagrid to a table, like a prisoner in the custody of a jailer. Dumbledore went to join McGonagall.

"Here," said Hagrid, sitting him down and filling a plate with Snape's favorite kipper and toast, "ya got to keep yer strength up for the day."

"I'm not hungry."

Hagrid's fist came down on the table like a sledgehammer, sending dishes flying. "Eat!" he shouted, and Snape grabbed a fork and began eating. "There now," Hagrid continued calmly, helping himself to some of the food. "Ain't that better now, us sharing a fine meal, all friendly like?"

Flitwick was the first to come over. "Important day today, we hear. Just wanted to wish you good luck with the Ministry."

"Thank you," Snape said, and smiled. A weak smile, but a smile.

Sprout came, too, and then Kettleburn, and soon all the others, even McGonagall, were wishing him luck for the day. Snape finished breakfast,

said goodbye to everyone, then left the castle and walked down the hill with Dumbledore and Hagrid, all three apparating to London as soon as they were outside the gate.

The atmosphere at the Ministry of Magic, chilly to begin with, became positively frosty as the three descended towards the offices and chambers of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. In the corridors, wizards and witches paused as Dumbledore passed, muttering imprecations and following his progress with angry looks. The aurors at Hogwarts had been right. Dumbledore was being blamed for what had happened to the Longbottoms.

Snape's preliminary hearing was held in a moderate sized room with the judge's desk raised slightly above the level of their heads, a clerk's desk to one side, a railed dock for the accused to stand in, and benches for prosecutors, aurors, and observers. Today observers had been banned, as Dumbledore would present evidence supporting a closed hearing.

Scrimgeour and Moody arrived shortly after Dumbledore, Snape, and Hagrid. They nodded curtly to Dumbledore in greeting, then waited in silence for the judge to arrive. Her clerk entered first and, as the little group rose, Judge Bones walked into the chamber. She was a dignified witch with a determined square jaw, graying hair, and glasses. She greeted them in turn.

"Mr. Scrimgeour, Mr. Moody, thank you for coming. I realize this hearing was rescheduled rather abruptly, and it was good of you to make adjustments in your busy schedules. Professor Dumbledore, you see we have made every effort to accommodate your requests. You will provide evidence supporting your claims today, however, or this case moves to a more open venue. Mr. Hagrid, it is pleasant to see you again. And this, I take it, is the accused." She checked the docket. "Mr. . . . Snape, is it? If you will all take your seats, please, I'll review the case."

They waited in silence for nearly twenty minutes as the Judge checked documents, asked the clerk for files, and took notes. Then she called Snape forward to stand in the dock for the rest of the proceedings.

"Mr. Snape, my name is Amelia Bones, and I am reviewing the charges against you prior to their being presented in court. Are you aware of the nature of these charges?"

Snape looked over at Dumbledore, who nodded and smiled gently, then back at the Judge. "No, ma'am," he said.

"Very well, first you are charged with treason in that you willfully and voluntarily became a participating member of a group actively engaged in

the overthrow of the Ministry and the setting up of another government in its place.”

“No, ma’am, I didn’t . . .”

“Mr. Snape, I take it you are unfamiliar with the rules. You’ll have a chance to respond later. Right now, you just listen.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Next, you are charged with conspiracy to commit treason in that you actively recruited or attempted to recruit others to join this same group. You are charged with using Unforgivable Curses. You are charged with several counts of murder, of inciting to commit murder, of conspiracy to commit murder, and of aiding and abetting others in the commission of murder both before and after the fact. I have a list of similar charges relating to grievous bodily harm, public disorder, and vandalism.” She looked over her glasses at the now thoroughly shaken Snape and said, “You seem rather young to have accomplished all of this in . . . three years, I believe it says.”

“Your Honor, if I may . . .” Dumbledore began, rising.

“Sit down, Albus, and wait your turn. I need to talk to these two gentlemen first. Which of you two is presenting the case, Alastor? You or Rufus?”

“I am, Your Honor,” said Moody, stepping forward next to Snape.

“Either I am missing a large number of papers, Alastor, or you’re getting sloppy with your homework. Or is this maybe because you weren’t expecting me to review the files until a week after the original hearing?”

Moody glanced back at Scrimgeour, who shrugged. Turning back to the Judge, he said, “I may need to check with our office. What are you missing?”

“I’ve been going through all these papers since I got here this morning, and I can’t find a single statement from a single witness placing this young man at the scene of any crime except the murder of Dorcas Meadows, and then only as a witness himself. How can you charge him with commission or inciting to commit if he wasn’t there?”

Moody was now beginning to turn red in the face, but it seemed his anger was directed at Scrimgeour. “Permission to discuss this matter with my colleague for five minutes, ma’am?” he asked.

“Granted,” the Judge replied, and Moody and Scrimgeour stepped out of the chamber.

A few minutes later, the two returned. “Your Honor,” Moody said, “our office would like to withdraw all charges relating to commission or inciting to commit on the murder, bodily harm, public disorder, and vandalism counts.”

"Noted," said the Judge. "Now, the Unforgivable Curses. I see no eyewitness testimony to the acts, nor any firsthand report of statements made by the accused. Everything is hearsay. What do you want to do with those?"

Moody turned to Scrimgeour and mouthed the words 'not one?' then addressed the Judge. "We'd like to withdraw those charges, Your Honor, as they're still under investigation. We thought to have them done by February, but with the case moved forward . . . If we collect enough evidence, we will be revisiting the charges."

"Are there any other changes you'd like to make, as long as we've gotten this far?"

"No, Your Honor." Moody didn't look happy.

"All right, Mr. Snape. Now we've gotten to the point where you hear the specific charges and enter a plea of either guilty or not guilty. If you want to tell the court that you did one of these things, you say 'guilty.' If not, you say 'not guilty.' Do you understand?"

"I think so, ma'am . . . Your Honor."

"First the treason charge. The group you're accused of being a member of is the organization known as the Death Eaters, who followed the orders of the wizard who called himself Lord Voldemort."

Snape winced at the name, but didn't say anything. He looked around the court, then back at the Judge. "Do you mean that if I was a member of that . . . group, I'm supposed to say, guilty?"

Dumbledore was on his feet, but the Judge stopped him with a gesture. "You have to be very careful about this, Mr. Snape. If you say 'guilty,' it doesn't go to a trial. You just get sentenced. If you want the chance to defend or explain your actions to the court, you say 'not guilty.' Do you have a lawyer? Is Professor Dumbledore your lawyer?"

"I don't know."

"Albus Dumbledore, front and center."

"Yes, Your Honor?"

"What do you mean bringing this young man here without briefing him first on what's going to happen?"

"I am very sorry, Your Honor. Unfortunately Mr. Snape has been suffering from acute clinical depression, and we were not certain he would make it to February. I believe Your Honor has transcripts of the correspondence."

"Did we get those?" the Judge asked the clerk, who sorted through a stack of files and brought one over. "Give me a moment, Albus. You may sit down."

Dumbledore sat, and when the Judge had scanned the papers, she called him back together with Moody. "I'd like you both to approach the bench." She handed Moody a paper and said quietly, "Did you know about this?"

Moody read it quickly, then looked at Dumbledore. "You're sure he drank it?"

"Yes. It turned out to be reasonably harmless, but he did not anticipate that."

"He certainly didn't think so on the tenth. Your Honor, we were not aware of this."

The Judge looked grim. "Can you guarantee to me, Albus, that neither of these actions of apparent desperation was connected with the charges before us? The timing of the first in particular bothers me."

"I assure you, Your Honor, that the charges are so far from being the source of his depression that I believe focusing on them will help him recover. This is why I requested they be moved up."

"And is he really that naïve?"

"About some things, Your Honor. About others, alas, the depth of his experience is heartbreaking."

Sending Dumbledore and Moody back to their places, the Judge addressed Snape again. "Mr. Snape, it is my opinion that you would be well advised to have a lawyer. If you wish, Professor Dumbledore could fill that position, or you could choose someone else, or the court could appoint someone."

"I'd like Professor Dumbledore, ma'am."

"Do you need to confer?" Snape shook his head. "Very well, Albus, we'll proceed with the charges, beginning with treason."

"Thank you, Your Honor. Mr. Snape pleads not guilty to the charge." One by one the Judge read each individual charge, and Dumbledore responded, "Not guilty" to each.

When they had finished, the Judge reached for another folder. "Now," she said, "about your petition to have the trial conducted behind closed doors..."

"Thank you, Your Honor. First, since we are no longer discussing charges, would it be acceptable for Severus to sit with Hagrid?" The Judge nodded and waved Snape from the dock. "Thank you. And now, Severus, as I am your lawyer, you must let me do the talking. If you wish to add or change anything, say 'Your Honor' and ask to confer with me."

"Yes, sir," Snape said.

"Good. Your Honor, we have requested that the trial be held behind

closed doors because we, well I actually, believe that Mr. Snape's life would be in danger if certain aspects of it were to become public. In danger from those who were also Death Eaters and former colleagues of his."

"Albus, I've just noticed that you've admitted your client's guilt on the first charge. Watch your step here."

"I realize that. We will argue extenuating circumstances. However, understanding that he was once a Death Eater is vital to understanding why his trial must be kept secret. About a year and two months ago, Mr. Snape came to me clandestinely at Hogwarts to divulge to me Voldemort's plans to attack two of his enemies. These two people were known to Mr. Snape from his school days, and he did not wish them harmed. I was skeptical of his motives and questioned him extensively. The information he gave me that day proved very useful to us later. I offered him asylum, but he feared Voldemort's wrath if he deserted the Death Eaters. I was mercenary enough to give him instructions on how to contact me if he wished to give me more information."

Everyone in the room, the Judge, Moody, Scrimgeour, and the clerk, were listening attentively.

"I was both surprised and pleased to receive from him some time later information that saved the life of yet another of my people. Then something happened, particulars of which I will reserve for the trial if you do not mind, that turned Mr. Snape against Voldemort completely. We began to receive information that enabled us to eliminate many Death Eaters and foil their plans. Many of our successes of the past year were, in fact, due to him. Since this is information that must be used in his defense at his trial, the trial cannot be public. Any Death Eaters still at large who learned of it might mark him for execution."

"Your Honor," exclaimed Scrimgeour, "we'd like to point out on the other side that as late as twelve days ago Mr. Snape was still withholding information from the Ministry in order to protect some of these same Death Eaters. Four of those he was protecting were responsible for the brutal attack on Frank and Alice Longbottom."

"Your Honor..." Dumbledore began, but the Judge raised her hand.

"This dispute can be argued at the trial. I've heard enough to reach a decision. This case is hereby covered by a gag order and secrecy provisions. Except for client/lawyer privilege, it may only be discussed in secure areas of the Ministry. Any violation will result in both contempt and criminal

charges. Anything else, gentlemen? No? You are dismissed.” The Judge rose and left the chamber, accompanied by the clerk.

Scrimgeour followed her out, clearly angry at the outcome of the proceedings.

Moody came over to Dumbledore, not looking at Snape at all. “That was a nice little surprise you threw at us there, Albus. I don’t deny it’s going to change the mood at the trial. It makes it harder to explain his silence in the last month and a half, though. They’re going to hit you hard on that.”

“They are? Should you not be saying ‘we are’?”

“I’m torn. I will admit I’m torn. Well, I’m back off to work. Enough lazing around for one morning. Catch you later.”

“Goodbye, Alastor.”

It was lunchtime when they returned to Hogwarts. The teachers came over for news only to be told sternly by Dumbledore that the case could not be discussed outside the Ministry.

“Are you that important now?” cried McGonagall with a laugh. “Whoever would have thought.”

Before leaving the Ministry, Dumbledore had checked the docket; Snape’s trial was firmly set to begin on Wednesday the thirtieth. Since the Council of Magical Law did not involve anything so mundane as juries, and members of the Council were free to ask questions during the trial, it was not expected to last more than a day, two at most.

One of the best things about the hearing was that it restored Snape’s appetite and general interest in life. He was always at his best when focusing on a well-defined problem, and at his weakest when dealing with the vague or formless. The charges, while detailed and complex, were nonetheless direct and specific. Snape sat down first to a hearty lunch, and then to trying to organize his memories of his activities at the time of the events mentioned in the charges.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 30, 1981 (FOUR DAYS AFTER THE NEW MOON)

On the day of Snape’s trial, he, Dumbledore, and Hagrid returned to London and entered the Ministry of Magic. Their progress through the building was about as it had been the previous week, except this time Hagrid was not allowed into the chamber. That alone made Snape feel uneasy, but nowhere near as uneasy as he felt when he entered the chamber itself.

Banks of benches for the council members rose like the bleachers in a stadium around a central circular area. In the middle of the circle was a chair. A heavy chair with straight arms, and with chains to bind its occupant in place. Snape shrank against Dumbledore, for being bound, unable to move, was one of the things that frightened him most.

The members of the Council of Magical Law had been moving around, greeting each other and conversing in small groups, but when Dumbledore and Snape entered, they moved quickly to their places in the stadium-like chambers. A few greeted Dumbledore in a friendly manner, but most did not. Two clerks came up to Dumbledore.

"Is this the defendant?" one said.

"It is," Dumbledore replied.

"Come with us."

Dumbledore laid his hand on Snape's shoulder. "Do not be afraid. No one is ever harmed in this chamber. These are not aurors, but council members, and they have seen far worse than you."

Snape followed the two clerks meekly and sat when he was told. The chains were enchanted and wrapped around his arms like snakes (very odd under the circumstances, he thought) binding Snape to the chair. The chamber became quiet.

The clerk then unrolled a parchment and read: "Ladies and gentlemen, you have before you the case of one Severus Snape, wizard, accused of various crimes against our world which are detailed in the docket books in front of you. They are one count of treason, one count of conspiracy to commit treason, six counts of conspiracy to commit murder, and fifty-two counts of aiding and abetting others before the fact in commissions of felonies, including murder, attacks causing or intending to cause grievous bodily harm, incidents of civil disorder, and vandalism or other damage to property. Counsel for the prosecution may proceed."

"Objection," said Dumbledore, rising. "The defendant was not informed of fifty-two counts of aiding and abetting. Only of ten. We request that the others not be laid before this council until we have had time to research them and prepare a defense."

The head of the council, an old wizened wizard with curiously long ears, made a note. "We'll keep your objection under advisement, Albus. Prosecution may continue."

The auror leading the prosecution was Gawain Robards. He approached Snape in a very businesslike way.

"State your full name."

"Severus Snape."

"Date and county of birth."

"Nine January 1960, Lancashire."

"Names and blood status of parents."

"My father was a muggle, Tobias Snape, my mother a pureblood witch, Eileen Prince."

"The council will note that we intend to return to this matter of blood status. Occupation, Mr. Snape, and for how long?"

"Instructor at Hogwarts school, in Potions, since this last August."

"And before then?"

"I was a private tutor."

"Anything else?"

Snape didn't answer.

"Note that the defendant did not respond to the question. Now Mr. Snape, let's get right to the meat of the first charge. Were you at any time a member of the organization known as the Death Eaters under the control of the self-styled Lord Voldemort?"

"Yes. I became a..."

"Just answer the question, Mr. Snape. In this case a simple 'yes' suffices."

"Yes, sir."

"When did you become a Death Eater?" Robards continued.

"The twentieth of July, 1978."

"Describe your initiation."

"I was invited to London by one of my sponsors..."

"You had sponsors? Please give their surnames."

"The Lestranges, Rosier, Wilkes, Avery."

"All three Lestranges? Rabastan, Rodolphus, and Bella?"

"Yes, sir."

"I ask the council to note that three of the defendant's sponsors were among those who attacked and tortured Frank and..."

"Objection!" cried Dumbledore. "The defendant has not been charged in connection with the attack on the Longbottoms."

"On the contrary, Professor Dumbledore, that is count number fifty-two of the aiding and abetting charge..."

"Of which the defendant was not informed until this moment, and which should therefore not be considered at this session..."

The head of the council banged his gavel. "That matter is still under advisement. The prosecution may proceed." Dumbledore resumed his seat.

Robards returned to his questions. "Now, Mr. Snape, how did you come to be acquainted with these sponsors?"

"I knew them from Hogwarts. Rosier and Wilkes were two of my dormitory mates, and the others were in classes ahead of mine."

"Were you all in the same house?"

"Yes, Slytherin." The answer caused a little ripple of murmurs.

"How did you become familiar with these older classmates?"

"They hired me to tutor them in their Potions work."

"Come, Mr. Snape, you can be more honest than that. This is a court, after all."

"Objection! Counsel is badgering the defendant." Dumbledore had risen again.

The gavel banged. "Overruled, Albus. We want to see where this is going."

Snape watched Robards, wary and apprehensive. "I don't know what you mean."

"With the council's permission, I'll refresh your memory. Isn't it true that you became involved with these upper level students when you became part of a conspiracy to hex and jinx members of Gryffindor house in retaliation for a harmless prank they pulled at the 1973 Welcoming Feast?"

"No, they attacked us first..."

"First? Then you did hex them?"

"Yes, but only because..."

"Wasn't your nickname in Slytherin house 'Cursemaster'?"

"Objection!"

"Counsel for the defense has a point, Mr. Robards. How does this relate to the charge?" The old wizard looked a bit impatient.

"I'm getting to that right now, sir, if the defendant will answer the question." Robards turned back to Snape. "Was it 'Cursemaster'?"

There was no advantage in denying it. "Yes," Snape said.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the organization of Death Eaters was well known for its value of blood purity. Every one of the defendant's sponsors was a pureblood witch or wizard of impeccable ancestry. And yet they united in sponsoring into their midst a younger half-blood wizard of no social background. I submit that the reason for this sponsorship was the defendant's well-known, I might call it notorious, expertise in the Dark Arts, in hexes,

jinxes, and yes curses, which by the time he was thirteen, thirteen, had earned him the name ‘Cursemaster.’ Mr. Snape, is this not true?”

The silence stretched as Snape stared at the floor. “Let it be noted,” continued Robards, “that the defendant refuses to answer the question.”

There was no trace of triumph or malice in Robards’s manner or voice. He continued to be very businesslike. “Let’s return to your initiation. You met with your sponsors. What then?”

Snape tried to collect his thoughts. “I was blindfolded and taken to their headquarters.”

“How?”

“Side by side apparation. They took me into a chamber and had me kneel, then they removed the blindfold. I was face to face with the Dark Lord . . .”

“Lord? You still call him Lord?”

“No!” Snape cried. “It’s just habit!” Robards didn’t pursue the issue. “He examined me with legilimency, welcomed me to the group, and gave me the mark.”

“Legilimency. So if you’d had any reservations, he would have known.” Robards waited. “The defendant does not answer. Do you still bear the mark? May we see it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Robards stepped forward and gently unbuttoned and pushed up the sleeve of Snape’s jacket, showing the council members the skull and snake brand. “Now, Mr. Snape, did you enter into this association with ‘Lord’ Voldemort freely and of your own will.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you. The prosecution yields for the moment to the defense.”

Robards sat and Dumbledore rose. Gently he asked, “Severus, what happens when someone says the name Voldemort in your presence?”

“It hurts. The mark hurts. It’s like a jolt of electricity.”

“Is this why Death Eaters employ the phrase ‘Dark Lord’?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. I shall try not to cause you further pain. Now, are you a talented spell caster?”

“Sir?”

“Does the casting of spells come easy to you? Have you been using a wide range of spells from childhood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Who taught you those spells?”

"My mother."

"Are you able to create new, previously unknown spells?"

"Yes, sir." The answer caused another murmur, this time of surprise.

"Describe your first encounters with the other members of Slytherin house, including your dormitory mates."

"They teased me and insulted me. They called me a mongrel and a cur. They bullied me..."

"How did you respond?"

"I hexed them. Spiders and lice. I made Rabastan Lestrange smell like a wet dog."

"What is the most powerful spell you used against them?"

"I created a small earthquake." More murmurs, louder now.

"How old were you?"

"Twelve." The head of the council had to use his gavel for silence.

"And this was against your own housemates, other Slytherins, who were teasing and tormenting you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what did Bella Lestrange do?"

"She offered to help me. She said if I stayed with her, she'd make the others leave me alone."

"So you went with her for protection?"

"Yes, sir."

Dumbledore continued, quiet and gentle. "Did you become a Death Eater of your own free will?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I was afraid. Wizards were being attacked by muggles, and no one seemed to be doing anything about it."

"Did this affect you personally?"

"My grandmother, a witch, was attacked and killed by a muggle mob."

"I see. Who of your family remained after this attack?"

"No one. She was my last living relative."

"How old were you when this happened?"

"Seventeen."

"An adult by wizard law, but how many of us could say we endured such great loss at such a tender age?"

"Objection," said Robards. "Counsel is editorializing."

"Sustained."

“Very well,” said Dumbledore, “I shall summarize this point. The defendant has admitted to becoming a Death Eater of his own free will, out of fear of muggle violence and the desire for protection, something he had been seeking since entering Hogwarts. Now, Severus, what did you subsequently discover about the death of your grandmother?”

“By chance I overheard a conversation between two other wizards in which one told the other that my grandmother had been murdered by Death Eaters. They had placed muggles under an Imperius curse to attack my grandmother, and the reason for the attack was to recruit me, to push me into becoming a Death Eater.”

“When did you overhear this conversation?”

“After the beginning of December of 1980.”

“When did your grandmother die?”

“October 1977.”

“So for three years, from October 1977 to December 1980, you believed your grandmother to have been the victim of random muggle violence, and your fear of this violence was a major factor in your becoming a Death Eater?”

“Objection!” cried Robards. “Counsel is leading the witness.”

“I believe,” said Dumbledore, “that my summary can be supported by the defendant’s previous testimony and is therefore not leading.”

“Overruled,” said the head of the council.

“Answer the question, Severus.”

“Yes, sir. I mean that’s my answer. Yes. Sir.”

“Good. Now Severus, when did you first come to me with information against this ‘Dark Lord’?”

“The thirteenth of November, 1980.”

“Before you discovered the truth about the attack on your grandmother?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why did you decide to turn against your master?”

The answer to this question was the only one that had been prepared and rehearsed, since Snape adamantly refused to compromise Lily’s memory through any connection to him. It was a masterpiece of precise truths and careful omissions.

“By the end of the summer, the Dark Lord — excuse me, I don’t know what else to say — he’d gotten it into his head that some newborn baby was a threat to him. The baby and his parents. He had us all looking for them, James and Lily Potter and their son. I didn’t like James, but we’d patched up

the worst of our differences before we graduated, and besides it wasn't him, it was the baby. You don't go after a baby. I couldn't think of where else to go for help, so I went to Professor Dumbledore and told him what was happening."

"Thank you. We will return to this later. Now, Severus, what kind of work were you given to do as a Death Eater?"

"I was asked to create spells. To mix potions and to create spells. He would give me a message telling me what he wanted the spell to do, and my job was to create the spell."

"What kinds of spells? Combat spells? Interrogation spells?"

"No, sir. I've always had a . . . kind of talent for sound spells and other sensory spells. He wanted things like covering conversations, hearing conversations at a distance, muffling movement, avoiding detection."

"Were you ever sent out as part of a group that attacked a person or a home or anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Were you ever involved in planning such an attack?"

"No, sir."

"Were you ever invited to join such an attack?"

"Yes, sir, on a couple of occasions by members of the squads, but the squad leaders always told me I couldn't go."

"Why was that?"

"They wouldn't tell me. But the last time, in December 1980, I overheard them say that they didn't want me to find out that my grandmother's death had been arranged in order to recruit me."

Dumbledore then addressed the council. "What we have here, ladies and gentlemen, is a young wizard of extraordinary talent in the invention of spells. This talent was noticed quite early by students associated with the Death Eaters. Please note that the Avery and Rosier mentioned by the defendant, were the sons of men who were among the original Death Eater cadre. This group over a period of several years carefully manipulated the defendant into believing that he was threatened, looking to them for protection, and finding among them respect and appreciation for his talents. Once recruited, he was carefully prevented from discovering the true nature of Death Eater operations. When he did learn of an operation that crossed a moral boundary—the hunt for a baby—even before learning about operations that affected him personally, he took steps to leave the Death Eater organization by coming to me. I now yield to counsel for the prosecution."

Dumbledore sat down, and Robards stepped into the center. “You’ve forgotten one or two things, haven’t you, Mr. Snape?”

“Sir?”

“In August 1978, weren’t you a frequent visitor to Fortescue’s ice cream parlor in Diagon Alley?”

“Yes.”

“What was your assignment there?”

“Make contacts, arrange future contacts through tutoring connections, gather information . . .” Snape could not move, bound by the chains, but his fingers were beginning to twitch uncontrollably.

“Talk to students about becoming Death Eaters?”

“Yes.”

“Do you recognize the name Marcus Abernathy? Did you talk to him about joining the Death Eaters? And did he join?”

“Yes.”

“For the information of the council,” Robards stated, “Marcus Abernathy has confessed to being a member of the squads that attacked and killed Edgar Bones and his family, killed Gideon and Fabian Prewett, and kidnapped Dorcas Meadows. Mr. Snape, did you create a spell that would allow a person to walk across dead leaves in silence, and another that would prevent a dog from noticing an intruder, and another that would locate and turn off burglar alarms?”

“Yes.” The answer was mechanical. Snape was wrestling with the thought that Marcus had killed, that he had brought a killer to the Dark Lord, that he had recruited a killer.

“Would you say you were a reasonably intelligent person? At least at the same level as any average person?”

“I suppose so.”

“As a reasonably intelligent person, Mr. Snape, what did you consider that these spells were being used for?”

Snape closed his eyes, his heart had begun pounding in his ears. “I . . . didn’t think about it.”

“Didn’t think about it. Let me show you a picture, Mr. Snape.”

Snape opened his eyes. The picture was of a room in a house, and there were five people in the room, a man, a woman, two young boys, and a little girl. It was a wizard photograph but the people weren’t moving. They weren’t moving because they couldn’t move. They were dead, and there was blood everywhere. And the little girl was staring up at the ceiling with wide,

frightened eyes, unseeing eyes for her throat was cut. Staring at him with wide, unseeing, accusing eyes . . .

Robards was talking. "This is the family of Edgar Bones, Mr. Snape. The members of the squad that attacked them, we have been told, were Abernathy, Rosier, Wilkes, Dolohov, Lestrangle and his wife . . . Curious thing, that Edgar seems to have been taken completely by surprise. You see, he had a dog that he expected to warn him of intruders . . ."

Snape closed his eyes again, his body rigid, his face drained of all color, the image of the little girl floating in the front of his brain — closing down, locking, shutting all the doors, all the barriers . . .

Somewhere in the distance Dumbledore was speaking, his voice muffled but urgent. "May I call a recess? A recess, please. My client is not well." The chains unwound, and Snape rose and was led to a small antechamber where he sat staring at the wall while Dumbledore got water.

"I don't want to do this anymore," Snape said quietly.

"I am afraid you have no choice," Dumbledore replied.

"Can't we just tell them I'm guilty? I mean, they're right, aren't they? I did all those things. I was stupid and blind, and I gave them the tools to kill people. Why don't we just say so, and stop this?"

"Are you sure?"

Snape nodded, and Dumbledore left the room to fetch Robards and the head of the council. When they were assembled, Dumbledore explained, "Mr. Snape wishes to change his plea to guilty."

"On all counts?" asked Robards.

"Yes," said Snape.

"No," said Dumbledore. "Not the conspiracy charges. He was never involved in any planning, and if he insists on pleading guilty to those, I'll request a hearing to find him psychologically incompetent to make his own legal decisions."

"All right. The evidence was circumstantial on those anyway. What about his giving evidence in other cases?"

"No," Snape said suddenly. "No more names."

"I believe he gave you a large number of names on the tenth, and I doubt he has more definite information than that. Could we not leave it there?"

Robards looked at Dumbledore for a moment. "All right. We'll amend the charges."

"Good." Dumbledore turned to the head of the council. "Faustinus, I

should like to address the council on the defendant's behalf, but I think it best that he remain here. Could Hagrid come in and sit with him?"

"I'm afraid not, Albus. Hagrid's general public. No exceptions."

"Rufus is outside," said Robards. "He could..."

"Absolutely not! That man will not come within..."

"Calm down, Albus. What about Alastor? He won't speak, won't move, just make sure Mr. Snape..."

They left and Moody entered, to sit unmoving and unspeaking in a corner while in the chamber Dumbledore's voice could be heard. "I should like to take a few minutes to speak on behalf of the defendant, especially concerning events that occurred between November thirteenth, nineteen eighty, and August first, nineteen eighty-one which I believe should be taken into account..."

Over an hour later, Snape again entered the council chamber, this time to stand before the assembled wizards. The clerk read from a roll of parchment: "Severus Snape, hear the decision of the Council of Magical Law concerning the charges brought against you. In the matter of treason — guilty. In the matter of conspiracy to commit treason — guilty. In the matter of aiding and abetting the murder of Marlene McKinnon — guilty. In the matter of aiding and abetting the murder of Benjy Fenwick — guilty. In the matter of aiding and abetting the murder of Edgar Bones and his family — guilty. In the matter..."

Snape hung his head and stared at the floor as the list droned on and on.

"... and in the matter of aiding and abetting the felonious assault against Frank and Alice Longbottom — guilty. This completes the charges. And for these crimes for which you have been found guilty, Severus Snape, this Council sentences you to a term of fifty-five years in Azkaban prison with opportunity for parole following a period of good behavior of twenty years. The Council of Magical Law has spoken."

The head of the council then rose in the ensuing silence. "Mr. Snape," he said, and when there was no reply, he repeated, "Mr. Snape? Please look at me." Snape looked up, his eyes vacant. "Mr. Snape, I am Faustinus Oglethorpe and I am pro tempore head of this council in the temporary absence of Bartemius Crouch. There are several things we still have to cover, but I first need to ask you. Have you heard the verdict and sentence, and do you have anything to say at this time?"

"I heard, sir. I have nothing to say."

"Very well. You are clearly unfamiliar with this type of proceeding, so I

would like you to notice that you are standing freely in front of this council rather than sitting bound in the accused's chair. This is highly unusual for a person who has just been found guilty on all counts, and you should take it as a favorable sign. You are not going to Azkaban, at least not yet."

Snape looked at him in earnest then, and glanced over at Dumbledore, who appeared hopeful. A glance in the other direction showed him that Rufus Scrimgeour was not happy, and that both Robards and Moody seemed displeased.

"Professor Dumbledore," continued Oglethorpe, "has given this council detailed information about your activities over the last year and two months which I won't go into in detail, but let me highlight a couple of points. First, of your own initiative and volition, you approached Professor Dumbledore with information that thwarted the plans of Lord Voldemort, even though you were one of his servants. You then returned to your position with Voldemort, placing yourself in considerable danger, and continued to supply Dumbledore with information that was instrumental in saving the lives of our people and even resulted in the capture or death of Voldemort's people. Most impressively, you've never asked for any kind of reward for these actions, not even now at your trial and sentencing."

Oglethorpe paused and glanced through his papers. "This would speak most highly in your favor were it not for some very disturbing aspects of your behavior. We have also been informed, and Dumbledore admits to the truth of the accusations, that you continue to show support, if not for Voldemort, then for Death Eaters who were Voldemort's operatives. This support extends to Death Eaters whom you know to have committed crimes, serious crimes. Not an hour and a half ago, in my presence, you continued to refuse to cooperate with our law enforcement people, even though your own freedom was at stake.

"Because of your service to us, this council is inclined to be lenient. Because of your contradictory and ambiguous behavior, we hesitate. Hear now the decision of the council. You have been found guilty and sentenced. Your service to us does not earn you a pardon, but we will grant you a suspension of that sentence. You are hereby remanded into the custody of Albus Dumbledore during the time of your good behavior. So long as your record remains clear, you will be free to come and go as long as you remain under Dumbledore's authority. Should you ever be found guilty of a future offense, however, the sentence here and now passed on you will be put into effect. Do you understand?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you have anything to say?”

“No, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Then you are free to go. Albus Dumbledore, I remit Severus Snape into your custody. You may take him back to Hogwarts. See that he doesn’t get into any more trouble.”

The council began to break up into groups that filtered out the doors. Robards came over to shake Dumbledore’s hand and offer congratulations. He didn’t speak to Snape, which was probably just as well since Snape didn’t want to speak to him. Scrimgeour stomped off, but Moody hung around to exchange a few words with Dumbledore.

“Guess that was about as good as you could expect, all told,” Moody said. “You have a happy New Year, Albus.” Then he looked at Snape and said, not unkindly, “Good behavior. You remember that. We’d hate to see the clemency of the court wasted.” And then he left.

Outside, Hagrid was on pins and needles. When he saw Dumbledore and Snape together, he beamed. “Figured it had t’ be pretty good ’cause of the scowl on old Scrimgeour’s face when he come out, and if ya was going to Azkaban, ya wouldn’t be standing here now. But it did take a long time, didn’t it? So they found ya innocent?”

“Guilty with extenuating circumstances, I fear,” said Dumbledore, “but that should be kept between the three of us. As far as anyone else knows, he is free. Now, shall we get back to Hogwarts?”

The reception at Hogwarts was gratifying, for the other teachers had prepared a small party, in the event that Snape came back to them, and they ended up laughing and joking, and playing silly parlor games like charades. Snape got tipsy enough to justify Hagrid’s seeing him to bed, which gave Hagrid the opportunity to be sure his door was left unlocked during the night — just in case.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1981

It was dark and snowing the next morning when Snape awoke, and the dungeon rooms felt icy and damp. Snape lay in bed for a while, fighting a desire to simply roll onto his side and sleep again — sleep for hours — sleep forever. He couldn’t see the future. It was as if there were no future. Just today, and the struggle to get out of bed.

Lying there was easy. It was warm and dark and quiet. He didn't have to think because there was nothing to think about. Nothing important in the world ever again, with the warm blankets wrapped around him like a cocoon. Like a shroud. Nothing at all...

Except Hagrid.

Snape's eyes snapped open. *What time is it? It's winter. It's always dark in the morning. Hagrid might be coming soon to haul me out of bed, force me into some clothes, and drag me to breakfast. And tell me how lazy I am, and how disgusting and careless.*

He didn't want that. He wanted to show Hagrid how wrong he was, how mistaken in his opinions. Snape checked the clock. Six-thirty. Half an hour before the house-elves would start putting food on the table. Full of resentment against Hagrid and his bullying, Snape threw back the blankets and stepped onto the cold stone floor.

For some reason, as he poured water into a basin for his morning ablutions, Snape thought of the magnificent teachers' bathroom on the third floor. His mouth tightened in scorn. Decadence and luxury were for those still under the illusion that life was good, life could be pleasant. At that moment, Snape was quite proud of the uncomfortable, Spartan arrangements of his own life.

In his wardrobe, all the clothes were black. As a boy he'd worn whatever muggle clothes his parents could get for him, but he'd loved the black of Hogwarts's uniforms and the contrast with his own, spectral features. It had been dramatic. Now the black had other meanings — mourning, death, and funerals. Black was also the color of priests and Dominican monks, of Jesuits, people bound within a life of physical austerity and dedication, finding a measure of freedom only in the mind and the world of the intellect.

Dressed and ready, Snape caught a glimpse of himself in the small mirror. Never handsome, his mother's lank, dark hair and long thin face highlighted by his father's aquiline nose and strong chin, the youth of skin and flesh contrasting sharply with the cold, hostile, intelligent eyes, eyes so dark they looked black. A face that eminently suited the way he felt.

Seven o'clock. He would show Hagrid. He was no weak baby to be coddled and coaxed. He'd go right into the Great Hall and eat his breakfast of kipper, toast, and coffee, and maybe even play a game of cribbage with Flitwick, so no one could say he was cowed by the events of yesterday, that he was weak or beaten.

Erect and defiant, Snape stepped into the corridor.

The problem, of course, was that no one expected him to be cowed by the events of the previous day. Since the only one who'd actually witnessed his ordeal was Dumbledore, everyone else thought he should be pleased and relieved by the outcome. It's particularly hard to be solemn, somber, and aggrieved when others insist on congratulating you on your good fortune.

Dumbledore understood. He rescued Snape from the heartiness of Kettleburn and the maternal clucking of Sprout to eat with him undisturbed in a corner of the hall. "I am pleased to see that you have the fortitude to face the world today," Dumbledore said after they'd sat down. "You have been through quite a lot."

"Truth? I couldn't bear the thought of Hagrid banging on the door to get me up. Coming myself was easier than facing him."

"Hagrid does serve some amazingly useful purposes. I shall have to remember that one. Do you mind if we talk here and now, or would you rather go later to my office?"

"Here and now is fine, sir."

"Excellent. I should first like to hear from you your impression of what is required of you from this point."

"I belong to you, don't I? I stay at Hogwarts teaching, and if I ever do anything wrong again in my whole life, I spend the rest of it in Azkaban."

"You do not belong to me, I do not own people. The phrase about being under my authority does seem to imply that you are expected to remain here, at least for the time being. I hope that you might come to enjoy it, or at least to accept it. I fear I must warn you, however, that your tribulations are not entirely over."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "What else is going to happen?"

"I have been in contact with the Ministry, trying to cancel Rufus Scrimgeour's contract to teach Dark Arts here. I have not been successful. It would seem that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is sufficiently discontent with me that they will not give up an opportunity to keep me under surveillance."

"Or me either," said Snape with a sigh.

Dumbledore left the Great Hall to attend to business, but Snape decided to stay. He conjured parchment, ink, and quill, and poured himself another cup of coffee. Instead of writing, however, he sat in thought.

"What are you doing?" Sprout asked as she came to sit opposite him.

"It's New Year's Eve," Snape responded.

Sprout regarded him for a moment. "That seems to be the answer to a whole different question. Let's try this again. What are you doing?"

"Sorry. Muggle tradition. My dad used to do it all the time. New Year's Day is a time of new beginnings, clean slates. So you make yourself promises of what you're going to do and not going to do in the coming year to make your life better. They're called resolutions. New Year's resolutions."

"Did they make his life better?"

"Not really. He could never keep them longer than a day or two, then he slipped right back into the old habits. Still, it's a time to review your life and see if you approve of the direction it's going in."

They sat for a moment, Snape neither writing nor elaborating. Sprout began to fidget. "Right," she said, "I take it this is a personal and private ritual, so I'll be talking to you later. Do you expect it to take the whole day?"

"I don't know yet."

Snape sat thinking for a long time, then gathered his parchment and quill and, as the morning progressed, moved from place to place in the castle seeking inspiration. His father's resolutions had always been very specific, very drastic, and very easy to break. Resolutions like, 'only one drink at the pub on the way home from work.' Impossible for a man like Toby to keep, and bound to be broken the first time he set foot in a boozer. Resolutions needed to be broad principles of life, not specific behavior modifiers.

In the end, Snape came up with three.

First: Be Prepared. He had walked into that trial knowing nothing about the wizard legal system, nothing about his opponents, and unready for the questions they would ask. Once in his life he'd truly prepared for something, and that was his interview after the Dark Lord realized there was a spy at headquarters. Then he'd known his life was on the line. Now he knew that his life was on the line every day. Every chance question, every casual observation, might hide a potential threat.

Second: Trust No One. He'd trusted Bella, who hadn't really wanted to protect him, just use him. He'd trusted appearances in the death of his grandmother, when it was part of a plot to trap him. He'd trusted Dumbledore to get him through the trial, not realizing there were some things Dumbledore couldn't do. Nothing is what it pretends to be. Everyone is looking out for his own interests first. No one takes care of you but yourself.

Third: Reveal Nothing. How many comments made lightheartedly to how many people in passing could be dragged up later to use against him?

Even this morning, talking to Sprout. There were people who hated muggle-borns and half-bloods, and he'd let slip that his family had followed muggle New Year's traditions. Sprout would probably never use the information against him, but what guarantee did he have that she wouldn't casually pass it to someone else until it fell into the hands of the wrong person?

Three New Year's Resolutions

1. *Be Prepared.*

2. *Trust No One.*

3. *Reveal Nothing.*

Snape wrote them carefully on a fresh piece of parchment and tucked it into a pocket of his jacket. He would think about them all day, and look at them again at midnight.

Most of the staff stayed up that night waiting for the New Year, because after all it was a new year—1982. There were refreshments and conversation, and games as well. Snape didn't talk much, though the fact that he was playing cribbage with Flitwick was taken as sufficient reason, and the others saw nothing odd about it.

Sprout came over just before midnight with a glass of mead for him. Snape looked at it, thought about how talkative he got if he'd had a glass or two, and said, "I think I'll have pumpkin juice, thank you."

At midnight they toasted the New Year, then went to bed. Before going to sleep, Snape looked at his resolutions again, guideposts for the rest of his life: Be prepared, trust no one, reveal nothing.

The students began arriving at school on the second of January, and by the evening of Sunday the third, they had all returned. Snape made a brief appearance in the Slytherin common room to welcome everyone back and wish them a happy new year and a successful term before they went to the Great Hall for supper.

There Snape had a most unpleasant shock, for Professor Scrimgeour was sitting next to Professor Dumbledore, and Alastor Moody was in a chair next to the place where Snape usually sat.

His first instinct was to turn and leave, but that course of action was already too late, for Moody had been watching for him and half rose from his chair to beckon. Snape steeled himself for this new ordeal and walked across the Hall with apparent calm to take his seat at the high table.

“Hope you don’t mind my dropping in and disrupting your seating arrangements. Rufus wanted to come down early and check his room and all the plans for tomorrow. I thought I’d pop along and make sure Albus knew we didn’t harbor any unnecessary grudges.”

“What would you consider a necessary grudge?” Snape asked, knowing Moody was playing with him, a little cat and mouse game.

Moody grinned. “Right to the chase. Spirit coming back now that the worst is over? I’m sure Dumbledore’s pleased. Don’t you fret. I’m only here for dinner, then I’m going home. It’s just Rufus who’s staying the night.”

“I’m devastated.”

“Thought you would be. You won’t believe what I’ve been doing the last couple of days. Checking up on old, old laws. Things that’ve been on the books for ages, nobody remembers them, but they’ve never been repealed. Did you know, for example, that after Cyprian Youdle was killed by a curse during a Quidditch match, a law was passed making it illegal to move widershins around a Quidditch pitch?”

An open, undisguised threat. “Are you planning to observe our next Quidditch game?”

“I might. And I’ve presented you with a puzzle. Do you dance to my tune and carefully walk clockwise the whole afternoon, or defy me and risk being arrested for breaking a six hundred twenty-four year old law?”

“I see you’ve thought this out very carefully.” Snape was now beginning to imagine all the other laws he didn’t know about that could trap him.

“It’s the ones that get away that keep you awake at night.”

A very large chair banged against the stones between them. “Sorry ’bout that,” Hagrid said genially. “I just noticed ya was occupying all Mr. Moody’s attention, and I thought I’d come down and socialize a mite. Shove over there, Professor, so ’s I can get me chair in.”

Snape moved quickly to his left to allow room for Hagrid between him and Moody. *That’s another one I owe you, Hagrid. Maybe getting dragged out of bed from time to time is a small price to pay.*

Hagrid proceeded to entertain Moody with tales of famous dragons, the disadvantages of trying to control gnomes with jarveys, and methods for removing chizpurples from the fur of crups, which led to a heated discussion about the need for licensing crups and docking their tails, a practice Hagrid considered cruel.

Dinner over, Moody took his leave of Dumbledore and Scrimgeour, saving his parting shot for Snape. “I’m looking forward to being able to welcome

you back to London. Got a reception all planned. Don't be a stranger, now." Then he was down the hill and gone.

Snape didn't go to the staffroom that evening after supper, preferring to stay in his rooms trying to calm down and prepare for classes.

Things got worse in Potions the following day, for after Snape spent fifteen minutes explaining and demonstrating to a fourth year class the proper way to decant armadillo bile for a Wit-Sharpening potion so as not to injure skin or damage furniture, a Gryffindor student named Miss Kestrel did exactly the opposite, causing second-degree burns on her partner's hands and leaving a turnip-shaped mark etched into the tabletop.

For the first time in a long time, Toby's demon flared, and Snape's hand was halfway to Miss Kestrel's face before he realized what he was doing. He jerked the hand back with an almost superhuman effort, shaking with fury and a pent-up anger that found release through his tongue.

"Do you take notes so that you can study how to do things wrong, Miss Kestrel? Because an error so glaring and counter-intelligent could hardly occur by accident."

Miss Kestrel returned to her Potion, contrite and frightened, while Snape went to his desk to try to still the pulsing rage. *I almost hit a student. Thank goodness I was able to control it. Striking a student — it's the worst thing you could do. Never touch a student. Never. Never. At least I was able to control it. Dumbledore knows about the time I hit Lily. I need to tell him about this. Thank goodness I was able to stop myself.*

"I want to be certain I understand this correctly. You wished to strike her, raised your hand to strike her, and then did not?" Dumbledore sat at his desk, calmly observing Snape's tense figure as he stood by the fireplace staring into the flames.

"That's right."

"Why did you wish to do that?"

"I was nervous. I was upset. I'd just spent all that time showing them what to do. It was like she was mocking all my efforts. Students are supposed to listen and follow instructions."

"Fist or open hand?"

That got a surprised reaction, then Snape relaxed. "You asked that question the first time, with Lily. Open hand."

"How did your father used to hit your mother?"

"Does it matter?"

"It might."

"Back of the hand. Fist if he was really drunk."

"And you?"

"I never hit my mother."

"I mean how did your father hit you?"

"Backhanded. Or he used something, like a belt."

"Why?"

"We would make him angry. There were things we were supposed to do, and . . . how we were supposed to talk to him . . . We never seemed to get it right."

"Like Miss Kestrel."

"You're trying to tell me that I'm like my father. I know that. I've known it for a long time."

"What made you stop?"

Snape stared into the flames again. "There are things you don't do. You don't use magic against muggles. You don't hit students."

"Did you have any of these impulses before the . . . events . . . of the Christmas break?"

"No."

"Let us hope, then, that this was an isolated incident. I would not dwell on it excessively if I were you. Should there be a recurrence, you will, of course, inform me."

"Yes, headmaster."

On his way downstairs for a quick bite of lunch before the afternoon classes started, Snape was surprised by the sudden appearance of Rufus Scrimgeour just leaving the Dark Arts classroom, apparently heading in the same direction. *Does he watch me? Has he been waiting for me?* Snape hurried past as if he hadn't seen the auror, slipped quickly into the Hall for a small plate of food, and went to his own rooms.

They're controlling my life. They control where I eat. They control where I relax. They affect my relations with the other teachers and the students . . . How can I allow them to do this?

For the rest of the lunch hour, and during his free time over the next few days, Snape pondered what he could do to escape from the tyranny, real or apparent, of Rufus Scrimgeour and Alastor Moody.

Thursday night was clear and cold, and Snape slipped out of the school after ten o'clock to finish his rounds and look at the sky. The moon was nearly full. *In fact, if I were a werewolf, the metamorphosis would start tomorrow. Saturday night it will be at its peak.* Which was the precise moment that

he realized that tomorrow night at midnight would begin his twenty-second birthday.

Another new beginning? Another clean slate? Or will the coming year be as horrible as the last year was? If tomorrow night is as clear as tonight, maybe I'll come out at midnight to greet my birthday with the full moon. At least I'll be reasonably sure not to meet Scrimgeour.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 9, 1982 (THE FULL MOON)

Late the following night, Snape threw his cloak over his robes and went out into the dazzling midnight world of full moon and white snow. It was beautiful, silent and serene, cold, pristine, and peaceful. Snape drew the frosty air into his lungs, aware only now that for the past few weeks he'd not been able to breathe in the castle.

The light snow on the lawn was marked with paths trodden by students during the day, and Snape followed the widest of them to the edge of the hill where the road led down to the Hogsmeade gate, the Quidditch pitch, and Hagrid's hut. There was a light in Hagrid's window, and Snape could see him moving around inside the hut. *I wonder what he's doing up? Probably helping some creature hatch, or caring for the sick and injured. It would be wonderful to have a life so relatively uncomplicated.*

Turning back, Snape retraced his steps, but instead of going into the castle, he veered left toward the cliff face. There was a path here that led down to the lake, the light of the moon making it clear and easy to follow. Snape wound his way down to the narrow lake shore and the rock where Lily used to sit and talk to him.

And bring him cake on his birthday. Little cakes, just right for two people, cajoled out of the elves in the kitchens. There had been three people in his life who remembered his birthday — his mother, his father when he was sober, and Lily. All three were dead, but tonight under the full moon he could feel their presence as if they were still with him.

Snape walked to the edge of the frozen lake. The ice was crossed and swirled with the tracks of skates, moonlight glinting from crystals strewn up when the students raced and glided over its surface in their free periods during the day.

It was very cold, but Snape didn't want to leave. He wanted to hold the sparkling magical moment forever. Glancing around, he focused on the rock.

I'll sit by Lily's rock for a few minutes and pretend it's nine years ago, and Lily's just brought me cake for my thirteenth birthday.

He brushed the snow away from a patch of dead grass so that it wouldn't grow damp under him, and sat huddled next to the rock, his cloak pulled around him, his fingers tucked under his arms to protect them from the biting cold. Then he thought, *This is crazy. I could at least make a little fire and be more comfortable.* A wave of his wand, a spoken word, and the fire glowed near his feet, very brightly at first, then subsiding into soft flickers. Flickering. Dancing against the backdrop of white and moonlight, entrancing in its constantly changing changelessness. Severus dozed, and eventually the fire died.

He was warm, warm and comfortable, his limbs relaxed in pleasant drowsiness and the comfort of knowing he didn't have to wake up, not today. 'Come on, Russ,' his mother called, 'you can't stay there forever, sleepyhead.' — 'It's all right, mum,' he answered. 'It's Saturday, and it's my birthday. On your birthday you can stay forever anywhere you want.'

'Do you miss me?' Lily asked. 'I'm sorry I didn't miss you as much as I should have, but husbands and babies keep you very busy, you know.'

'Yes,' he answered. 'That's what I heard. I thought about you a lot, especially that last year. I wanted to do so much.'

'There's still so much to do. Don't let them beat you down. You're a fighter. You've always been a fighter. I told James. He wouldn't believe me, but he found out.' She laughed, then she touched his arm. *'Don't let this make you stop fighting.'*

'I'm scared, Lily, and I'm tired.'

'I know. Lovely, dark, and deep. Promises. Miles to go...'

'Before you sleep, Russ,' his mother called. 'Chores to do before you sleep. You can't lie there forever, even if it is your birthday.'

And then Toby was yelling at him. 'What're you doing here, lad? You can't sit out here all night! Wake up!' He threw his hand up to protect his head from his father's blow, but the blow never landed. Instead, Toby was shaking him, rubbing his wrists and hands, pulling him up out of the warmth into the cold, frosty night...

"What the blame-all are ya doing out here?" Hagrid roared. "You start moving around, now, get that blood pumping!" Then Hagrid pulled off his own great coat and wrapped it around Snape's shoulders, its warmth battling the biting cold that weighed Snape's hands and feet. "Now move! Walk! I'm right beside ya. We're just going t' my place where there's a good fire and hot tea. I thought I saw ya up there on the hill a bit ago, then the flash when

ya lit yer fire. Then when the fire died, I says, 'Well, he's gone back inside t' bed,' but something nagged at me and I says, 'It won't hurt checking. No, ya can't sit down. Not yet. Ya just keep moving there.'

Then Snape was staggering up the steps into Hagrid's hut, and was set before the fire, wrapped in warm blankets with a cup of hot tea in his hands while Hagrid pulled off his shoes to check his feet for frostbite.

"I was not trying to kill myself! I swear, I went out just to look at the moon, and it was so . . . beautiful . . . that I just wanted to stay awhile. I even made a fire. Ask Hagrid."

"That there is true, Professor. He did make a fire. That's what let me know he was out there to begin with. Well, that and seeing him on the hill."

"You saw me there?"

"It were a dandy silhouette 'gainst the moon, lad. No mistaking who it was neither."

"Still," said Dumbledore, "it is the third time in fewer months. Many would find a sinister meaning in the sequence of events. Do you promise me, Severus, that this time it was not deliberate?"

Snape looked directly into Dumbledore's eyes. "I swear, this time I was not trying to kill myself."

"I am content," said Dumbledore. "Now perhaps we should discuss the foolishness of falling asleep outside on a night as cold as this one."

"I didn't mean to do that either," said Snape ruefully, then added, "I saw Lily."

That attracted the instant attention of both Dumbledore and Hagrid. "Saw Lily?" Dumbledore asked, "Actually saw her?"

"Not actually. It was more like a dream. I saw my mother and father, too. Lily told me not to stop fighting, not to let them beat me down." Snape touched his left arm, the cloth of his robes under which lurked the skull and snake. "She said not to let this make me stop fighting. And she said something I didn't understand."

"Which was?"

"She said, 'Lovely, dark, deep. Promises. Miles to go.' I don't know what it meant."

Dumbledore smiled. "It is the intrusion of the inexplicable into an otherwise easily explained occurrence that promotes in us the belief in the supernatural."

"Sir?"

"Last night's experience, Severus. You dozed off and, as you were succumbing to the cold, you had a dream. That dream expressed certain desires of your heart — that you would see your parents and Lily again, and that you would find some way to fight back against the forces that are trying to push you down. All of them the simple wishes of your subconscious mind expressing itself in a dream — until we get to the inexplicable. Are you certain you do not recognize the words?"

"I don't think so."

"They are from a poem about a man who also stops to contemplate the beauty of snow falling at night. The last lines are thought by many to expressing a longing similar to Hamlet's — 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.'"

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't understand about Hamlet either."

"Ah! One of Shakespeare's most famous. '... to sleep,— no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to,— 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. To die,— to sleep...'"

"I didn't realize you knew so much about Shakespeare."

"I do not. I am merely intrigued by this muggle attitude toward death and dying, the acceptance of it as a natural, gentle, and even desirable thing. Something Moriarty would not have understood."

Snape thought for a moment. "If this dream came from my own mind, how could it tell me part of a poem I don't remember reading? Could that be proof it was really Lily speaking to me?"

Dumbledore reached forward to lay a finger over Snape's heart. "Part of Lily lives right in here," he said, "and will continue to live here as long as you yourself are alive. As long as you do not force that part to change into something she was not, she will continue to speak to you. The Lily of your dream, is that how she would have talked to you?"

"Yes, very much so."

"Then do not be distressed if you find that at some time in the past you read or heard that poem. It was still Lily talking to you. Perhaps at this point it would be well to think of your school days and remember that you had a reputation for refusing to be cowed."

"Thank you, sir. I'll do that, sir." Snape left Dumbledore's office somewhat more optimistic than he'd been for several weeks.

The first problem, of course, was defining the problem. *Who is my enemy? Is the Ministry of Magic my enemy? I would say not, because Judge Bones didn't*

act like an enemy, and Faustinus Oglethorpe didn't really act like an enemy. So far the only people who've acted like enemies are the aurors. And that's because of the Longbottoms.

The Longbottoms. Pureblood aurors. They were the real threat to the Dark Lord. When their son was born as the seventh month died, the Dark Lord should have recognized the true chosen one of the prophecy, and not gone after Lily. It was the Dark Lord's error, his blindness, that had killed Lily, and Snape wasn't going to let any more aurors push him into feeling guilty about the Longbottoms. Their fate had been prophesied. It wasn't Snape's fault.

It then occurred to Snape that the family whose picture he'd seen at the trial had been named Bones. Edgar Bones and his family. Remembering the picture made him feel sick again, but he had to think about it because the judge's name was Bones, and he wondered if they were related. She knew whose deaths he'd been accused of, yet she'd been kind and fair. No, it was just the aurors. Maybe their job made them cruel and suspicious, but they were the ones who wanted people to be guilty, wanted them to be punished. Not the whole Ministry, just the aurors. Like Scrimgeour and Moody. And Robards.

They're going to keep pushing, trying to make me crack. What are some of the things they might bring up? If they do, what can I say that will show them I'm not afraid and at the same time not get me into more trouble? Snape began to think of sentences, lines, remarks, and commit them to memory.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 15, 1982

Defense Against the Dark Arts classes were canceled the following Friday because Scrimgeour was not coming up from London. Something was happening, something special enough that Dumbledore was going down to London to observe.

"Normally, I am part of the Council that conducted your trial. I could not sit with them that day, since I was acting as your lawyer. Today I go as myself. If anything happens that you need to know about, I shall tell you on my return."

It was a very pleasant day at Hogwarts for Snape, knowing he would not have to see Scrimgeour until the following Monday, but Dumbledore had given him something else to think about.

Maybe it wasn't so smart letting Professor Dumbledore act as my lawyer. He's wise, and he knows the law, and he was on my side, but what I needed then was

someone who knew all the twists and turns and tricks. Someone who understood how they can lead you from question to question until you're in the trap before you see it. Not someone wise, or even clever, but someone just as sneaky as they are.

Dumbledore returned from London late in the afternoon and sent a message to Snape to come to his office after the last Potions class. When he got there, Dumbledore offered him a glass of elf wine, but Snape turned it down, preferring tea or pumpkin juice. Dumbledore eyed him quizzically.

"Are you embarking on a change of diet? I was under the impression that you enjoyed an occasional glass of wine."

"I did. But if I drink it, I start talking too much. I have to watch what I say."

"Loose lips sink ships. Muggles used to put that on signs. I think it was during one of their wars. By the way, have you been taking your evenings off?"

"No. I don't think it's wise to leave Hogwarts."

"I hate to have to say it, but that is probably an excellent idea. They're bringing people out of Azkaban to give further evidence in exchange for lightening their sentences. One of the ones they questioned today was Igor Karkaroff. He named you."

"Karkaroff knew me. Not well, but he knew who I was."

"I was glad I was there. I spoke for you and reminded the council that you had been released because of your actions against Moriarty, but you could tell by the faces that not all of them were convinced. Scrimgeour and Moody were particularly skeptical."

"I think I could have guessed that."

"There was something else. They have statements from the Lestranges and Master Crouch about the attack on the Longbottoms. The four of them were trying to extract information about the whereabouts of Moriarty. They want to locate him."

"Whereabouts? He's dead!"

"That was my impression, but it is not the opinion of Bellatrix Lestrange. She, it would appear, is firmly convinced that Moriarty survives, and that the aurors somehow know where he is. More than that, she believes that he will return and be restored to power. It is a disturbing thought."

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - F I V E

FORTRESS SLYTHERIN

MONDAY, JANUARY 25, 1982

Unpleasantness hit the fan on the twenty-fifth of January, and it took everyone by surprise. Morning was normal, breakfast was normal, and then as first hour classes were about to begin, it was announced that the Dark Arts students should stay in the Great Hall for a study period.

That, at first, was all anyone knew — that Scrimgeour would not be arriving at Hogwarts on time to teach his morning classes. Fifteen minutes into the second session, however, the Potions class was interrupted by Dumbledore coming in himself.

“Excuse me, Severus, but I really must see you in my office at once. Students, if you will quickly clean up your potions work and go either to the library or to the Great Hall to study . . . You may check with Professor Snape tomorrow about assignments that will be due next week. Very good . . . that is right . . . quickly now . . . Lock the door, Severus. It would be wise to hurry.”

They did hurry, through the dungeon corridor, into the entrance hall, and up the marble staircase, but they didn’t hurry quite fast enough. Scrimgeour burst through the great oaken doors, Hagrid at his heels.

“You can’t hide him this time, Albus! This time he goes down!”

Dumbledore came down three steps so that he stood between Snape and Scrimgeour. “Rufus, we have been expecting you. I trust you bring news, though mine is fairly recent. Let me suggest, however, that we discuss it in my office, for while you and I know what this is about, Professor Snape and Hagrid are ignorant, and there is no need to gossip before the entire school. If you would follow Hagrid up . . .”

Dumbledore turned, pushing Snape upwards so that he remained between. Scrimgeour sprang for the stairs and was stopped by Hagrid. “The professor asked you to follow me,” Hagrid said, “That means me first, and

you second.” Hagrid then made his way leisurely up the stairs, ensuring that Snape and Dumbledore were well ahead, and Scrimgeour well behind.

As soon as they were in the office, Snape crossed to the far side, wanting as much substantial furniture as possible between himself and Scrimgeour. He still had no idea what the problem was, but considered that of secondary importance. Scrimgeour stormed in behind Hagrid, though the groundskeeper prevented him from going far into the room.

“This has gone too far, Albus!” Scrimgeour shouted. “You can’t protect him anymore. I’m taking him back to London.”

“Do you happen to have a warrant, Rufus? I fear without a warrant I would be in violation of the law if I were to force Severus to accompany you. No? Then let us take this a step at a time. Would you care to sit down?”

“I’ll stand!”

“Suit yourself. Severus, you need to know that last night Alastor Moody was involved in a fight with several Death Eaters and is currently in St. Mungo’s hospital. My latest information, Rufus, is that he has regained consciousness, and that his prognosis for recovery is excellent.”

“Right. Except that the blasting spell hit him in the face and he’ll never see again.”

Snape had long since closed himself down, but now a knot tightened in his stomach. Another victim who’d be laid to his blame, even though he’d known nothing of the attack. Part of him felt he should say something, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. It struck him that Scrimgeour, with his irrational accusations, and the violence of his actions and emotions, was remarkably similar to Sirius Black.

Dumbledore continued. “Do they have in custody the people he was fighting?”

“Yeah. Yeah, they do. A couple from Lincoln and her cousin. You know anyone named Folkenstone, Death Eater?”

“No,” replied Snape quietly. “I don’t.”

“Liar.”

“Rufus!”

“Albus, you know what he can do! Alastor’s good, and Alastor said he couldn’t read this one. Can you stand here, look me in the face, and tell me honestly that he’s never lied to you?”

“That is not the point under discussion.”

“It’s exactly the point under discussion. He could lie, and lie, and lie, and none of us would even know it.”

"He has not lied to me about this."

"Albus, you have no way of knowing."

They stood, staring at each other across the room. "Do you have a suggestion?" Dumbledore asked. "Because if you do not, I shall be forced to ask you to leave. I believe that although I cannot fire you while under contract, I can suspend you from your teaching duties for the rest of the year. We would continue to pay you, of course."

"I don't want your pay!" Scrimgeour's face was red now. "For God's sake, Albus, why won't you listen? We don't want vengeance, we want justice. Frank and Alice are lost. Alastor's lost, too. You don't care what happens to us. When did we become expendable? Why are you wasting this time on a proven Death Eater who won't even repent?"

"This is a very good question, Rufus. Perhaps we should ask Severus." Dumbledore turned to Snape. "Rufus accuses you of being unrepentant. What have you to say?"

Snape flipped through all the responses he'd been preparing, and the answer to 'Why are you still shielding Death Eaters?' seemed to fit best. "I didn't know what they did. All I know is that they came to me for potions, and for spells, and for lessons on how to protect themselves. I was tricked into becoming a Death Eater. I don't know how many of them were tricked as well. Why should I let you punish them for having been tricked into a lie?"

"So you think they're just going to innocently crawl under rocks and hide? Your record hasn't been good so far."

"As a total percentage? It's been very good. I can't help that there are a few."

It was the wrong thing to say. Scrimgeour jumped on it immediately. "Total percentage? You mean that the number of attacks are small compared to the number of names you know? Who else is going to ambush us, Death Eater? Who else?"

"No one that I know of."

"Yeah, but that's what you said before Alastor was attacked. And the Longbottoms."

"I can't give you names of people I think are innocent."

"You think the Lestranges and Crouch are innocent? You think the Folkenstones are innocent?"

"I didn't know the Folkenstones."

Turning to Dumbledore, Scrimgeour demanded, "Let me talk to him, Albus!"

“You are talking to him, Rufus.”

Scrimgeour stiffened and became suddenly quite cold. “Then we have nothing more to discuss, have we? Perhaps you’d better suspend me, Albus. I see no more reason for me to come to Hogwarts.”

“I shall be sorry to lose you, Rufus. You were a good teacher. But this is probably for the best.”

With that, Scrimgeour strode from Dumbledore’s office. He neither looked at nor spoke to any of them on the way, but hastened from the castle and apparated back to London.

Dumbledore went to a cabinet and took a cloak. “You will excuse me, now, gentlemen,” he said to Hagrid and Snape, “but I, too, must be going to London. I shall be at St. Mungo’s visiting Alastor. If you would remain in the castle this afternoon, Hagrid, near the dungeon area, I should appreciate it. I expect to be back before supper time.” Dumbledore left the office and followed Scrimgeour’s route out of the castle and down the hill.

“It’ll be lunch time, now,” said Hagrid. “We’d best go down and have a bite t’ eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” Snape replied.

Hagrid took him by the arm. “Well, I am. And if I’m to look out for ya this afternoon, y’re just going t’ have t’ come t’ the Hall with me and watch me eat, then. Now, we can walk down side by side, or I can put ya over my shoulder like a stack of wood.”

“Hagrid, are you angry with me?”

Hagrid took Snape by the shoulders and turned him so they faced each other. “I don’t have much fondness for Rufus Scrimgeour, lad, and Professor Dumbledore, he wants ya safe up here. But Frank and Alice, and Alastor, too, they’re friends of mine. I ain’t sure yet what’s t’ become of Alastor, but it’s beginning t’ look like Frank and Alice are as good as dead. Don’t get me wrong. I got a fondness for ya, and I’ll do what it takes t’ protect ya, but I got other friends, and there’s still a lot of Death Eaters out there. So you’ll excuse me if I’m having a bit of trouble understanding this blamed stubbornness of yers. Now, let’s go t’ lunch.”

Dumbledore was back at Hogwarts before the end of the afternoon classes. Hagrid stood outside Snape’s classroom as the last lesson of the day ended, with a message to come to Dumbledore’s office whenever convenient. Snape and Hagrid went up together.

It was something of a shock that Dumbledore looked so tired. He mo-

tioned them to sit, then poured mead, hesitating a moment with Snape's goblet still in his hand. "That's all right," Snape said, "I'll take it."

After a moment, Dumbledore began. "It is hard, very hard, to witness. Frank and Alice have no awareness of anything around them. Their eyes follow the light, they flinch slightly at loud noises, but that is all. The healers believe it to be a combination of physical damage and psychological trauma, so the long-term prognosis is not good. They may be institutionalized for the rest of their lives. Alastor is a little better than we originally feared. He has, indeed, lost one eye, but they may be able to save the other. They have apprehended Berengaria Folkenstone, and she has implicated two additional Death Eaters, Rudy Carstairs and Horatio Gamp. Severus?"

Snape's grip had tightened on his glass, sloshing some of the mead onto his hand. He set the goblet down and rose, walking over to the windows where he stood looking down at the lake.

"I take it," said Dumbledore quietly, "that these names are not unknown to you?"

"They took lessons from me."

"So we are two for two. Two attacks, both involving people you know."

"Headmaster, I don't know what to do."

Dumbledore didn't try to hide his concern. "Is there some criterion you could use to distinguish the potentially dangerous ones? The lessons, perhaps?"

"Those who took lessons were generally those who went out on raids, but the Lestranges and Crouch never took lessons. Neither did the Folkenstones. And most of those who did haven't been involved in any dangerous activity."

"So there is no benchmark you could use."

"None."

"Then we must defend ourselves as best we may. Crouch has ordered that any group involved in a roundup of former Death Eaters be prepared to use deadly force at the slightest hint of resistance."

"They can't do that. There are healers, and cooks, and supply personnel, and clerks."

"Give us the names of the inoffensive, then."

"The ones who never hurt anyone, who might otherwise escape them entirely? No."

"We are at an impasse, and each must look out for his own as he can."

Snape turned back to the window and the lake, while Dumbledore and Hagrid were silent. Minutes ticked by, but by this time the outcome was

inevitable, and Dumbledore was willing to wait as long as it took. Finally Snape returned his attention to the room. "Let them know I'll give them some of the names. But only the ones I think may still be dangerous. Only not in London. If I'm seen going into the Ministry again, and then roundups resume..."

"It shall be somewhere else. Not Hogwarts either. That would be traced back to you. Somewhere else." Dumbledore left the office to contact the Ministry.

The inquisitor was Gawain Robards, all business and practicality. The venue was a house in Newcastle, not normally a place for any kind of Ministerial or Death Eater activity. Snape apparated in with Dumbledore, and Robards with a clerk.

They sat at a table in a large kitchen, where Dumbledore brewed coffee for everyone. Snape and Robards sat opposite each other with the clerk at a nearby desk and Dumbledore standing behind Snape. The first thing was a piece of parchment with a statement for Snape to sign.

"What's this?" Snape asked.

"A standard statement that you are doing this of your own free will," Robards replied. "Just sign there."

"I'd like to read it first." Snape read for a moment, then looked up at Robards. "This says that since I agreed to give you information, once I start talking if I withhold anything, I'm liable for criminal penalties."

"I believe that's just standard language."

"Gawain..." Dumbledore warned.

Robards sighed. "I can reword it, but they want a statement. What about 'withhold information about a person I know to be dangerous'?"

"And add, 'who thereafter initiates violent action,'" suggested Dumbledore.

Between them, Robards and Dumbledore worked out language that would satisfy the aurors and yet be specific enough that Snape would be protected from arbitrary action, after which, having little other choice, Snape signed the paper.

"Now," said Robards, "in December, you gave us a list of names which I have here." He handed another piece of parchment to Snape. "All of the names on that list were of Death Eaters who were dead, had already been captured, or who have since been captured, the most important being the Lestranges and Crouch. They were also fairly high-ranking, what we would consider the inner circle. We're now looking for lower level operatives who

engaged in violent actions against the wizarding world or the muggle world. First, is there any name you feel that you left off the first list?"

Snape looked over the names. "No," he answered.

"Are you sure?" The hostile note was clear in Robard's voice. "What of Lucius Malfoy?"

Narcissa's husband. Snape glanced away, toward the window. "He became a Death Eater late, not until after his father died of dragon pox. I never had anything but social contact with him. I never heard of him going on raids. I think they recruited him for his money."

"Wasn't he involved in high level planning?"

"I wouldn't know. I didn't have that kind of access." Snape paused. "If you already know about him, why do you need me?"

"Just curious how you would respond." Robards then began the slow, careful search for names and data, trying to obtain as much detail as possible while Snape took his time with each person, trying to decide whether or not that one might be a threat. From time to time he had trouble remembering names, but adamantly refused to put his memories into a pensieve for fear that the 'innocent' might be revealed along with the 'guilty.' All four of them were exhausted and irritable when, several hours later, Robards packed up his papers and returned to London. He had a list of twenty-seven new names.

They had results by Friday. Dumbledore called Snape into his office and had him sit down. "Lemuel Lufkin and Dickon Varney are dead," he said quietly, pouring Snape a small glass of firewhisky.

Snape's eyes grew wide with shock. "What happened?" he whispered.

"There was a raid. They fought back. I hope it is a consolation to you to learn that inside the house were detailed plans for attacks on Mr. Crouch, the head of Law Enforcement, and on Judge Bones. The information you provided has foiled those plans, and both are being given extra protection. The aurors also found the names of seven more Death Eaters from the west of England that they are checking out." Dumbledore handed Snape the firewhisky. "You do not look pleased."

"I feel like a traitor." Snape looked at the drink, then quickly consumed half of it.

"How would you feel if the news I was giving you today was of the assassination of Judge Bones by people you knew?"

Snape thought about this for a moment. "I'd feel worse," he said at last.

"Then we may derive a measure of contentment knowing that we have been given the better of two evil situations."

"I suppose so."

"Stay here for a while, Severus. Think about all the things that might have happened. There is some good to be found in the thought that of all the bad choices we have, we made the one that was least bad."

It was a comfort, as Dumbledore said, for while Snape knew little about Mr. Crouch beyond his being Barty's father, Judge Bones had been kind. And Snape acknowledged that he would have been devastated to learn of her death knowing that he'd held the information that might have saved her. That was guilt that he'd been spared.

Much later, returning to the dungeons, Snape ran into Algie Colfax.

"Professor Snape," Algie called from beside the Slytherin wall. "I was wondering if I might have a word with you."

"What's on your mind, Algie."

"Next week's the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff game, and then in March we play Ravenclaw. Wanted to talk about it with you if you don't mind."

Snape invited the Quidditch team into his office rather than meeting in the common room. They all seemed a bit apologetic, as if they knew that Snape had other problems, bigger problems, to deal with.

Algie plunged right into Quidditch talk. "The thing is, the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw game was high-scoring. Can we score high against Ravenclaw, too?"

"You're going to have to explain this to me," Snape said. "I don't usually bother with Quidditch, and I haven't been thinking about it at all for a while."

"There are three rounds of play in which each team plays a game against one of the other teams. The team that wins the most games, wins the Quidditch Cup. If two teams win the same number of games, the team that accumulated the highest number of points wins the Cup. Right now, Slytherin and Gryffindor have won, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff have lost. But Gryffindor made one hundred twenty more points than Slytherin did, so in a way, they're ahead."

"Do we have a chance of beating Gryffindor?"

"Not really. They've had the best teams for years, and we've been at the bottom. We'd love to win, but a respectable year would be good, too. That game against Hufflepuff was our first win in more than two years. Even if we don't get anything else, we have that. We won a game, and it was a good game, too. Not a Seeker fluke."

Snape thought for a moment. "I know everyone hates Gryffindor for

being so overbearing and cocky about Quidditch, and we're the underdog. So now it's to our advantage to have exciting games, whether we win or lose."

"Come again, Professor?"

"Look, it wasn't planned, but I was 'sick' and our first game was canceled. So this year we play Gryffindor last, the final game of the season. Let's take a worst-case scenario. Let's say Gryffindor beats Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw beats us. We get down to that last game, we want the whole school to be cheering for us, not for Gryffindor. Doesn't it help you play if everyone is cheering for you?"

"Sure it does, but why would they want to?"

"Let's say Ravenclaw beats Hufflepuff. Hufflepuff would have no chance of winning, but they'd cheer the underdog, especially since our game against them was a good one with no hard feelings between the houses. Ravenclaw would cheer for us, especially if they scored high against us and Hufflepuff, because if we won, they'd be in contention for the Cup in a three-way draw."

"What if we beat Ravenclaw, Professor?"

"Then it would be straightforward us against Gryffindor for the winner, but we could still get the underdog support if we've played good, exciting games. Wouldn't you like to play well against Gryffindor, even if we don't win the Cup?" They nodded emphatically, and Snape continued. "In addition, the longer the game lasts, the more practice our team gets for next year. That won't affect Algie and Chris because they won't be here, but the rest of you are next year's team, too, if you all continue playing well."

The rest of the meeting was tactical on drawing the game out by scoring without catching the Snitch too soon. Ravenclaw had good Chasers and a weak Keeper, the opposite of Hufflepuff. Slytherin's Keeper was good. Now it was the Chasers who needed more work. The team went out to practice with a clearer idea of what they were working towards.

The question came up of what to do with Scrimgeour's classes, since Dark Arts could not be canceled for the rest of the year, especially for the fifth and seventh years who were preparing for OWLs and NEWTs. The only way it could be handled was to redo the master schedule.

First, the number of Dark Arts classes was cut in half by lumping two houses in the same hour, Slytherin with Ravenclaw, Gryffindor with Hufflepuff, and sixth together with seventh year. Then the classes were dealt out to the teachers, with the least experienced instructors getting the lowest level classes, and the more experienced the higher levels. Dumbledore himself took

the sixth and seventh years. Some of the other lessons in other courses were also merged to give the professors the time to take the new class.

Snape was not given a Dark Arts class because all his Potions classes already contained two houses, and they were all two-hour sessions. His classes were, in fact, the ones that the schedule had to accommodate since they were impossible to shift. Dumbledore did admit privately that the schedule alone was not the whole reason for Snape's being kept out of Dark Arts.

"What would the Ministry think, or worse — do, if I put you into Dark Arts when your relationship to the dark powers has been a bone of contention between us since the school year began? No, no, Severus. We give them no excuses to interfere."

With all his other problems and irritations, Snape actually found himself looking forward to the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch match.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 1982

Most of the week was clear and cold, but Saturday was overcast and therefore warmer. It was good Quidditch weather, since the players wouldn't have to worry about the glare from the sun as they flew. As it turned out, there would be other things to worry about. Snape had hardly walked into the Great Hall and sat down to breakfast when it hit him.

"Have you seen this?" McGonagall asked, laying a copy of *The Daily Prophet* on Snape's as yet empty plate. "Page three."

Snape opened the paper to page three and felt as if someone had punched him in the chest. There was an article on the efforts of the Ministry to round up the last of the Death Eaters, and his list of twenty-seven names was prominently displayed together with the names of all of those arrested since Halloween. Snape's own name was never mentioned, but several of the students in Slytherin house, a couple in Ravenclaw, and one girl in Hufflepuff had family members listed.

A glance around the hall showed that students at every table were reading a larger than usual number of *Prophets*.

"Does Professor Dumbledore know about this?" Snape asked McGonagall.

"He does. There isn't much we can do, however."

"We can protect our students."

"You'll have the biggest job," she responded. "You have more of them in your house than the others do."

Something in McGonagall's tone made Snape turn to look her in the face. "I hope we have the same understanding of who the likely victims are," he said.

Shouting from the entrance hall had every professor at the breakfast table up and heading out of the Great Hall. At this early hour on a Saturday morning, that meant Snape, McGonagall, Sprout, and Flitwick, since most of the other teachers stayed home on weekends, and the few left in the school were late risers.

A crowd of students was beginning to form in the entrance hall around a little group of boys. Three of them were Slytherins — Algie Colfax, Chris Tobin, and a third year named Richie Gamp. The other boys, five of them, were Gryffindors. All of them but Gamp had their wands out.

"What is the meaning of this!" McGonagall cried out in her most authoritarian voice. Algie and Chris put their wands away at once. "Peterson! Maddock! Explain yourselves!"

Peterson pointed at Gamp. "He's a Death Eater. It's in *The Prophet*. My cousin Oscar and his family had their house destroyed by Death Eaters and lost everything. He shouldn't be here at Hogwarts."

Snape had moved to the same side of the hall as his three students, watching warily now for what McGonagall, as deputy headmistress, would do.

"That is ridiculous, Peterson. *The Prophet* has not named Master Gamp. It may have listed someone with the same last name, but that is irrelevant. You are both students here, and you will obey the rules. There will be no fighting, no teasing, no harassment. Put your wand away."

Peterson didn't obey. Instead he pointed at Snape. "What about him. Tiberius's father says he's the biggest Death Eater still at large. How come he's teaching here?"

"Peterson!" snapped McGonagall. "You will close your mouth, put your wand away, and go to my office at once!"

"But it's true!" exclaimed Tiberius Diggle. "My uncle works in the Improper Use of Magic Office, and he says Professor Snape should be in Azkaban, but Professor Dumbledore is shielding him!"

Everything happened at once. McGonagall cried, "Silence!" as Peterson raised his wand at Snape and screamed, "*Stupefy!*" Unable to use a shield because of the crowd of students, Snape dove to his right, dodging the bolt of red light and rolling smoothly to a standing position, wand in hand, sending Peterson's wand into the air with a finely aimed, nonverbal Expelliarmus.

"Enough!" bellowed Dumbledore from the stairs, and the students in

front of him parted to let him through. "Miss Thackery, you will kindly bring me Master Peterson's wand. Master Peterson, you have attacked a Hogwarts teacher and are suspended from all classes and activities. Go to my office at once. We shall have to contact your parents about expelling you. Professor Snape, I hope you are not injured."

"No, sir. I'm fine."

"Good. The rest of you get in to breakfast. Heads, please sit with your houses. Attacks, wild accusations, teasing, none of this behavior will be tolerated. A Quidditch game is scheduled for this afternoon, but if the school is disrupted it may have to be canceled. Professor McGonagall, I shall be in conference with Master Peterson."

Hagrid arrived as the professors were shepherding the students into the Great Hall, trying to maintain a strict silence as witches and wizards from different houses brushed shoulders going through the great doors. Sprout filled Hagrid in on what had happened, and the groundskeeper found himself nearly alone at the high table because the heads were with their houses. Hagrid didn't want to join any particular house for fear of appearing to take sides.

One thing that Snape noticed immediately was that his own students were watching him closely. At first he wondered if they were afraid of him, then slowly realized that their faces reflected a mixture of awe and pride. Algie looked positively proprietorial, as if he'd been trying for ages to convince the others that their head of house was more than just a bookish potions brewer. *O Lord, now they think I can fight. They'd better not ask for lessons.*

Dumbledore returned in about forty minutes, followed by an obviously contrite Peterson, who went to join his friends at the Gryffindor table. Beckoning to the heads of houses, Dumbledore informed them quietly that Master Peterson was suspended from classes for a week and on detention until after the Easter break. "I hope this is sufficient, Professor Snape. I am certain that Professor McGonagall will find appropriate work for the young man."

"I certainly will! Behaving like that, and in front of the whole school!"

A spark of mischief rose in Snape, a reaction to the tension of the morning perhaps. "Foolish child. If he'd attacked me in private, it would have been acceptable. When will they learn?"

McGonagall spun on him. "Now listen to me, youngster!" she began, then caught the tilt of his head and the glint in his eyes and began to laugh. "You got me there, Professor. Dear, dear, you did." The rest of the school saw them at ease with each other and relaxed as well.

Dumbledore stepped onto the dais and addressed the assembled school. “All students will, after breakfast, return to their common rooms to discuss the proper way to deal with the difficulties we face as a school over the next few weeks and months. I know that all of you realize that we as a community must work together to keep Hogwarts a place of safety and of dedication to the future that we all will share. Your maturity, your wisdom, will carry us through rough places. I am sure that enough progress will have been made before the lunch hour that we shall be able to devote the afternoon to the friendly competition of a well-played Quidditch game. I hope to see you all there.”

The meeting in the Slytherin common room didn’t start well. The majority of the students carefully avoided the group of Death Eater children. When Snape entered the common room, their attitude was more ambivalent, as if they wanted to be able to trust him, but weren’t sure if they could.

There are things I can tell them, and things I can’t. Help me distinguish which is which and say the right things. But I can’t hide things — they all know what’s been going on.

Marlene Kingsford stepped forward. “The first thing we want to know, sir, is — is it true? Are you a Death Eater?”

It was a question that had to be answered. “I was.” It was an answer that raised more questions.

“Why?”

“Marlie, do you remember when you were in third year that I had to leave school for a while? It was in the autumn term. Do you remember why?”

“Yes,” Marlie said, and Chris added, “Your grandmother was killed. They burned her house down with her in it. Muggles. We were all talking about it.” The majority of the students looked shocked, but the fifth, sixth, and seventh years nodded. They all had some memory of the occasion.

“I was afraid. I believed muggles were instituting witch hunts again, and I believed that . . . You-Know-Who was the only one who could help. So I became a Death Eater. It was three years before I found out that You-Know-Who had ordered the attack, putting muggles under Imperius curses, to trick me, to recruit me. By then it was too late.”

“Why did they want you?” asked a fourth year girl.

Algie spoke up. “Do you know what we used to call him? Cursemaster. Any curse, any hex, any jinx, any potion you wanted, he could do it.”

“Did you ever kill anyone?”

Snape didn’t look for the questioner. “No. I worked in a potions room. I

watched people die, though. I watched him kill people. By the time it ended, most of us were more afraid of him than anything. Now he's gone, we just want to stay away from trouble."

"Why aren't you in prison if they know this?"

"I work for Dumbledore. I told you, he takes care of his own. You're his, too. He'll take care of you if you give him a chance."

After that, others whose family members had been Death Eaters, but whose names had not been in *The Prophet*, also came forward. Some of them were from families Snape had not known were servants of the Dark Lord. Fortunately, not a single one came from an important Death Eater family, and most of their families had long since been disillusioned. At one point a debate started as to the relative worth of blood status, but then Snape mentioned that he himself was a half-blood, and the discussion was halted. The general consensus of Slytherin house boiled down to five points:

First, the Dark Lord was gone, and whether your family had followed, opposed, or been neutral, the question was now moot and, in any case, a problem for the older generation.

Second, there were more Death Eater families represented in Slytherin house than in the others, and there was therefore some actual logic to their house being targeted for reprisal more than the others. The students resolved to check with Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff to be sure the other students named in *The Prophet* were not being harassed, but otherwise to treat each incident as separate and unique, to be dealt with on a case by case basis.

Third, any future harassment was to be responded to in defensive mode only, and to be reported as quickly as possible to a staff member. Offensive or retaliatory strikes were counterproductive. In order to reduce the number of incidents, each Death Eater student was to have a constant bodyguard of non-Death Eater housemates so that the targeted students would never have to face harassment alone.

Fourth, any statement made in the common room as a committee of the whole was to be regarded as confidential, and never to be revealed to anyone outside the common room, as long as it did not involve criminal activity.

Fifth, Dumbledore was to be given the opportunity to show that he protected his own, and Slytherin students were at all times to show the utmost respect for the Headmaster and his directives so as not to jeopardize the relationship.

Leadership had been taken by the non-Death Eater upper classes of Slytherin house, the sixth and seventh years, and Severus was immensely im-

pressed at the seriousness with which the whole house debated the issues and reached resolutions. It occurred to him that these students had been living together for years knowing who was 'dark' and who was not, and that what they were doing now was bringing into the open a system of mutual coexistence that they'd been practicing ever since they entered Hogwarts.

It was with great pride that Snape made his report to Dumbledore and the other heads on the discussions in the Slytherin common room.

Flitwick and Sprout also reported relatively serious debate in their houses. A most encouraging sign was that the two houses had decided that their reported Death Eaters were their Death Eaters, and that no other house was to be allowed to touch them. Ravenclaw's business was Ravenclaw's business, and Gryffindor had better keep its nose out.

McGonagall's report was of a far more emotional meeting. Plea after plea for logical, rational debate was met with anecdotal challenges of relatives who'd suffered, and calls for justice on a higher plane that had nothing to do with practicality or the general well-being. Every time a general resolution was passed, someone would announce with an almost religious fervor that it might be well and good for the house as a whole, "but if you think I'm going to sit quietly by and not get the people who hurt my aunt Susan, you are sorely mistaken." The degree of insistence on the absolute moral right of individual action was discouraging.

Snape, Sprout, and Flitwick mutually agreed that they were very lucky that all the crazy students got funneled to McGonagall.

It was determined that due to the maturity shown by the student body of Hogwarts as a whole, the Quidditch game between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff would take place as scheduled. The school was informed at lunch to tumultuous cheers, and by one o'clock long lines of students were wending their way down the hill to the Quidditch pitch and their house stands.

Members of the staff who usually weekendend away from the school were apparating into Hogsmeade for the game as well, and Severus was heartily greeted by Kettleburn, and exchanged greetings with Futhark and Vector as well. The centers of attention, of course, were McGonagall and Sprout, and though the staff had agreed to show solidarity by sitting all together in the same booth, Flitwick and Snape were careful to sit between McGonagall and Sprout, just in case tempers might flare.

Dumbledore accompanied Madam Hooch to the pitch, then waved cheerfully at the assembled students and took his place. Madam Hooch gave what

was becoming her classic “I want a good, clean game” speech, and the two teams were off the ground and fighting.

It was disappointingly quick. Gryffindor pushed past Hufflepuff’s sterling defense only once to score ten points. Then there was a defensive battle for all of fifteen minutes before the Hufflepuff Seeker spied the Snitch and went into a nosedive. And then it was over. Hufflepuff emerged victorious over Gryffindor, 150 to 10.

Happier by far than the Gryffindor players were the Slytherin and Ravenclaw teams, for not only had Gryffindor lost, their massive point lead had been slashed to modest proportions by their modest score. It was anyone’s Cup.

As students poured onto the field to congratulate or commiserate with the players, Dumbledore approached the heads of houses. “No urgency,” he said, “but when you are back in the castle, could you all come up to my office?”

That, naturally, injected precisely a note of urgency into the whole proceeding, and the four heads tried to urge the students up the hill as quickly as possible, leaving in Hagrid’s hands the question of order in the entrance hall as the four of them made their way upstairs.

“So pleasant we could all get together,” Dumbledore said as he passed around mead, wine, and firewhisky. The words “Sit, Severus, I have a new brandy I’d like you to try...” were a clue that whatever it was had to do with Professor Snape, and the other three relaxed a bit. Still, an afternoon summons and glasses of spirits boded no good for any of them.

“I wanted to let you know,” said Dumbledore as they settled into chairs with goblets in their hands, “that your classes will be a bit smaller on Monday.”

“Smaller?” McGonagall exclaimed. “Whatever for?”

“We have,” continued Dumbledore calmly, “a few families who have expressed a desire to have their children educated elsewhere. The students in question will be departing this evening or tomorrow, and will therefore not be in your Monday classes or any classes thereafter.”

McGonagall was once again the spokesperson for all of them. “Pulling out in February? Why would they pull the children out in February?” They all knew the answer, but somehow it seemed right to make Dumbledore say it.

Dumbledore hesitated. “It seems . . . Well, to put it in a nutshell, they do

not want their children taught by a former Death Eater, and Potions is a required course.”

“How many?” asked Flitwick.

“Eleven from Gryffindor, five from Ravenclaw, and two from Hufflepuff. None from Slytherin so far.”

Snape, having begun to shut down from the moment Dumbledore offered him a brandy, was now completely closed, his eyes distant and cold. “Would you like me to resign, sir?” he said.

“You forget. That is not an option.” Dumbledore looked over at the three other professors. “It is a type of probation imposed by the Ministry. Severus must remain here under my authority.”

“How small do you think the school will get?” McGonagall asked.

“Word has gotten out very quickly since this morning. Two of the students in question have already approached me and asked if I might intercede with their parents to allow them to stay at Hogwarts, so I do not think they were motivated by a desire to get out of school.”

“They want me fired,” said Snape dully.

“I shall admit, that was the initial request made by all the parents. I was instructed to get you out of the school. I informed them that I had the utmost confidence in you, and that under no circumstances would I ask you to leave. That was when they told me they were withdrawing their children.”

“Well, there it is,” Sprout said. “This is all very recent news, and people are overreacting. When they all find out that Hogwarts can’t be swayed by their prejudices, they’ll back down and send the children here again. We just have to give them time for all this to sink in and be digested.”

“Pomona’s right,” chimed in Flitwick. “Something unexpected comes up and they respond without thinking. It will sort itself out given a little time. Like the Slytherin parents.”

“What do you mean?” Snape was suspicious and defensive.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Flitwick answered, “but haven’t the Slytherin students known from the beginning of last term that there was a Death Eater on staff? Even before You-Know-Who fell, and you might really have been dangerous? I mean, we were all wondering about you and what you’d been doing for three years, but some of them knew for certain.”

“I am curious,” said Dumbledore. “What made you wonder?”

McGonagall raised her chin and glared at the headmaster in defiance. “You can’t honestly think we’re such dunderheads as that, Albus. You bring in a child to teach, a boy who tells us he’s had no regular employment since

he graduated, and yet he's clearly had the experience of setting up a large potions workshop and has been 'tutoring' people older than himself, and who comes close to panicking at the thought of an auror on staff... What were we to think? And then the other things."

"Such as?"

"He saw the thestrals and it surprised him, so he's watched people die since he graduated. He collapsed at the news that You-Know-Who was destroyed. You think you're so devious, Albus, but really it was as clear as the nose on your face that Severus was a Death Eater, even before they arrested him in December."

McGonagall's words flowed around Snape like water around the pilings of a bridge, hardly affecting him at all for, locked down as tightly as he was, they couldn't reach the inner core of feeling. Nothing could. He watched her as calmly as if he were watching a performance, then turned to Dumbledore, whose duty it was to respond.

"I am properly contrite, Minerva," said Dumbledore. "I am not as clever as I thought I was. We may then accept as probable that there will be no defections from Slytherin house because this is not news to them. A few of those leaving may change their minds and return. Others may ask to leave as word leaks out. It is a mutable situation. Well! Now that you know the worst, what do you all say to supper? The elves should be laying out the meal shortly, and I for one am famished. Severus, would you walk with me, please? I wanted to ask you about the situation in Poland, and I have only recently discovered that people are playing with these strange little cubes, nine faces to a side..."

The majority of the student body, released earlier than expected by the quick end to the Quidditch game, was already in the Great Hall when Dumbledore and the professors arrived. At once, the glances and whispers began. Dumbledore laid his right hand on Snape's right shoulder, seeming engrossed in their conversation, his encircling arm guaranteeing protection, both psychological and physical as the staff made their way to the high table.

Snape could tell immediately which were the students who were leaving. All of them seemed either downcast or angry, and were surrounded by commiserating housemates. It suddenly occurred to him that among the nearly three hundred students, there must be a few who were naturally skilled in legilimency. *I can't let them see how much this situation affects me, how much it hurts. They can't see.* And he left his defenses up, as strong as he could make them.

The professors chatted amicably during dinner, and as the meal was ending, Flitwick suggested a game of cribbage in the Hall. Snape didn't want to stay there, under the eyes of the whole school like a fish in a tank, but he realized what Flitwick was trying to do and stayed long enough for two games, by which time most of the students had filtered out of the Hall for the library or their dormitories, it still being far too cold to go strolling outside at night.

McGonagall suggested the staffroom for the teachers, but Snape offered his excuses, saying he was tired and preferred to rest a bit before he had to make his rounds. They wished him a pleasant night.

"I see what you meant about him," said Sprout as she accepted another butterbeer from the staffroom stores. "It gave me the shivers just looking at him. I had no idea his eyes were so dark, like pieces of jet. And nothing behind them, nothing at all."

McGonagall had an 'I-told-you-so' smirk on her face. "Now, my dear, you just imagine standing out there with the first years preparing for sorting and seeing those identical eyes on an eleven-year-old only about this tall. Shifty little boy who never would look anybody in the face. I wouldn't be surprised if all this butter-wouldn't-melt-in-my-mouth politeness wasn't just an act, and the real Severus Snape was reappearing. Tonight was more the way I remember him from school."

"I don't know, Minerva," Flitwick mused, "he's been through a lot in the last few months. It would put a strain on anyone."

"On probation, Albus said. The Ministry wouldn't do that unless there was something he was guilty of. Now that we know he was one of them, I won't feel comfortable until I have some answers. Like what was he teaching to people older than himself? Not potions. Curses, probably, or dark magic. And who did he watch die? How many? Under what circumstances? And why did he come to Hogwarts looking for a teaching position before You-Know-Who died? Answer me that one! His presence here was for some dark purpose."

Sprout was thoughtful. "He did react rather strongly to news of You-Know-Who's death. You don't usually have a nervous breakdown over the death of someone you hate and fear."

"Nervous breakdown! Rumor says he tried to kill himself."

"Maybe that's nothing more than a rumor," said Flitwick. "Maybe he was distraught over the death of the Potters."

"Come now, Filius! He hated James Potter. I wouldn't be surprised to

learn he was pleased at Potter's death. I'll bet he collapsed because he knew the jig was up, he knew he'd be called to account. He was sent to Hogwarts for no good, and he was about to be arrested and tried, and he couldn't face it."

"Be logical, Minerva. If he's really that bad, why is Albus going to such lengths to take care of him?" Flitwick sat back in his chair with the air of a man who'd just scotched an opponent.

McGonagall glared at Flitwick as she paused to think. "I don't know," she said finally. "He never showed any fondness for Master Snape while he was a student. The boy never visited Hogwarts after he graduated. If Trelawney's telling the truth, he showed up over two years ago looking for a job and was tossed on his ear for eavesdropping. That was probably on You-Know-Who's orders, too. Then last year he's sent back to try again, and Albus gives him everything he wants. It's a mystery."

"It's ten o'clock," said Sprout. "Time to see the children are all in bed." The three professors wished each other good night and left for their rounds and a good night's sleep.

Snape rested that evening by sitting in front of a small fire staring at the flames until it was time to make his rounds. As much as possible, he emptied his mind by forcing unwanted thoughts down into the sealed areas of his brain. Red, yellow, orange, and blue danced before his eyes, and he let it mesmerize him, the semiconscious state being at the moment preferable to most others.

At ten o'clock, Snape rose and left the dungeon for his outside rounds. It was still bitterly cold at night, one of the coldest winters on record. He paused at the cliff edge to look down at the lake, but had no intention of going down. It did remind him of his dream the month before, and the admonition not to stop fighting.

It would be so much easier if I knew where it would end, but it seems it's never going to end. Just when I've gotten through one trial, a new one rises up and the battle goes on. I don't know if I have enough strength to keep fighting. I'm just so tired and it's all so discouraging.

Sunday brought empty seats at the Gryffindor table, Peterson among the missing. "Too bad none of their Quidditch players are going," said Algie when Snape paused by the Slytherin table on his way out of the Hall.

"What are you planning?"

"Well, Professor, whoever wins the next one is at least neck and neck with Gryffindor, and maybe even way ahead depending on the score. If we

win, then Ravenclaw's out of the running, and Hufflepuff's only hope is a tremendously high scoring win against Ravenclaw plus a Gryffindor win against us. But if we win the last game, it's us all alone in first place with the Cup. If we lose, it could be a three-way point decision for the Cup. On the other hand, if Ravenclaw wins, it'll be a point decision between whoever wins the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff game and whoever wins our game against Gryffindor. So we have to work on scoring and scoring high. A quick, low-scoring Seeker win could scuttle our Cup chances."

"So it's a Chasers' game?"

"If we can do it. Problem is, they're good on offense, and we're good on defense. It's going to be hard for us to rack up the points."

"Won't they be trying for a high-scoring game as well?"

"That's right, sir," Algie grinned. "At least we shouldn't have to worry about a fluke Seeker win fifteen minutes into the game. Ravenclaw needs the points, too."

Snape spent most of the day alone in his rooms. There really wasn't anything to do there, but he wanted primarily to avoid people's eyes. He hadn't been able to leave Hogwarts since Halloween except for the trips to the Ministry for interrogation, arraignment, and trial, and he was beginning to hate the castle intensely. It might not have been so bad if he could spend more time outside, but it was too cold. He looked through his books and noticed the cookbooks he'd bought when the world still seemed good—they held no interest for him now. Finally, Snape lay down on the bed facing the wall, locked inside himself, trying to think of absolutely nothing. After a while, he slept.

Dumbledore left early in the afternoon to visit Moody and the Longbottoms in the hospital. He returned around supper time and went to his office to meditate.

McGonagall cornered Hagrid at supper. "How well did you know Professor Snape when he was a student here?"

"'Bout as well as most, which is t' say not well at all. Has he been in the Hall today, had somewhat t' eat?"

"I saw him earlier, he was fine."

"Was he eating?"

"I believe so. Now, tell me what you know."

"Ain't much to tell. Quiet boy, but deep. Calm on the surface, but a lot going on underneath. Never liked to give hisself away, that one."

"I don't recall his having many friends."

"He weren't the type. Didn't have the knack. I never knew of any but the one . . . Well, that's not my business. His feeding now, that were my business 'cause he weren't never in the best of health — nervous and all. Are you sure he was eating?"

McGonagall assured Hagrid that she'd seen Professor Snape consume food earlier that day, and then Hagrid returned to his hut for the evening, leaving McGonagall dissatisfied with the paucity of information she'd received and wondering who 'the one' was that Hagrid had mentioned.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 1982

Snape dragged himself out of bed shortly before seven o'clock on Monday morning, not wanting to face the day but seeing no way out of it. Throwing on his robes and not bothering even to run a comb through his hair, he slouched to the Great Hall. There he found the one thing powerful enough to lure him so far from his own rooms that day — coffee. He poured a cup and returned to the dungeons, just managing to avoid Hagrid, who came into the castle a moment later.

"Professor Snape been to breakfast yet?" Hagrid asked Flitwick.

"He was just here. Came in and left right away, I imagine."

"Did he eat?"

"I think he took a plate back with him. He may be working on something."

Hagrid grunted and sat down to his own breakfast, reasonably content that his charge was obeying the rules.

The first morning class was hell. Three Gryffindor students had departed over the weekend, and the cauldron groups had to be rearranged, with one student lacking a partner. The Gryffindors as a whole glared and muttered at Snape, too low for him to chastise them as they mixed their potions, but too loud to completely ignore. He was certain that everything they did wrong was done on purpose to stretch his patience to the breaking point. *They're hoping I'll strike one of them so they can get me fired.*

"Don't tell me you didn't burn something in this cauldron. I smell smoke. I see soot. You may think I'm an idiot, but this idiot determines your grade."

"What possible resemblance could you see between Iceland moss and centipede scales? Perhaps that *Centraria Islandica* begins with the same three letters? Because I assure you, the resemblance stops there."

“Put that damned wand down and read the instructions! You do know how to read?”

Then, in the second class, a fourth year Ravenclaw student poured octopus ink into yak bile, a combination they were taught to avoid in second year. No one reacted as putrid green smoke billowed through the classroom, until Snape slammed a Potions text against a desk with a resounding thud that caused students on the far side of the room to cover their ears and yelled, “Everyone with at least half a brain into the corridor! The rest of you can stay and raise the average intelligence of the class!”

They poured out of the room then, while Snape battled the fumes, ending up with a clean classroom and a hacking cough that continued for three weeks. “And what did you do to get into Ravenclaw,” he asked the offender, “bribe the Hat?”

Hagrid came by as the class was ending, sniffing the air with a sensitive nose. “Go away!” Snape snapped. “This is none of your business!”

“I weren’t going t’ say nothing about the class. I’m here on official business seeing as I can’t find no one’s seen ya eat nothing since breakfast yesterday.”

“Leave me alone!”

“I hear the grub in Azkaban is right tasty. Maybe ya should be eating it.”

“Maybe I should! It would be an improvement!”

Hagrid grew suddenly timid. “Ya ought not t’ let the house-elves hear ya say that. They can be a mite sensitive . . .”

“Bugger the house-elves!” And Snape stomped off down the corridor to his office, slamming the door behind him.

There was blessed silence for all of fifteen minutes, and then Hagrid lifted the door off its hinges. He’d brought a plate of food from the Great Hall which he placed on Snape’s desk before he turned to fix the door. “You eat at least half of that, now,” he said.

“Why? What’s the point? What good will it do?”

“It might keep ya from giving up out of sheer weakness.”

“And how is that a good thing! Did it ever occur to you how much happier I’d be now if I’d given up two months ago?”

“I ain’t having the selfsame argument with ya every few weeks! Ya got any idea how boring that is?”

“Then why do you do it, you big oaf?”

“‘Cause strange as it seems I might happen t’ like you!”

"Well that just goes to show how much of an idiot you are, doesn't it!"
Snape shouted at Hagrid.

"An' you ain't talking me out of it while y're sick."

"I'm not sick!"

"Now you sit down..."

"Get out of..."

"... and eat your lunch."

"... my office!"

"PUT THAT DOWN!"

Glass shattered against the inside of the door as Snape flung a jar at Hagrid, who sidestepped neatly. Another jar followed, and a beaker, shards of glass flying as each hit, though it was clear that the door rather than Hagrid was now the target. Hagrid watched calmly as item after item was sacrificed to the storm, interfering at last only when Snape turned to the desk to seize and throw the plate of food.

"No. No, lad. Give me that. Y're eating that, not throwing it."

Snape attacked Hagrid then, his fists doing no damage whatsoever, though after a moment Hagrid held his wrists to keep the younger man from hurting himself while Snape kicked and struggled. When he began to weaken, Hagrid steered him to the desk and sat him down in the chair. Snape laid his head on the desk, cushioned on his arms, panting from the exertion.

"Feel better?" Hagrid asked.

"I hate you."

"That's a step in the right direction. Now eat yer lunch."

Snape sat up and stared at the food for the space of several heartbeats. "I don't know why you waste your time on me when I treat you so badly," he said at last.

"I been watching this coming for some time. Ya were gonna blow. Better against me than against Professor McGonagall or a student 'cause ya can't hurt me."

Picking up the fork, Snape began to play with the food. When he finally put some of it into his mouth, Hagrid sat in one of the chairs and leaned back against the counter. "I don't think this is ever going to stop," Snape said. "It just keeps getting worse and worse."

"Ya been through bad times before. Ya got to weather it."

"But always before when things got bad I could at least say there was still

something good and clean in the world. Something untouched by trouble. I can't do that anymore. She's gone. It's a cold, dark world, Hagrid."

"Thought she told ya not to stop fighting."

"Do you think that really was her?"

"Don' know. Tell me, what's the worst thing that's happening right now."

"The students. I hate the students. They're all out to make me miserable. They want me fired. I'd leave if I had anywhere to go."

"D' ya hate all of them?"

"Every single one."

"Colfax?"

"Algie? Well, no. Not Algie. He's pretty decent, and besides, he's wrapped up in Quidditch."

"What about the other Slytherin students?"

"On the whole, they're a good group."

"Any Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws that just mind their own business and do their work?"

"You're right. It isn't all the students. It just feels like all the students."

"Yer problem is, ya got t' get out of here for a bit. I'm goin' t' ask Professor Dumbledore t' cancel yer classes for the afternoon, and me and you 're going somewhere."

"Where?"

"You think about it."

Hagrid left, and In the short time it took for him to return, Snape had changed into more muggle-friendly attire, but reality had also raised its ugly head. "I can't go anywhere," Snape said. when Hagrid walked into the office.

"Why not?"

"The moment I set foot outside Hogwarts, the Ministry types will be after me."

"Doubt it. I'm acting in the capacity of what ya might call a bodyguard. Ain't nobody going t' interfere. Now, where do ya want t' go?"

"I can't. I was warned not to leave Hogwarts. They'll come for me. They'll say I did something wrong while I was outside, and they'll come..." He was locking down again as his sense of danger rose.

Hagrid gripped Snape's arms and peered into his eyes. "Don't do that, lad. Don't shut everyone out. We won't go anywhere, and you just open up again."

"You can't read me."

"Don't have to. I can see the look on yer face. We won't leave Hogwarts, but we'll get out of this castle. Come on down to my place where it's friendlier like."

Snape bundled himself in a warm, hooded cloak and, after checking the door to be sure Hagrid had replaced it properly, went with him into the cold, white world outside. Snow hadn't fallen for a while, but it lay heavily around them, and the cold was like a vise clamping Snape's head. It was good that Hagrid's hut wasn't far. "It wasn't this cold Saturday for the Quidditch match," he commented.

"I suspect Professor Dumbledore had somewhat t' do with that," replied Hagrid, ushering Snape into the hut and then poking at the fire, laying on more wood and getting it blazing. "Yer rooms are mighty cold, too, ya know."

"I'm used to it."

"I think it's a drain, ya know, physically, t' have t' fight the cold when y're feeling poorly. A lot of what ails a man's brain comes from not taking care of the body. Ya ought t' have a good fire in there, and eat proper, and take care of yer appearance..."

That got a derisive snort from Snape. "Me? Appearance? I thought you were supposed to cheer me up."

"You ain't bad looking. Got an interesting face. Roman nose."

"Roman! Don't mock the afflicted. And my poor little head trembling under the weight of it."

Hagrid forged ahead. "Y're not tall, but y're not that short, and y're what they call slender..."

"Skinny. Look at me. Face and hair from my mother, nose and chin from my father, stature and teeth from poor nutrition — the worst of all possible worlds."

"Ever thought of cutting yer hair?"

A trace of sadness flitted across Snape's face. "No. Not now, for certain."

"I give up. Here, make yerself useful." Hagrid pulled out a huge tub of peas. "Help me shell these. The thestrals love the pods. I chop 'em up for winter feed."

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, shelling the peas. The simple, domestic task had a calming effect, and Snape felt some of the locks unfastening, the doors opening, releasing memories that hadn't surfaced in more than a year, overshadowed in recent months by more urgent things. Voices that reflected and expressed his feelings better than he ever could. *Everywhere*

people stare, each and every day. I can see them laugh at me . . . How can I even try? I can never win. Hearing them — seeing them — in the state I'm in . . . Why do the people I care about have to die?

Hagrid was talking about thestrals and their winter habits, and Snape was listening, at least with half his mind. The other half was free floating, sorting through the mystery of sudden, unexpected death — of cars in ditches, strokes and heart attacks, burning buildings, guns on city streets, and curses on the lips of madmen. *Here I stand, head in hand, turn my face to the wall. If she's gone, I can't go on . . . But I have to go on. That's what she told me. It is a consummation devoutly to be wished, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.*

The meditation did not, could not, ease the bitterness, but it gave Snape order, context, and lifted some of the depression. As Hagrid's soothing voice flowed around him, Snape began to feel he could go on, could face his enemies and detractors and show them he wasn't cowed. Maybe he could never win, but he would give them a fight for their money.

In sudden shock and realization, Snape looked at the pea pod in his hands. "Hagrid," he asked, "how do you get fresh peas in February?"

Peas in February were a trade secret, one that Hagrid steadfastly refused to divulge. "Y're feeling a bit more chipper, though," he said. "Didn't really have t' do anything, just get out of those stone walls."

The two trudged back up the hill shortly before supper, and Hagrid sent Snape to his rooms to tidy up before coming to the Hall. Hagrid went directly into the Hall, which was still mostly empty, the tables not yet laid for the meal. Dumbledore was already at the high table, waiting.

"How is he doing?" Dumbledore asked, "And where did you go?"

"No place. He got the heebie jeebies again and wouldn't leave the grounds. I meet that Scrimgeour fellow in Knockturn Alley, and I'm goin' t' spread him all over the walls. All my hard work falling to pieces. We went t' my place and shelled peas for the thestrals."

"A total change of atmosphere and occupation in an accepting environment. It might have done him good. What did you talk about?"

"I talked about thestrals. He didn't hardly do no talking at all. Didn't seem to be half listening. I sort o' got the feeling he was thinking things through. Kind o' melancholy, but not so brittle, if ya know what I mean."

"Open or closed?"

"Fair open, I think. I could see a ways past his eyes, bit like a normal person for once and . . ." McGonagall came into the Hall and to her seat next to Dumbledore, effectively changing the conversation.

A few minutes later Snape came into the Hall as well, looking much neater and more presentable than he had that morning. He spoke to several of the Slytherin students, ignored the looks from the other houses, and greeted his fellow teachers at the high table, paying particular attention to McGonagall.

"Excuse me, Professor, but are you by any chance going off grounds this evening? Maybe to town?"

"If by 'town' you mean London, no, I'm not. I'm going home to my family. But I'll be in a town if that can help you."

"Perhaps. The larger towns have bookstores open into the evening. I'd like to get a book, but I wouldn't want you to go out of your way."

"And what book would that be?"

"The complete works of William Shakespeare. I imagine it's kind of a standard thing that most book shops carry. It doesn't have to be anything fancy." Snape pulled a twenty-pound note from a pocket. "It wouldn't cost this much, I don't think"

McGonagall scrutinized the note. "Muggle money? How quaint. Well, if I'm near a shop, I'll check."

"Thank you."

The rest of the evening was peaceful. The students went off to the library or their dormitories, the commuting teachers left for home, and the onsite staff retired to the staffroom, where Flitwick eagerly requested — almost demanded — a game of cribbage.

"I think I've created a monster," Snape told him as he went to his own rooms for the board and cards. They played several games, after which Snape suggested leaving the board in the staffroom, which Flitwick considered an excellent idea.

Back in his own rooms for the rest of the evening, Snape first lit a fire in the fireplace and opened the door to his bedroom so that the heat could penetrate there as well. *Hagrid's right. It's one thing to forego a fire on a chilly night, and totally different when it gets this cold. I'm just helping defeat myself.*

He rearranged the furniture in the bedroom as well, placing the bed with the headboard against the wall and extending into the room. It was awkward for moving around the room, but at least when he lay on his side he wouldn't be staring at a wall. *They're not going to crush me. I won't let them beat me down. I'm going to fight.*

At ten he made his usual rounds, taking his time, and just before eleven he contrived to be outside under the moon and the stars. A voice, low but

carrying in the cold, dry air, called his name. “Severus, are you waiting for me?” It was McGonagall, wrapped in a heavy cloak, coming up the hill from her weekly evening off.

“Should I be?” Snape asked.

It was the third day of the full moon, and there was plenty of light to see the little package that McGonagall held out to him. “I believe so,” she said. “It was most interesting, seeing the inside of a muggle shop and counting muggle money. Here’s what’s left.”

Snape thanked her profusely, took the money and the book, and hurried to his rooms. He already knew where he was going to start. He opened the book to Act I, Scene I of *Hamlet*.

It was hard reading, as Snape struggled through the archaic language trying to decipher the meanings of words like ‘moiety,’ ‘joint-labourer,’ and ‘romage.’ *I thought I was reasonably intelligent, but I’ll need a dictionary to read this play.* Then he came to Hamlet’s first soliloquy.

“O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d his canon ’gainst self-slaughter . . . How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world . . . ’tis an unweeded garden that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature possess it merely. That it should come to this . . . It is not, nor it cannot come to good; but break, my heart — for I must hold my tongue!”

Weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable, and he wants to die — that’s exactly how I feel right now. The world seems so empty and ugly. And I can’t say what I want to say, even if my heart is breaking . . . How does this man who lived four hundred years ago know what I’m feeling right now?

Even though it was quite late, Snape continued until the end of the first act, where he made another discovery. *This is a murder mystery! Is that really his father’s ghost? Was his father really murdered by his uncle?* It was late, and Snape had to go to bed to be able to teach his classes the next day, but he now had something to pull his thoughts out of black depression — a murder mystery with a character who understood how he felt.

The next morning, Snape took his book to breakfast, where he reread Act I. This was important, since in a murder mystery you needed to catch all the clues, and the language was so hard to understand. That was when he began to notice other things, the first being that people didn’t seem to trust Hamlet. Polonius thought Hamlet was trying to seduce his daughter Ophelia, and so did her brother Laertes. And Hamlet talked too much, a strange, almost babbling way of talking when he was trying to hide something. *Is it possible*

that he's crazy, and there isn't really a ghost? The others saw it too, but it didn't talk to them. What if Hamlet goes after his uncle, but the uncle is really innocent?

Potions classes were as bad as ever, and Snape had to snap at and admonish students in every session, but he felt no desire to strike anyone because somehow his priorities had shifted and the students had diminished in importance. The material was important, student understanding and performance were important, but their opinions were not. They irritated him, but not enough to wake the demon, and during the whole morning his voice never rose above a conversational tone.

At lunch he was once again deep into the mystery of Hamlet. *Is he really going crazy, or just pretending? And what kind of father is Polonius, to send spies to check on his son?* Then, suddenly, another line touched Severus.

"Denmark's a prison.

Then is the world one.

A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' the worst.

We think not so, my lord.

Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so; to me it is a prison."

All I have to do is substitute Hogwarts for Denmark, and I could say the same thing.

Then, Hamlet's plan — to have the players reenact the murder described by the ghost and watch his uncle's reaction. *Now maybe we'll find out if Claudius is really a murderer!*

"I take it," Dumbledore said to McGonagall, "that you got him the book he asked for?"

"It turned out to be quite easy. The girl in the shop knew exactly what it was and got it for me in a minute. I don't think I was five minutes in the shop."

"It certainly seems to be doing good. It has taken him completely out of himself. Such a complete transformation in twenty-four hours! I wonder which one he is reading."

"You could ask."

"Not yet. I do not wish to disturb the process by making him aware that he is being observed. Much better if he considers it a completely private experience. Maybe in a day or two."

Then of course, at supper, Snape hit the speech, Dumbledore's speech, the 'sleep of death' speech. 'Conscience does make cowards of us all. Dread makes

us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of.' *I can bear Hogwarts. It's that undiscovered country, the aurors and Azkaban, that keeps me a prisoner here.* It was by no means a new thought. He'd understood that since the day of his trial, but miraculously Shakespeare understood it, too. Understood it and expressed it in words far better than Snape's own.

Momentarily abandoning Hamlet, Snape skimmed the sonnets and found one — his sonnet: "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, I all alone beweep my outcast state, and trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries, and look upon myself, and curse my fate . . . Haply I think on thee . . . For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings, that then I scorn to change my state with kings."

Shakespeare was right. If Lily had thought him good enough to be her friend, he could hold that memory, like a shield, against the whole world.

Then, suddenly, Snape hated Hamlet. He didn't hate the play, he hated the character, and sought out Hagrid to explain to him why.

"He's not content with killing the man he thinks murdered his father, he wants to send him to hell. He has an opportunity, while his uncle's praying, but he won't do it because then his uncle might go to heaven, and Hamlet wants him damned. Do you understand the concept of damned, Hagrid?"

"Can't rightly say as I do."

"Well it's forever, it's for eternity. It's until the end of time. It's horrible. And then, he goes right to his mother's room, hears someone behind a curtain, thinks it's his uncle, and kills him without checking to see if he's right. He just saw his uncle praying — why did he think he was behind the curtain? And he doesn't care that he killed Polonius. Do you know what he says about this man he's just killed? He says, 'I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.' The guts! He doesn't even remember he's human!"

"You goin' t' stop reading it, then?"

"Are you kidding! I want to find out if Hamlet gets what he deserves!"

The next morning at breakfast, Snape was so engrossed in Act IV that he scarcely heard the other teachers as they came into the Hall and said good morning. Hagrid, however, wouldn't let the rest of them bother Snape, for next to him was a plate of food, and though his eating was absent-minded, he was eating.

Hagrid moved away from the table as Snape stood, on his way now to his morning classes. "How's it going with that young rapsallion?"

"It's getting a lot more complex. The king really did kill Hamlet's father, but he seems sorry for it and trying to do good, but now that Polonius is dead

he's plotting different ways to kill Hamlet. Ophelia's gone mad and drowned, and her brother's come back secretly from France to kill Hamlet. He and the king are working together. Hamlet's decided he has to stop fooling around, get down to business and kill the king. The only nice person is the queen, except Hamlet keeps saying such funny things that it's hard not to like him."

"What's he say?"

"That worms eat dead people, then we use the worms to catch fish, and we eat the fish, and thus a king may progress through the guts of a beggar. Then he tells the king that when a man and a woman get married they become one flesh, so now Hamlet says the king is his mother. The poor king doesn't know what to say when Hamlet tells him 'Goodbye, mother' in front of everybody. I'm beginning to like him again."

"I'll be interested in knowing how this one ends. You be sure t' tell me."

Two more Gryffindor students were gone from Wednesday's first session, which contained sixth years from all houses. As Snape moved their former cauldron partners, another Gryffindor student said to a housemate, "I guess they couldn't stand the stench of eating death anymore."

Snape turned slowly and quietly, his anger and bitterness now tightly controlled, his voice soft and caressing. "Have you ever considered, Gregson, the proper function of a maggot?" He stopped by the boy's station, leaning forward slightly, one hand on the desk, the other on the back of Gregson's chair. "We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your body becomes a very busy place in the grave." His voice now just audible in the silent room, Snape whispered, "We don't eat death, Gregson. Death eats us."

Gregson was white as a sheet as Snape, rigidly calm, moved to the front of the class to begin the lesson. He noted that while the Slytherin students seemed highly amused, the Ravenclaw students were jotting down what he'd said. Hufflepuff students were checking their indexes for potions containing maggots, and the Gryffindors seemed shaken and angry. *Interesting how the personalities of the houses are reflected.* Snape never referred to the incident throughout the rest of the lesson, but it was the best behaved class he'd had all year.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - S I X

S N A R E S

The ending of the play came so quickly that it took Snape by surprise. *All dead? They're all dead?* Snape closed the book and stared at it, forgetting his lunch completely. *How many people died in this play? We're told about old king Hamlet, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. We watch Polonius, Queen Gertrude, Laertes, King Claudius, and Hamlet die. And in the end, we never really know if Hamlet was crazy or not. But the whole play is about death, about murder, and maggots, and skulls dug out of graves, and ghosts, and committing suicide...*

Snape flipped back through the pages looking for one speech. He found it in scene two of the first act. *King Claudius tells Hamlet that his father's death is part of the natural order of things, that his father's father also died, and his father before that. It's just natural, so why grieve beyond the normal amount of time? And Hamlet says death is like sleeping. And the gravedigger jokes and sings while he's digging a grave because this is so normal to him. The soldiers go off to die for a worthless piece of land, and they consider it their duty. The only one who is really troubled by it is Claudius because he killed his brother for personal gain, and he still has the power, wealth, and woman that he killed for. Professor Dumbledore is fascinated by muggle attitudes toward death, and this play is full of it.*

His afternoon classes were quiet, maybe because the students had heard about the morning session. It gave Snape time to think, and what he was thinking most about was Lily.

There were, Snape reasoned, two basic categories of death. Timely death of natural causes after a full life, and untimely death where life was cut short either by early natural causes or by artificial causes. Snape knew three people who'd died the first kind of death — both his grandfathers, and his muggle grandmother, Gra. Grieving for them had been gentle, with a sense of the circle of life turning as it should.

All the others, and there were so many others, had gone by violence. *How do you reconcile yourself to loss through malice?* Hamlet and Laertes had sought revenge, and Snape could see how vengeance might close the wound and allow grief to heal. But what if all chance of vengeance were snatched away?

No vengeance was needed for his parents. His mother's death was tragic misjudgment, and his father had atoned by suicide. Nor did he any longer need vengeance for Nana — he already had it. It was his information that had sent Rosier and Wilkes to their deaths, a particularly satisfying piece of work.

What about Lily? The Dark Lord had killed her, Sirius Black had betrayed her, and James Potter had bartered her safety for sentiment. All had been punished, two with death and one with Azkaban, but the punishment had nothing to do with Snape and so the wound remained open. At no point had Snape been allowed vengeance, and so there was no justice.

Dumbledore, of course, was absolved of blame. He could not have forced James to make him Secret-Keeper. That fault rested with James, and James alone. Snape knew, too, that he himself was not at fault because he'd realized that the prophecy he'd heard referred to the pureblood auror's child, not to Lily's part-blood baby, and only the arrogant stupidity of the Dark Lord had led to her tragedy.

What then of Lily, the pain of whose death could never fully heal if vengeance was denied? *It's a pity after all that Black's in Azkaban. I might otherwise have gone after him.* It was a canker, an ulcer, a wound that could never heal.

What of Lily? She was no ghost, of that Snape was sure. Hamlet's father was a ghost because he was doomed to daily punishment and allowed to wander at night. Lily, naturally, would never be punished because she was a saint, an angel...

The second afternoon lesson ended, and Snape locked up quickly. He needed to find a ghost. The Baron spoke in monosyllables, and most of the others were unknowns to him. The only one he could recall being at all talkative was the Gryffindor ghost, Nearly Headless Nick. The question was, where to find him.

Students were heading in different directions, to the common room, to the entrance hall... Snape let them pass and then turned into the more labyrinthine passages of the dungeons, places where classes were no longer held. Out of sight, and hopefully out of hearing, of the stream of Slytherin

students, Snape quietly called, “Baron? Baron, I was wondering if I might talk with you.”

It was several minutes before the Baron appeared. He hovered before Snape, grim and gaunt, his clothing stained with silver gore. The air grew colder; Snape’s breath hung in a misty cloud before him. “Baron, I don’t mean to disturb you, but I have some questions about the spectral existence.” The Baron nodded, so Snape continued. “May I ask you, or if that isn’t convenient, would you know who I could ask?”

The Baron held up a hand to stop Snape from speaking or moving, and dissipated into the cold dungeon gloom. A moment later the Gryffindor ghost appeared. “The Baron said you needed me, what? I don’t believe I’ve ever been summoned by the head of Slytherin house before.”

“Summoned?” Snape wasn’t sure what to say, but he certainly didn’t want to offend a ghost. “I would never summon you — it’s not my place. I asked the Baron for advice, and he thought you might be the best . . .”

“Well, that all right then, isn’t it? You’re the new one, aren’t you? I’ll say you’re different from old Slughorn. What did you need?”

“I . . . well, sir, I . . . Excuse me, but I’ve only ever heard a nickname for you, and I don’t know if it’s respectful to use it.”

The ghost beamed. “You always did have that aura of being partly in the other world. I am Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington. You may call me Sir Nicholas.”

“Thank you. Sir Nicholas, why do some people become ghosts when they die?”

Sir Nicholas froze, as if he’d been ambushed. “That is a rather personal question,” he said. “I’d hardly call it asking for advice.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

The ghost relented. “Most witches and wizards are willing to accept death when it happens. They go on. Others choose not to go, usually because . . . well, because they’re afraid. They cling to a shadow existence that stops short of death.”

Snape’s voice dropped to a nervous whisper. “Does that mean the Baron was afraid of dying, too?”

Sir Nicholas stared at him in surprise, then slowly began to smile. “I guess it does,” he said.

That resolved the question of Lily’s ghost. Lily would never be afraid to die. She was gone, and would never come back except in dreams. *She never knew I was thinking of her, never knew I was helping. For all I know, she died*

thinking I was her enemy. And now I'll never be able to explain it to her. It was another bitter thought.

What happens when people die? Is it different for wizards and muggles? Are we all the same when we die, or do we go each somewhere different? Is my muggle father with my witch mother? And what of Lily, who was both muggle and witch together? Or me, who am both and neither at the same time?

Dumbledore studied death, so perhaps, probably, he would know. Snape made his way to the Great Hall for supper, and headed for Scrimgeour's vacant seat rather than his own. "May I?" he asked, and Dumbledore responded, "Of course."

The food was served, supper started, and Snape plunged in. "I've been reading Hamlet."

"A most excellent play. Not my favorite to watch, nor my favorite to read, but unequaled for its depth and philosophy."

"It's about death. You said you were interested in it because you were interested in muggle ideas about death."

"I did, because I am."

"What happens to us when we die?"

"I do not know. I have never been there myself to check. It is an undiscovered country..."

"From whose bourn no traveler returns. But after all these centuries, surely we know something."

"You did not ask me this question when your parents died."

"I was too young to realize its importance."

"Well, I fear I have no answer for you. There are many who believe this world is all there is, and that when we die, we are simply gone. Others believe that we remain as a spirit world, guiding and protecting those who are left. Still others believe that there is an all-encompassing cosmic force from which we have been separated, and that it is our goal to re-submerge ourselves into that force, our success and failure depending on how well we have lived our lives, so that if we are not successful, we may return in a new body to try again. Did your parents give you no religious upbringing?"

"Dad didn't believe in it. Neither did Mum."

"It is a pity. Many muggles go to great lengths to inculcate these ideas into their young children. In any case, another group believes that we have only one chance to do well in this world, after which we are sent on to the next stage. If we have performed correctly, the next stage is happiness. If we have performed ill, the next stage is punishment."

“Heaven and hell.”

“Those names have been used.”

“Which of all these views is right?”

“I do not know. I have never made the journey, and none who has, has ever returned to advise me. It is, empirically, an entirely open question. I did once speak to a woman whom the muggle healers believed to have died, but who was then revived.”

“What did she say?”

“She described a contraption called, if I remember correctly, a roller-coaster. She said it was exactly the same feeling you have just as the car reaches the highest point and you know you are about to plunge down. She said to herself, ‘Here we go . . .’ and then there was nothing. She woke up to find the healers reviving her.”

“That doesn’t tell us anything.”

“I believe that it tells us a great deal, but that it does not answer all of the question.”

“You mean it doesn’t address the question of what happens after death, only the moment of dying.”

“Precisely. I find it comforting to think that the moment of death is devoid of fear. It is like riding a children’s amusement ride — Here we go!”

“What leads up to it can be pretty terrible, though.”

“Very true. Often when we think we are afraid of death, we are really afraid of its preamble, of all that comes before dying. The shorter the preamble is, the easier death is.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“It is because I do not know the answer.”

And there it was. No answer to Snape’s most pressing question because the answer didn’t exist. *Where is Lily? Has she been reabsorbed into some cosmic force, or is she a distinct entity that can still communicate with me, or something else entirely?*

The library turned out to be no help at all, since it had no works on religious philosophy. It was maddening. *No Shakespeare and no religion. What kind of a library is this?*

The next day was Thursday, and now Snape had a problem. Books. He desperately wanted books. But unlike the Shakespeare, these were books no one else could pick out for him because he himself didn’t know what they were. He had to go to that great bookstore on Charing Cross road, climb to the proper floor, and browse.

"Would it be all right," Snape asked Dumbledore at lunch. "If I went to town this evening?"

"You do not need to ask. It is your night off."

Snape hesitated. "I was rather hoping that Hagrid might come with me."

"If you are going where I think you are going, Hagrid may create something of a stir. Still, it is good for people to have to adjust their preconceptions from time to time. I shall speak with Hagrid."

"London? Monday he was shaking like a leaf at the thought of going to London. What'd y' do?"

"I? I did nothing, Hagrid. He is doing what he did the day he left Voldemort and came here to you for help. He is letting an all-consuming priority override everything else, including fear. That boy's ability to focus is stunning. Then, it was concern for a friend. Now it is concern for the same friend from a somewhat different angle. When his parents died, he never opened up enough to be able to resolve these questions. It is good that he can do so now. So you will go with him?"

"Course I will. I ain't never been in a muggle bookstore. Might be interesting."

"I may make a small trip this evening as well," said Dumbledore with a gentle smile. "I have a sudden overwhelming urge to visit Stratford on Avon and lay flowers on the grave of William Shakespeare."

Snape and Hagrid went first to the Leaky Cauldron. Or rather, they passed outside the Leaky Cauldron, since Snape wanted to show Hagrid the route between it and the bookstore, apparating not always being possible where there were crowds of muggles. The two then made their way up Charing Cross Road, across Shaftesbury Avenue and into the bookstore.

Hagrid had some trouble maneuvering between the tables of books on the ground floor, and Snape wouldn't let him get into the lift. "That's all we need, to have the lift get stuck with you in it," so they took the stairs. Snape wanted history as well as religion, and spent a minute or two studying the board that told what was on each floor.

Hagrid wandered through rooms filled with thousands upon thousands of books while Snape browsed, and by the time Snape was ready to go, Hagrid had found a book on animal anatomy — one intended for veterinarians — and held it out to Snape. "D' ya think ya could get this one, too?"

The price of Hagrid's book was more than Snape's put together. Snape checked his money and stifled a sigh. "Yes, of course. Just let me decide which of these I want to buy right now." He settled on a volume entitled *Views of*

the Afterworld and a history of medieval England, and reshelfed the others. He could get them later, after he'd had a chance to go to the bank.

They queued up to pay. "What's that little card?" Hagrid asked in something more than a whisper.

"It's a credit card. You use that to pay so that you don't have to carry money with you. Then you reimburse the credit card company."

"Why ain't you got one o' those?"

"You have to qualify for them. Have a job and income."

"You got a job."

"A job that pays you in pounds. Banks don't understand our currency."

"Oh," said Hagrid, but Snape could see he still didn't understand.

"Next time I come, I'll have to visit a bank and get more money. You can come, too, if you like."

"That'd be right interesting," said Hagrid.

As they left the bookstore, Snape was considering a completely new problem. His muggle money wasn't going to last forever, not if he kept buying books. Where was he going to get more?

"They said you'd left Hogwarts,"

Snape and Hagrid had gone into the Leaky Cauldron so that Hagrid could visit with some of his friends. Snape reasoned that since Hagrid had waited for him, it was only fair now that he wait for Hagrid, and a little butterbeer while he read at a corner table would be nice. And it would have been nice had not Alastor Moody made his presence known.

"Is it a crime now to leave Hogwarts?" Snape said without turning around.

"Just hit the statute book. Decree four-seven-eight-seven-dash-three. Concerns known felons on parole attempting to defeat justice by trying to live a normal life. You might look at me while we're talking, you know."

Snape turned to Moody and instantly looked away. The auror's face was more ravaged by scars than Snape could have imagined possible, and it was now dominated by a false eye, a rotating blue orb that darted its gaze haphazardly around the pub, seemingly independent of both its normal mate and the will of its owner. It was hideous.

"It's even worse from my side," Moody laughed hoarsely. "Come sit with me, Death Eater."

"I would prefer not," Snape replied, but Moody sprang to his feet and took Snape's arm before the words were finished.

"Can't look at your own handiwork? I thought Death Eaters had stronger stomachs than that. Sit with me."

Steered to an out-of-the-way table, Snape sat while Moody ordered two firewhiskies, but he would not look at Moody's face. Even the glimpse he'd had was too much.

"They just let me out of the hospital this morning, and what do I get as a welcome back gift?" Moody continued as the firewhiskies were placed in front of them. "The chance to express my appreciation to the little dung-ball that gave me my new eye. I hurried right over, hoping you'd drop in before slithering back north to hide behind Dumbledore." He paused. "That whisky's from me to you. Are you going to insult me by not drinking it?"

Reluctantly, Snape took the glass and raised it to his lips. Just as he took the first sip, Moody raised his own and said, "Death to Death Eaters!" tipping the glass back and taking the firewhisky in two gulps. "Two more," he signaled to the barkeep.

"I don't want any more," said Snape.

"You drink my whisky, or I'm going to describe in loving detail what it feels like to have a blasting spell hit you in the face, and to hold your own eye in your palm..."

Snape choked the rest of the whisky down and allowed Moody to put the second glass in his hand.

"Good boy. Now we get to discuss the vital matter of your breaking parole and the direness of the consequences."

"I'm not breaking parole. I have to stay under Dumbledore's authority. I still am. I still work for him. It didn't say I had to spend every minute at Hogwarts."

"That's a matter of opinion. Normally when they weigh a rat's opinion against a human being's, the rat loses. My opinion is you owe me an eye, several chunks of flesh, and a load of skin and blood."

"I didn't do it."

"Accessory before the fact. That's a crime, and it occurred after your sentencing. Pure justice would allow me to feed you to the dementors personally." He tapped Snape's glass. "You'd better drink this quick; you've got a lot more coming, and we wouldn't want this to take all night."

"Why are you trying to get me drunk?"

Moody laughed again. "I want to watch you try to apparate when you're snookered. I've got a bet I can push you to a three-way splinch."

Snape set his glass down at once, but Moody covered his hand with a

great paw. "It's not considered polite to refuse to drink with someone you nearly got killed."

A great bulk obscured the lantern light as Hagrid's shadow darkened the table. "Hullo there, Alastor," Hagrid said jovially. "Sorry t' interrupt yer fun, but I promised t' get this youngster back in time t' do his rounds. Ya put that drink down now, lad, and come with me."

Snape obeyed quickly, not glancing at Moody to see his reaction. Together he and Hagrid hurried out of the pub and into a little side street where, unobserved, they apparated back to Hogwarts.

"Do me a favor," Snape said to Hagrid after they were inside the gates and about to separate. "Don't tell Professor Dumbledore about Mr. Moody. There's already enough trouble."

"Suit yourself," said Hagrid, and went to his hut.

Friday was normal. Snape closed off all memory of the evening before and didn't think about Moody, the Leaky Cauldron, books, or bookstores all day. As he cleared up his classroom just before supper, however, he wondered which of his two books he should take to the Great Hall to read. He went to his office, took the books from the bag that he'd left on the desk and stood, one in each hand, contemplating the titles on the spines.

"Neither," said Dumbledore from the doorway.

"Why not, sir?" Snape asked, looking up and across the room towards him.

"One of the great benefits of a community meal is the opportunity to treat each other as a community. The staff spends its days isolated in little cubicles, cut off from one another, deprived of contact with their peers—supper is time to reconnect and socialize. Not to seek more isolation."

"I don't feel comfortable with them all, and I don't think they feel comfortable with me."

"You are relatively new. You had a different relationship with them a few years ago and are finding it hard to adjust. There have been distractions and unpleasantnesses that have interfered with the progress of forming collegial bonds, but that is not sufficient reason to abandon the attempt. It has been a stressful week. Come, join us at supper and leave these for later."

Snape put the books back on the desk and followed Dumbledore to the Great Hall. "How was London?" Dumbledore asked as they walked.

"It was all right. I didn't see much more than a bookstore, a street, and a tavern."

"No problems?"

After weighing the pros and cons of his options, Snape asked, "Have you been talking to Hagrid?"

"Hagrid was singularly reluctant to talk. This is usually not a good sign. I thought I might hear about it from you. Good evening, Minerva."

They'd reached the high table, and Dumbledore took his place, motioning Snape to the chair on his right while he greeted McGonagall on the left. Snape murmured, "Good evening, Professor McGonagall," but didn't really want to talk about what had happened in London where she would overhear, or Flitwick on his other side either.

The food appeared, and they filled their plates, then Dumbledore asked, "Did you find any books you wanted? Hagrid showed me the one you bought him. I was quite impressed."

"Hagrid got a book?" chimed in McGonagall. "Whatever for?"

"It is a medical book, Minerva, meant for animal healers. The language is highly technical, but the anatomical drawings and discussion of ailments are of great value. I will not describe them in detail as we are eating, but perhaps later."

"I got a history book and a book on the philosophy of death," said Snape. "I thought the history might give me some background on more of Shakespeare's plays. He writes about things I'm not familiar with."

"An excellent idea. It is always valuable to prepare oneself to understand as much as possible."

"There were other books I was interested in, but I need to go to the bank first."

"I trust Hagrid was not too much trouble in the bookstore."

"He did attract a lot of attention, but since he was looking for things in other parts of the store, it didn't bother me much. Then we went back to the Cauldron so he could see some of his friends." Snape had by now resolved how to handle this part, so he continued. "Alastor Moody was there."

"He is out of the hospital! That is wonderful news. I trust he is well on the way to complete recovery?"

"He seemed fit. He said he'd hoped to meet me there, and bought me a couple of drinks. I only had one of them, though, because we had to come back to Hogwarts."

"It sounds like he was expecting you."

"Well, it was my night off, and it was the area of town where I normally go."

Dumbledore then turned his attention to McGonagall while Snape discussed a levitation charm with Flitwick, but the important information had been passed in the guise of ordinary conversation — the aurors were watching Snape and knew when he left Hogwarts and where he was going.

I don't have to attract attention by going up to Dumbledore's office to tell him things. We could talk right in front of everyone else, and if we do it right, no one will even suspect. It was a useful tidbit of information, and Severus stored it in the back of his mind for later retrieval.

That evening after supper, mindful of Dumbledore's order (for such he took it to be) to socialize, Snape went to the staff room to play cribbage with Flitwick. It was McGonagall who referred back to the supper conversation.

"Muggle banks? You have money in a muggle bank? Wouldn't Gringotts be safer? You can keep anything safe there."

"Thirty-one, that's two for me. Yes, Professor, but in a muggle bank, the amount of money I have keeps getting larger. Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, and a pair is six."

"Larger? You mean they pay you to keep your money there?"

Flitwick was counting quickly. "Fifteen-two and three is five. And a pair in the crib for another two. And . . . I'll take the two you didn't count because you were paying too much attention to Minerva."

"What? Blast! If I get skunked this game, Professor, it'll be your fault."

"It's only a game. Tell me about this 'they pay you' business."

"It's called interest. They don't put your money in a vault. They loan it to other people or invest it, which is a kind of loan. They collect interest on the loans, and they pay part of it to you because the loan was made with your money. I hadn't been using the money for a while, so the total got bigger. Now I've been withdrawing some for books and the theater, so the total is going down. I either have to stop buying so many things, or find a way to make more muggle money."

"Where did you get that money?" asked Sprout.

"They sold my muggle grandmother's house when she died, and I was her only heir. Then I made some muggle money tutoring. I used to charge less if they paid me in pounds."

"Why would you want muggle money?"

"For things you can't buy with wizard money, like a subscription to the *Guardian* or a ticket to the theater. Books."

"You can buy books at Flourish and Blotts."

"Not these books."

Sprout wasn't really interested in the kinds of books Severus bought, so she let the subject drop. Later, having lost the game but not having been skunked, Snape went to his rooms to decide which book to look at first. He chose the history.

It was a peculiar thing, but although Snape always started a nonfiction book at page one and tried dutifully to read to page two, page three, and so on, he always succumbed to the desire to skip around and jump back and forth. This evening was no exception. There seemed to be little profit in beaker people and Celtic migrations, so he started to browse. That was when he came across the Civil War.

Now Snape actually knew something about the Civil War, for there were some in the countryside around his home who still passed down the old divisions, remembering that mighty Liverpool had once been a Whig island in the Tory sea of Lancaster and lamenting the tragic death of King Charles, and who might have continued drinking to the king 'over the water' if any such were left alive.

To his surprise, however, this was quite a different civil war. This one was fought in the twelfth century between a king's daughter, Matilda, who claimed to be queen, and her cousin Stephen, who had himself crowned king. It was a time of lawlessness and wildly shifting fortunes, when for a time both armies were generated by women, Stephen having been captured, but his wife refusing to surrender and finally forcing a prisoner exchange.

I have those books! Snape thought, and dug into his belongings for things purchased the previous August, including the four volumes of murder mysteries he'd bought but never had a chance to really read except for the first. Now he started the second.

That first volume had not mentioned the civil war, but this one revolved around the siege of Shrewsbury and a murderer who tried to hide his victim among the scores of executed traitors after the town and castle fell.

There was from the beginning a character with whom Snape identified. In his early twenties, short, slender, dark haired and dark eyed, quick with his tongue but slow to reveal his true self, this character quickly became one of the murder suspects, and throughout the rest of the book the question of his guilt or innocence hung in the balance.

It was past midnight and halfway to dawn when Snape finished the book, marveling first that he'd read the whole thing in a few hours, and second that the medieval mind saw no problem in judging guilt and innocence by combat, where the better fighter was also deemed to be right.

Now there were two questions to be resolved, that of death and that of justice. Snape dragged himself to bed, but dozed only fitfully, his head filled with too many ideas for sleep.

February eased its way toward March, though the cold remained bitter. In the middle of the month, Maggie Pulcifer left Hogwarts. She was the Hufflepuff student whose uncle, as it turned out, had been a Death Eater. Sprout tried everything she could to shield the girl, but it was the steady drip of small things, like drops of water on a stone, that wore her down and drove her away. The two Ravenclaw students were still holding out, though they were visibly weakening, growing more quiet and isolated as the days passed.

Only Slytherin remained strong, protecting its own with fierce jealousy. Slytherin students who'd never been Death Eaters, even those whose families had been harmed by Death Eaters, found themselves targeted for teasing by the other houses because they defended their housemates. The house as a whole became stronger with adversity, its unity now a matter of pride and honor, its opinion of the other houses reduced to scorn and expressed in defiance.

Snape visited the common room on an almost daily basis to be sure everything there was going smoothly and to ensure no retaliation was being planned. Behind the safety of the Wall and guarded by the lake above them, the Slytherin students were able to relax, devising ways to amuse themselves or help each other despite being confined more than usual by the weather and their own fortress mentality. Many were helping their housemates with their studies, and Slytherin's academic record for the year was high.

There were no more trips to London for the rest of February. Snape just couldn't force himself to brave the outside world again, so while his house strengthened, it seemed he weakened. There were more books he wanted to get, but that priority had not risen to the point where it could override his nervousness.

Views of the Afterworld proved to be a valuable resource in some ways, but not in others. It gave very deep, detailed explanations of the different religions' and philosophies' beliefs and attitudes about dying and what happened thereafter, but no instruction on which belief was most likely to be correct. Snape was left with the impression that each person was allowed to imagine the afterworld that was most comforting or useful at the moment, and that there was a presumption that simple belief caused the image to become real.

That's silly. It's like belief in God. If God exists, will the fact that I don't

believe in God change God at all? And if God doesn't exist, will the fact that I believe create God? Of course not. My personal belief or disbelief has no effect on God whatsoever, for the existence or nonexistence of God is outside of me.

This wasn't an easy thought, and Snape wished his parents had raised him with some religious training so that he could have a little background on the matter, but there was no help for it now. He had to find out on his own. The only way to do that was to try practicing some of the things in the book and see if he got a reaction from the universe.

He decided to start at the beginning with animism and ancestor worship. Animism was, in fact, rather easy, since it was the belief that everything had a spirit and was capable of conscious thought, including trees and rocks, and that somehow these spirits formed a vast network so that disruption in one part could cause turbulence in another part. Most magic was based on this interconnectedness as was, apparently, the whole concept of prayer, and Snape had certainly had enough experience with the magical aspects.

Ancestor worship was based on the idea that the dead didn't leave you. Their animating spirits continued to watch over and protect the living, and they deserved to be honored. *I'm not sure how much protection Dad could give, but Mum and Nana and Gra might be worth something.*

The next thing was what to do about it. The ancient Romans had a lararium in their home for simple daily observance, and it seemed easy enough to do, so Snape looked around his small domain for a place. *Near the hearth. I don't cook here, though, so it isn't a proper hearth. On the other hand, I do have that cookbook, so if I started cooking it would be.* He set a small table next to the fireplace in his office and thought about what to put on it.

Spirits of the ancestors. I might have pictures at home, but that would mean going home and hunting for them. Leaving Hogwarts . . . Spirits of the place. That would mean the Founders, I suppose, though it might mean unnamed spirits of the cliff, the lake, and the forest. The small dishes for burning incense and food offerings were easy — his potions stores were full of them — but he needed to set them aside for special use, dedicate them as it were, for the lararium.

The biggest obstacle was the picture of his parents, and as February waned, Snape tried to work up the courage to leave again, to go to the bank, to buy books, and to go to his childhood home in Lancashire for photographs.

With the beginning of March, however, a new priority took over, a priority that gripped the whole school and electrified Slytherin house with determination. The first weekend in March was the Quidditch game against

Ravenclaw, and Slytherin's chance to show the rest of the school their true mettle.

The first signs of trouble appeared a week before the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match, though at first no one realized that there was anything ominous about it. Notices appeared on the school bulletin boards asking the school to join Gryffindor house in dedicating the first Saturday of every month to the celebration of a different world culture. The first one, coincidentally on the day of the game, was to be a tribute to Mexico.

"Where did they get that idea?" Snape asked McGonagall at Saturday supper.

"They came up with it themselves. I was quite thrilled. I didn't think they paid any attention to history, geography, or culture. To tell the truth, I'd have to think a bit to find Mexico on a map, but they're tremendously wrapped up in it. They've even checked with the kitchens to see if the house-elves can serve Mexican food that day. The whole thing is delightful."

For the next couple of days, Gryffindor students lobbied the other houses for their support in the event, calling it a chance for them all just to get together and have fun. It was soon apparent that Ravenclaw had entered wholeheartedly into the spirit of the occasion, for by midweek many students had already begun sporting sombreros and serapes over their birettas and robes. Hufflepuff was for some reason a bit more reluctant to go along.

Wednesday evening there was a major meeting in the Slytherin common room where the whole question of supporting the world culture event was debated. The diehard Gryffindor haters insisted that nothing Gryffindor did could ever do less than harm Slytherin, while the more conciliatory saw the occasion as an opportunity to build bridges and relieve some of the tension. It was finally decided that each student could do as he or she saw fit. Several of the Slytherin students sent for costumes.

SATURDAY, MARCH 6, 1982 (3 DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

On the day of the Slytherin-Ravenclaw game the school was a riot of red, white, and green. The school was planning to march en masse to the Quidditch field flying the Mexican flag. It was, Snape thought as he returned to his rooms from breakfast, rather enjoyable to see the blaze of color and hear the magically produced strains of '*Cielito Lindo*' played in the entrance hall. He was looking forward to the celebratory lunch, and went to the Great Hall at noon with pleasurable anticipation.

The Slytherin table was empty.

"Where are they, Severus?" Dumbledore asked as the rest of the Hall filled while Slytherin remained conspicuous by its absence.

"I don't know, sir," Snape replied. "Let me check in the common room. I know many of them were planning to take part."

He met Chris Tobin coming across the entrance hall. "Thank goodness, Professor," Chris said. "I was coming to get you. We need you right away."

The common room was packed and, as Snape came through the Wall, silent. Algie stood defiant in the speaker's area by the great fireplace, and rage radiated through the room.

"What's wrong?" Snape asked. "They're expecting you in the Hall."

Algie spoke up. "They're expecting us all right, so they can laugh at us. And they're expecting us to parade to the Quidditch field under the Mexican flag. Well they won't get us. Have you ever seen the Mexican flag, sir?"

Numbly Snape shook his head. From under his arm, Algie pulled a vibrant piece of red, white, and green bunting and spread it out for the head of Slytherin house to see. There, on the central white vertical stripe, was the picture of an eagle, sitting on a cactus, killing a snake.

The Ravenclaw eagle devouring the Slytherin snake.

Snape felt sick. "Where did you get this?" he asked.

"They're setting them up on the seventh floor. They're not planning to unfurl them until they're halfway down the hill, when it'll be too late for the teachers to stop it. They were hoping to have lots of Slytherins in the procession to make our house look divided and fragmented. I spied on them, and I grabbed this one, and I ran. I had six Gryffindors after me all the way to the Wall."

"Of course we can't join them," said Snape. "If you'll give me that, I have to tell Dumbledore."

Taking the colorful piece of cloth, Snape left the common room, but it was already too late. Gryffindor, knowing its moments numbered, had jumped the gun and started the procession. They were leaving the Hall and heading across the lawn to the hill by the time Snape reached the entrance hall.

"Well," said McGonagall, slipping in beside him. "Where are they all?"

For answer, Snape handed her the flag.

"Oh," said McGonagall. "My. We must find Albus at once."

"You find him, if you don't mind," said Snape. "I have a house to look after."

Slytherin came down the hill after all the other houses, flying the green serpent banner. As they marched, they chanted: “Sly-ther-IN means to WIN! Sly-ther-IN means to WIN!” They could not match Gryffindor and Ravenclaw together in numbers, but they managed to match them in volume. Many Hufflepuffs deserted the school flags to join Slytherin, since they were to play Ravenclaw in a month’s time.

As Snape made his way to the staff stands, to sit with McGonagall and Sprout between him and Flitwick, Kettleburn appeared at his side. “Do they have a chance?” Kettleburn whispered anxiously.

“A chance? Can’t you hear them? They want blood. I didn’t do that, Professor Kettleburn, they did it. With a little help from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. You bet the way you feel, but my house wants blood.”

“That’s all I need to know,” said Kettleburn, and left to place his bets.

Flitwick leaned forward and spoke across the others. “I’m sorry, Severus. I didn’t know. If it’s any help, I think my students see it as purely a Quidditch prank. Not directed against you as a house but as a match opponent.”

Dumbledore appeared then. “It is your call, Severus. We can remove the flags if you want, though your house did catch on to the plot before they were made the butt of the joke . . .”

Snape looked at the stands, where Slytherin green was now accented by Hufflepuff yellow, the roars of defiance growing louder by the second. “No, sir,” he said. “Let the flags stay. They’ll only help us now.”

With a nod and a quiet smile, Dumbledore took his seat.

Madam Hooch started the game, and the Keepers sped to their hoops. A Ravenclaw Chaser got the Quaffle and headed across the pitch, two Slytherin Chasers behind her on either side. As she entered the scoring area in front of the left hoop, the Ravenclaw suddenly dove down, sideways, and up to the right hoop, the Quaffle scoring before the Slytherin Keeper could adjust his position. The Ravenclaw and Gryffindor stands erupted in cheers.

Slytherin took the Quaffle, and the Ravenclaw Chasers united in a Parkin’s Pincer to force him away from the hoops. Instead he broke away from them to soar high into the air, and as the three Ravenclaw Chasers went after him, he flung the Quaffle left-handed down to a waiting team mate who was already in the scoring area. Slytherin went wild as their team scored ten points.

The next Ravenclaw who tried to score was distracted by a Bludger that flew across his path, directly in front of his nose, and Slytherin was able to take the Quaffle again. Algie slammed another Bludger in the direction of the

Ravenclaw Keeper and it immediately turned on him in attack, Ravenclaw's own Beaters being halfway down the pitch at the time. With the Keeper unable to protect his hoops, Slytherin scored again.

Meanwhile, high above the pitch, the two Seekers hovered unmoving. Both teams needed a high-scoring game, and for the time being the Snitch was unimportant.

There was no doubt from the moment the game began that the Ravenclaw Chasers had the advantage. They'd been playing together for four years, and their coordination was spectacular. Slytherin had the advantage in Keeper and Beaters. Ravenclaw's ability to hold on to the Quaffle in attempt after attempt meant that Slytherin, while blocking throw after throw, began to fall behind. The score stood at 60–20 when the Slytherin Seeker suddenly dove downward, hurtling toward the ground in a death-defying plunge, the Ravenclaw Seeker right behind.

At the last moment, the Seeker pulled away, skimming the edge of the pitch and climbing back up into the air. It was a feint, there had been no Snitch, but while the other players were distracted, Slytherin had scored a goal.

Fifteen minutes later, a Bludger took out Ravenclaw's Keeper, and for the short while he needed to recover, Slytherin was able to rack up points, but Ravenclaw's greater team experience was taking its toll. Twice more, the Slytherin Seeker tried a Wronski Feint, and the third time the Ravenclaw Seeker scarcely paid him any attention. After two hours of intense play, with the stands on either side screaming "Sly-ther-IN!" and "Ra-ven-CLAW!" the score stood at 150–90, and Ravenclaw was looking for the Snitch.

Algie and Chris turned the Bludgers on the Ravenclaw Seeker now, while the Ravenclaw scoring attack turned into a fight to protect their Seeker. As Slytherin managed one more goal, the Slytherin Seeker streaked downwards in yet another Wronski Feint.

Only this time it wasn't a feint. This time the Snitch darted and zigzagged near the ground. By the time the Ravenclaw Seeker realized this and joined the hunt, it was too late. Slytherin had the Snitch and the game, 250–150, and Ravenclaw's chances for the Cup were destroyed.

Slytherin and Hufflepuff went wild, green banners and yellow streamers waving high over their heads. Students poured onto the pitch to lift the players into the air on their shoulders and carry them back up the hill for a victory celebration. Ravenclaw and Gryffindor hung back, disappointed and quiet.

In the teachers' box, Flitwick reached over to shake Snape's hand. "Well played! Well played!" he exclaimed. "I haven't seen such an exciting game in years! I won't say it was worth losing just to see it, because it wasn't, but it was a great game!"

The most heartfelt congratulations came from Kettleburn. "Great game, lad! Well played! You had me worried for a bit, but it ended up fine!"

"I take it you decided not to bet on Ravenclaw," Snape commented.

"I got better odds betting on Slytherin. And a two-hour game with that much action would've been worth losing a bet on. To get both was icing on the cake."

They were following the students up to the castle. "I'd like to be able to promise you an equally long and exciting game next time, but the truth is that we need to win, and the quicker the better."

"How do you figure that?"

"If we win, we'll be the only house with three victories, and the score totals won't matter. But if Gryffindor wins, we'll have to be at least forty points ahead of them in Quaffle scoring in order to beat their point total. Gryffindor plays like Ravenclaw, and you saw how hard it was for us to keep up with them. They'll want to win fast, too, so that they can get the Cup on scoring."

"Sounds like you're actually learning how this game is played."

"I can't afford to sound like an idiot when I'm talking to my own team, can I? Besides, this part is mathematics, and a lot easier to understand."

They reached the castle to find the Great Hall had been taken over for a Slytherin-Hufflepuff party. The decorations from the 'cultural celebration' remained, but new flags had been added. These were yellow, white, and green, and the central picture was of a snake killing an eagle.

"Are you going in?" Kettleburn asked.

"No. I'd just have to tell them to break up the party. I don't think they're supposed to be doing this in the Great Hall. As long as I don't go in, I can pretend I don't know about it."

McGonagall stopped next to them. "You know they shouldn't be carrying on like that in the Hall. What do you plan to do about it?"

"Not a thing. I haven't looked in, and I haven't seen it."

"Young man, you are shirking your duties!"

"Oh, come on, Professor. They've had so little to celebrate recently. Give them an hour."

"Professor Dumbledore," McGonagall called as Dumbledore came into

the castle. "Professor Snape doesn't think it necessary to restrain his house's over-exuberant enthusiasm."

"Are they being over-enthusiastically exuberant, Minerva? That may be a matter of opinion. Perhaps we should discuss the parameters in my office."

"Albus! You know what you would do if this was Gryffindor!"

"Yes, Minerva. I should ignore it for a decent interval of time, then tell the students to relocate their festivities to another area. Their common room, for example. Surely you expect me to give Slytherin the same treatment."

McGonagall opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again. Around them the entrance hall was beginning to clear as Gryffindor and Ravenclaw students made their way upstairs to their houses. Since both Slytherin and Hufflepuff had their common rooms and dormitories in the lower areas, there would be no confrontations.

"It is now about forty-five minutes since the end of the game," Dumbledore went on, "most of which time was spent walking up the hill. If I disperse them now, and if Gryffindor wins the cup at the end of the year, Gryffindor will be granted no more time for public celebration than Slytherin is given now. Deal, Minerva?"

"You have a deal, Albus."

Dumbledore swept into the Great Hall in majesty, and those nearest the door quieted at once. "Slytherin house!" he called, and students shushed one another. "I have come to offer my congratulations, to the green and silver, for today Slytherin stands at the top, with two victories and no defeats..." The roar of cheering and banging on tables drowned him out for a moment, then they calmed down again. "It was a good game, well-played and hard-fought — I must say that I enjoyed watching every exciting minute of it." More cheers and pounding. "Now, however, there is another priority, and that is supper. The house-elves must have the hall cleared and cleaned and supper laid in an hour, and so I ask that you avail yourselves of those decorations you wish, and join your head of house in the Slytherin common room to continue your celebrations..."

Algie was up on a bench at once, still dressed in his Quidditch uniform. "Will you join us, too, Headmaster? Will you come to the common room and raise a glass to the Slytherin Quidditch team?"

"Master Colfax, I shall. And with the greatest pleasure."

That settled it. As the students poured from the hall back to their houses, Dumbledore took Snape's arm and walked with him, cheerfully waving to McGonagall as he disappeared down the steps into the dungeons.

Dumbledore didn't stay long in the Slytherin common room, but then no one expected him to. They showed him around with some pride, applauded when he toasted the team with pumpkin juice, and bade him good afternoon politely when he made his excuses and left, but the house as a whole was immensely pleased that he'd been there.

"Thank you for coming," Snape said as he walked with the headmaster back to the entrance hall. "It means a lot to them. Sometimes they feel ostracized."

"You must thank Master Colfax for inviting me. I could not have come otherwise. Remember that if Professor McGonagall challenges you."

"I will, sir. Thank you, sir."

By supper time the house was reasonably calm again, and made their way in to supper in a fairly normal manner, without unnecessary grandstanding. It appeared Gryffindor and Ravenclaw may have been prepared for a confrontation, but as it never reached that point, supper was peaceful.

Nothing else of moment happened all of March except for a brief flurry of excitement four days after the Quidditch match when a rumor spread through the school that the world was about to end. Someone received word from outside that on March 10 all of the planets would line up on the same side of the sun, and the resulting gravitational pull would tear the earth apart. Snape, with his interest in astronomy, patiently explained to his nervous students gathered in the common room that this had occurred many times in the past with no ill effects, and they were mollified. It was fun, however, to watch the rest of the school run around in panic.

Then the Easter break was upon them and, as at Christmas, the great majority of the students were leaving to spend a couple of weeks at home with their families. "Where will you go for the break, Severus?" Dumbledore asked at breakfast on the first Sunday of the break when the students were all departing for the train.

"Here. I'm not setting foot outside of Hogwarts."

"Do you wish my opinion?" Since Snape didn't reply, Dumbledore went on. "I think you should take advantage of the free time to get some things accomplished. You wanted to go to the bank, for example, or buy more books."

"And let them throw me in Azkaban for violating parole? No, I think not."

"You know, I have always been curious as to the interior of a muggle bank. I would take it as a great favor if you would allow me to see one."

"I suppose if I'm going to have a nursemaid, I may as well get top value for my money."

"My thoughts exactly."

Dumbledore did not pass muster the next day as they prepared to go to London.

"No. Absolutely not. You're not wearing a striped jacket with plaid trousers. Don't you have anything that's just black, or brown, or dark blue?"

The trousers became white, and the jacket navy blue, with brown shoes. Snape held his head in his hands. "You look like you just walked off a yacht on the valet's day off."

"I really do not understand why you are so particular."

"I'm going to a bank to do business. You already look odd enough with the long white hair and beard. In conservative clothing you are merely eccentric. In anything else, you look like a nut case."

The entire suit became navy blue with black shoes and a modest tam o'shanter. "I'll take it," Snape said before Dumbledore could change into anything else.

They apparated into the west end near Snape's bank. Instead of just making a withdrawal, Snape asked to speak to a bank officer about his options. They looked at the relative advantages of long-term time deposits while Dumbledore wandered around examining everything.

"Do you think you might get your grandfather to sit down?" the bank officer said after a while, as she helped Snape fill out forms for having the interest from a long-term deposit transferred to his normal savings account. "I think he's making the other customers nervous."

Dumbledore was corralled and seated next to Snape as the paperwork was completed. Snape was then offered a little plastic card. "What's this?" he asked.

"It's for the cash machine outside. You put the card in, enter your personal secret number, and retrieve the cash you want. It operates twenty-four hours a day, and you don't have to come into the bank to get money. The amount is automatically deducted from your account."

Snape tried the machine instead of withdrawing the money inside. It worked beautifully and could be used wherever his bank had a cash machine. He took his money, thanked the bank officer, and he and Dumbledore headed towards Charing Cross Road. They ran right into Moody before they reached the end of Leicester Square.

"Fancy seeing you here!" Moody exclaimed. "Can't hardly turn around but what I run into you in London. Morning, Albus. What brings you to town?"

"Business," replied Dumbledore. "I see you knew exactly where to find us."

"Me? Chance encounter, purely chance encounter. You don't think I lie in wait stalking people, do you?"

"The thought had crossed my mind. We are now on our way to a bookstore. Are you planning to accompany us?"

"Books? I love books! Lead me to a book, and I'll follow like a thirsty horse to water. I'd be honored to accompany you."

It wasn't comfortable for Snape to walk up Charing Cross Road with Alastor Moody trailing him, but Dumbledore and Moody chatted along the way like the old friends that they were, and left Snape alone. When they got to the bookstore, Dumbledore demurred. "I know I promised to stay with you, but if Alastor will be my companion I think I should enjoy myself more in the Leaky Cauldron." It was impossible for Moody to refuse, and so Snape was left unmolested in the bookstore.

He spent two hours there, haunting the sections on religion, philosophy, history, and literature, trying to decide. He ended up with a book of European myths and legends, another of myths from around the world, a classic work on the first emperors of Rome, and the most recent of the series of murder mysteries set in the twelfth century. It was a most satisfactory day's work.

No one bothered Snape on his way to the Leaky Cauldron, where he found Dumbledore and Moody deep in a debate about the Salem witchcraft trials. Snape slipped into a chair at the table with them.

"Did you find anything?" Dumbledore asked.

"Several things. It was a very profitable day. Isn't it lunchtime? Maybe we could eat here?"

"That is an excellent idea, Severus. We shall make a whole day of it," Dumbledore replied, but Moody rose to say goodbye. Though both were polite, neither Snape nor Dumbledore was truly sorry to see him leave.

"I did," said Dumbledore as they ordered a bite to eat, "get Alastor to promise that neither he nor any other auror would hound you if you came to London. I think you should be reasonably safe from here on in."

"Thank you, sir," said Snape

On Thursday, Snape got a message by owl. It was a rather tattered looking

owl, something like those used by a public messenger service, and it didn't wait for a response. Snape watched it flap its way out of the Hall, then opened his letter. It was short and succinct.

Don't get angry. I tried everyone. Some can't help — some won't. I got to find a job. I have a drink at the Pig's Snout when I got a sickle. Some days I don't got a sickle. Please help. M. Bodkin.

It took a moment for Snape to remember Marcellus Bodkin, a quiet, untalented wizard who'd always had trouble getting jobs, and who never rose above supply clerk in the clinic. Snape didn't think he'd even attended Hogwarts; he certainly never seemed well educated. A harmless mouse of a man that no one ever noticed.

The Pig's Snout was a lower class pub on the south side of the Thames, frequented by working class wizards. Snape knew where it was, though he'd never been inside. *I guess it can't hurt to talk, and buy him a drink. I don't know how he thinks I can help.*

The problem was Moody. He couldn't lead the aurors to someone like Bodkin. And yet Moody 'd promised Dumbledore not to trail him anymore. Snape thought maybe this was a time to test Moody's promise.

It was the break, so there were no students or classes. That evening it was an easy matter to go into Hogsmeade as if for some shopping or relaxation, and from there to apparate to his usual London haunts. Snape wandered around Leicester Square for a while, but saw no one who looked like a wizard, much less an auror. Just to be on the safe side, he popped over to a secluded part of Hyde Park, checked that he wasn't followed, then apparated across the river.

The Pig's Snout was tucked into the end of an alley. Snape entered a smoke-filled room, looked around and saw Bodkin, and walked over to his table, seating himself where he could watch the door.

"It was good of you to come, sir," Bodkin said, profuse in his thanks when Snape bought drinks for them both. "Truth to tell, sir, I been down on my luck. Them as has jobs open, they want to know what a man's done with himself the last few years, and I can't tell 'em. I heard you got a position up there in that school, and I thought it's a big place and might need someone who can do a day's hard work."

"It's possible. Why don't you come up and ask?"

"Me? Go way up there where I'd stick out like a sore thumb and no guarantee they'd even talk to me? Might just as well walk into the Ministry and ask for a ticket to Azkaban. You, now, you could pave the way, like."

"I really don't have that kind of influence up there. I'm very much the junior teacher and in need of help myself. The only thing I could do would be to tell Dumbledore about you and see what he says."

"That's a sight more 'n most would do, sir. I'd be in your debt for that much."

They talked a few minutes longer, and it turned out Bodkin had a family, a wife and two children right there in Southwark, then Snape felt he should go. No one had entered the pub after him.

On the street everything was quiet in the fading evening light. No one noticed as Snape ducked into another alley to apparate back to Leicester Square, and no one noticed as he disappeared from there to Hogsmeade.

They came out of the shadows as he walked past the Hog's Head on his way to the gate, an auror squad with wands drawn, no telltale sounds of apparation to warn Snape of their approach. Snape held his hands up immediately, to show he held no wand and didn't intend to fight. They removed his wand from his sleeve and bound his wrists.

"Severus Snape," one of them said, "you're under arrest for violating your parole by continuing to have contact with Death Eaters without permission of the Ministry."

"Please let me inform . . ."

"Shut up, Death Eater," and with that they apparated back to London and the Ministry.

Once again Snape was pulled through the Ministry atrium and down into the lower levels while witches and wizards turned to stare. This time he was taken directly into a cell block and locked in a cage, a box of metal bars with only one solid wall and no chance for privacy, its only furniture a chair and a cot.

After half an hour's wait, Moody arrived with three other men and a witch stenographer. He threw a black and white striped shirt and trousers onto the chair, and a pair of slippers next to them — a convict's garb. "Take off your clothes and put those on. We'll record identifying marks and then you're going on a little trip."

"No," Snape said flatly, trying not to look at the smug witch with her parchment and quill.

"No? Suit yourself." The blue eye began to whirl in Moody's socket. "About five foot seven, and I'd say well under nine stone. Black hair, dark eyes, Dark Mark branded into left arm and extensive scarring on the back,

looks like a whip. Who did that, Death Eater, Voldemort when he was feeling frisky? Mole on the left shoulder . . .”

Snape stood rigidly still as Moody described him for the others, his face burning with shame. Then the stenographer left. “Now,” Moody continued, “take off your clothes and put those on. Unless you’d rather have me put you in a full body bind and we get to do it for you.” Defeated, Snape slowly began to unbutton his jacket.

When he was dressed in the prison clothing, they took his own clothes away. Snape lay down on the cot and stared blankly at the wall through the bars on his cage. He could hear the voices in the cell block and knew they were looking for a judge to sign some papers. From time to time a new voice would intrude.

“Alastor, I need you to release this to my department. It’s that muggle tooth-healer’s chair that Quimbly had set up in his cellar. The one he was using to . . . Oh, got another one, did you?”

“You’re working late tonight, Arthur. Yeah, that’s one we’re shipping north as soon as we can find a judge. What’s the hurry about this chair?”

“Just need to clear things off my desk. I’ve got the papers right here to sign. And there, too, if you don’t mind. Thank you, Alastor. Try not to work too hard.”

Then Snape’s cell door opened and Moody and his men came in. “You’ve got a meeting with a judge,” Moody said. “On your feet. He’s late for supper and wants to get this over with as soon as possible.”

The slippers were a little too big, forcing Snape to shuffle as he followed Moody out of the cell block, down a little corridor, and into an office. He felt like he was in Azkaban already.

The judge looked up as they entered. He was old and gray-haired, and looked bored. “I don’t see why this can’t wait until morning, Alastor. Let him stew a while in a cell. These Death Eaters don’t deserve any better. Why they keep thinking that ‘lord’ of theirs is going to come back, I don’t know. Well, as long as I’m here, give me the papers.”

“I wouldn’t have bothered you, your Honor, but there’s a shipment going up to Azkaban just after midnight, and we wanted to get this over with.”

“All right, all right. Let’s see . . . trial . . . verdict . . . sentencing . . . probation . . . conspiracy . . . Not too bright, this one. Had a free ride at Hogwarts, then goes off consorting . . . Well, where’s the pen?” He was dipping the quill into the ink when the office door opened.

“Good evening, Carter, Alastor, gentlemen,” said a calm, dignified voice. “This is a bit late for you, isn’t it, Carter?”

“Judge Wigglestaff was just helping us clear out some last minute business, your Honor,” said Moody quickly.

“Good evening to you, Amelia,” said the old judge. “Looks like you’re working late as well.”

“I’ve got a heavy docket. Who’s this?” Judge Bones didn’t look at Snape, but took the unsigned papers from the desk in front of Judge Wigglestaff. “Case looks familiar. I think I had it on arraignment. You’d think they’d have brains enough to stay out of trouble. I’ll take this, Carter. My unfinished business anyway. You go home. I’ll wager Ermentrude is waiting supper for you.”

Judge Wigglestaff was only too happy to wash his hands of the whole business as Judge Bones took his place at the desk. She looked sharply at Snape. “Did you know the terms of your parole forbade you to have contact with any former Death Eaters?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Why did you?”

“He asked for help. He needs a job. He was just a clerk at the clinic, and he has to support his family.”

“That’s not what he says.”

“Ma’am?”

“I have here a statement that you were discussing the possible return of Lord Voldemort and the . . .”

“No, ma’am, that’s not true.” Realization was beginning to dawn, and Snape knew the trap was already sprung.

“We have here,” said the judge, “a case of he said, he said. I can understand why you might lie about the conversation to protect yourself, but can you think of a reason why Mr. Bodkin would incriminate himself so deeply just because of you? It seems much more logical that he’s telling the truth. You understand that unless you have another witness to back you up, I shall have to sign these papers? Do you have anything to say?”

Snape wracked his brain trying to think of something. “No, ma’am,” he said at last, feeling as if the world had come to an end. “Could you let Professor Dumbledore know? I don’t want him to think I ran away or anything.”

“I am sure, since you were arrested at Hogwarts, that Professor Dumbledore already knows.”

Snape looked up. "I was arrested in Hogsmeade, so I'm not sure if he knows or not."

"This says Hogwarts."

"No, ma'am. I didn't even get close to the gates. They picked me up right after I apparated in."

Judge Bones regarded Moody carefully. "Does this arrest report contain inaccuracies, Alastor? The prisoner says he was in Hogsmeade."

"I wasn't present, your Honor. I can check with the arresting aurors."

"Mr. Snape, how soon after you arrived in Hogsmeade did the arresting aurors get there?"

"I think they were already there, ma'am. I didn't hear them apparate in."

Judge Bones pushed the report away and put the quill down. "Alastor Moody," she said icily, "I have the greatest respect for your work as an auror, and sympathize with the fact that you have been through a very traumatic time, but this is taking things too far. I am going to give you a choice. First, we can investigate this matter, interviewing other patrons in the tavern and talking to witnesses in Hogsmeade who may have seen the arrest. If everything is as you say, he goes to Azkaban, but if I find one hint of entrapment I'll have you up on criminal charges. Or you can drop the matter, and I write up an injunction forbidding you to speak to this young man or come near him for the next ninety days, or even to discuss his case with other aurors. Which shall it be?"

Moody turned positively purple and fizzed like a steam engine, but in the end said, "I'll drop the charge, your Honor."

"Very wise. Bring Mr. Snape's belongings. I believe he should be getting back to Hogwarts."

Snape changed back into his own clothes in the privacy of the office, then went with Judge Bones back up to the atrium area. Professor Dumbledore was there waiting for him.

"You need to keep a leash on this one, Albus," Judge Bones said as they shook hands in greeting. "He's a wanderer."

"I owe you an immense debt, Amelia," Dumbledore replied. "You and Arthur both. We had no idea there was anything wrong until I got Arthur's message he was here pending transport. It was good of you to come back in tonight just for this. I am yours to command henceforth."

Back in Hogwarts, Dumbledore ordered Snape up to his office. "Of all the foolish, irresponsible . . . Severus, how could you go off like that to meet with another former Death Eater?— Here, have a glass of firewhisky and sit by the

fire a bit.—Do you not understand that they will use any excuse . . .?—Have you eaten? You must be tired and hungry . . .”

After an hour of being alternately scolded and coddled, Snape went to his own rooms for the night, still shaking when he thought of how close he’d come to losing everything because he’d felt sorry for someone.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - S E V E N

OF GOD AND QUIDDITCH

FRIDAY, APRIL 9, 1982 (THE DAY AFTER THE FULL MOON)

Snape went to breakfast as usual the next day, and no one spoke to him of the night before because, as he found out, Dumbledore had told none of them of it. That suited Snape well, for he didn't wish to speak of it either. Instead he exchanged pleasantries, then took his breakfast to his office with the excuse that he was working on something.

Which was only partly true. The fact of the matter was that he was working out something and needed quiet and undisturbed calm.

Why didn't I resist them? They were wrong, they were trying to trap me. Why did I go along so passively, like a sheep? The answer, when it came, was deceptively simple. *I obeyed them because I knew I'd broken the law. I wasn't supposed to speak to Death Eaters, I did, and I knew I was being punished for my own error. If it hadn't been for Judge Bones, I'd be kicking myself in Azkaban now for what a fool I'd been to talk to Bodkin. But if I'd fought back, maybe their plot would have been uncovered even without Judge Bones.*

That thought brought iron resolve for all of twenty minutes, then gave way to one more sobering. *They took me because I didn't follow the rules. They were able to take me because I met them halfway. So predictable. Just like Sirius Black, the candy, and the green hair. Sirius got green hair because he stole and ate another student's candy. I got arrested because I broke the rule about talking to Death Eaters. The plot wouldn't have worked if I hadn't stepped into it.*

Rules, he realized, weren't there to control you. They were there to protect you. *If I hadn't broken the rule, if I'd been arrested on a one hundred percent fabrication, I'd have had the moral strength to fight them from the beginning. When you break the rules, you forfeit the protection.* He thought of the New Year's resolutions that had lain unnoticed since January. This fell into the

‘Be Prepared’ category. Know what the rules are, then never break them. There was a corollary: Unless you are prepared to accept the consequences.

Another problem was that of justice. *Was I being justly punished for having peached on my mates* — somehow at this point Severus always heard his father’s voice — *by having someone peach on me?*

Punished by whom? Probably not by Bodkin, who almost certainly did not know that Snape had given twenty-seven names to the Ministry. Not by Moody either, for Moody had wanted the names and wouldn’t punish Snape for having given them. The question of just punishment thus presupposed an overarching source of justice — the existence of God. Snape wasn’t sure he wanted to go this far, certainly not yet.

There was always the possibility of the universe expressing its sense of irony, which in its turn assumed that the universe was a conscious entity.

Luckily, Snape was able to sidestep the question entirely by remembering that the two instances were not analogous, for he had given names of people for something they had actually done — been members of the Death Eaters — whereas Bodkin had accused him of something he had not done — plan the return of the Dark Lord.

The problem of justice was temporarily shelved.

Lunch loomed, and the question of what to do. Break no rules. Snape searched for the areas in his mind that contained dangerous spontaneity and locked them behind a brand new door. Every word, every action, should be weighed. Snape went to the Great Hall.

“Ah, Severus!” Flitwick greeted him. “Up for a game or two?”

A heartbeat, the tiniest of pauses. “I think so. I’m in the middle of something, but a game or two might clear the brain.”

Sprout joined them. “As long as I have a moment to go over the late spring plantings. There’s a lot we could grow that you wouldn’t have to order.”

Another heartbeat as timetables clicked and resolved. “Would later this afternoon be all right? It would give me time to dig out my lists of what’s needed for each class, and when it comes in the year.”

“Severus, have you managed to look at that book on Greek myths? I have encountered a question or two . . .”

Black eyes met blue ones, and Dumbledore recoiled, not exactly in shock, but in consternation, the gentle smile still on his face. “Not yet, Headmaster, but I hope to soon. I shall let you know when I have,” Snape said, the normal-sounding words not relieving Dumbledore’s worry at all.

Dumbledore went to London to attend the wizards' council, and returned with news of the sentencing of the Lestranges and Barty Crouch. He discussed it only briefly with Snape.

"It is disturbing that Bellatrix is so positive that Moriarty has not been destroyed. Her faith in his return is unshakable. Can you think of any reason why that might be so?"

Does he want me to reveal that I know more about it than I've told them? But I don't know anything. "No, Headmaster. I have no idea why she would think that."

"I felt particularly sorry for Barty. The dementors have frightened him badly, and I believe he would have done or said anything to be taken out of their hands. His father was adamant, though. Well, that is all."

Another warning about dementors. A reminder of what's waiting outside. Does he want to keep me frightened as well, bound to him? "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your sharing this with me." Severus returned to his own office and Dumbledore went to talk to Hagrid.

Hagrid poured tea while Dumbledore nibbled on something that was supposed to resemble a scone. "The problem is, I am not certain if this is ultimately a good thing or a bad thing," Dumbledore mused. "If he is exploring new ways to protect himself that he will eventually have more control over and can fine tune to adapt to circumstances, then all may be well. If he has merely found a new way to hide, it could be disastrous. I wish I could get inside his mind."

"All I can say is, if he's goin' back t' where he was when he were thirteen, I'll be a mite disappointed. One thing t' hold 'em when they're small and kicking, but he's growed now and his tantrums are more focused."

"Exactly the point," said Dumbledore. "The tighter he closes himself off, the greater the explosion when it breaks through. It is not healthy."

"What're you doing about it?"

"Nothing at the moment. Interference may be counterproductive. If he were a thestral, Hagrid, what would you do?"

"Get him used t' what makes him skittish. Start with it far away and not a threat, then slowly move it closer 'til he sees it as a normal part of the landscape. Let him examine it, sniff it, play with it if he wants."

"That would work very well if he were skittish about an object, but I doubt Alastor or Rufus would let themselves be a normal part of any landscape, much less be sniffed."

"Sometimes it helps if they've a chance just t' run free for a bit, not penned-up like."

"He won't leave the grounds. I have to work him back up to that."

"Begging your pardon, Professor, but it ain't really his body that's penned up. It's his brain. He needs to open them doors and let fresh air in."

"The students return this weekend. Are you planning anything for your last few days of rest?" McGonagall's question was a general one, addressed to the resident staff as a whole. The response was restrained. Sprout was reorganizing greenhouse three, and Flitwick just wanted to rest. "What about you?" McGonagall asked Snape.

To whom might you pass information about my comings and goings? "I still haven't finished the books I bought last week. I'll probably spend the time quietly reading."

As the teachers finished breakfast and separated, Dumbledore joined Snape. "It might be a good idea to take advantage of the opportunity. Is there nothing that needs doing outside? No place you would like to go?"

Why do you want me off the grounds? To be set up for arrest like last week? "No, sir. I really would prefer to stay here." Snape headed for the security of the dungeons, still pondering Dumbledore's motives. *Every time something happens, it makes me more dependent on him. Is that what he wants, for me to be tied to Hogwarts forever? Or is he honestly concerned about me?*

Stepping into the office, however, he noticed the unfinished lararium. Was it worth continuing the experiment to see if it revealed anything about death and the existence of an afterworld? Suddenly Snape remembered that there was something he wanted outside of Hogwarts. He hurried back up to the entrance hall. Dumbledore was still there, talking to Filch.

When the headmaster was free, and Filch gone upstairs, Snape made his request. "There is a place I want to go, but . . . do you think I might take Hagrid with me?"

"That would be up to Hagrid. I have no objection. I hope you have a pleasant day."

Snape waited to see if Dumbledore would ask where he was going, but the headmaster simply went upstairs. It was a good sign. Snape left the castle and went down to Hagrid's hut.

Snape was still nervous about being tailed, so he and Hagrid apparated first to London, then side by side to Pendle Hill. From the top of the great tor they surveyed the rolling countryside. "Moor country," Hagrid said. "I

didn't know ya came from moor country. Always thought of ya as kind of a city boy somehow."

"Factory town," said Snape. "Mill and mine." He took Hagrid to the east side of the hill and pointed out a spot in the distance. "We're going there. Shouldn't be anyone around at this time of the morning. They'll mostly be working or at market."

The two approached the quiet, deserted street and the small house at the end. A couple of other houses still had boarded-up windows, but others that had been empty were now inhabited again. Snape released the locking spells and opened the door. Hagrid had some trouble squeezing through, but managed it. The house seemed tiny with Hagrid in it. The groundskeeper filled the whole living room.

"Ya got a lot of books," Hagrid said as Snape moved furniture to give him space to pass.

"I hope to have more. I plan to line this other wall with bookcases, too. Can I get you some tea? There's nothing to eat, I'm afraid."

"Tea 'd be nice." Hagrid followed Snape to the kitchen watching with interest the whole business of lighting coal in a grate. "Whyn't ya just magic it?"

It was a logical question, and Hagrid already knew about his parents. "Dad never liked the magic part of it, and Mum wouldn't use magic in the house. It wouldn't feel right if I did." It took a moment for the water to run clear after sitting so long in the pipes, but soon a kettle was on the grate and shortly thereafter they had tea. Snape did use magic to make one of the chairs sturdy enough for Hagrid to sit on, then excused himself to go upstairs.

He returned a few minutes later with a slim album of photographs. "We didn't have many. These were the last Dad ever had taken. We went to Blackpool when I was nine."

Hagrid examined the pictures, comparing Tobias's and Eileen's faces with Snape's own. "Ya do favor both of them, don't ya? Yer dad had a craggier face, though, and thicker hair. Are all muggle pictures, ya know, quiet?"

"Muggles don't have moving photographs. Not yet, anyway. I'll be upstairs for a bit. There's one or two other things I want to find, but the photos were the most important."

Most of the things Snape wanted were in boxes in the storeroom. He had a photo each of Gra and Nana in small frames. For his great-grandfather, he took a little voodoo doll. One thing that troubled him was that he'd never

had a picture of Lily, but while looking for Wensley Snape's dark magic artifacts, he found his old schoolbooks. Flipping through them quickly he came across a scrap of paper with "Lake. Tonight." scrawled across it. It was a piece of Lily he hadn't realized he possessed.

Feeling much better now, Snape returned to Hagrid, who was fascinated by the voodoo doll. "It was the muggle one had this?" he kept asking, as if the idea that a muggle might know something about magic was totally alien to him.

They left the little house, and Snape reset all the locks. This time they didn't worry about being followed, apparating directly to the outskirts of Hogsmeade. "If ya don't mind," Hagrid said, "I'll stop by the Hog's Head for a nip. Ya don't need me anymore, do ya?"

"No, I'm all right from here. Thank you for coming. It was good of you." Snape left Hagrid to his socializing and went up the hill to the castle to assemble his lararium.

Dumbledore was waiting in the Hog's Head. "I trust all went well," he said as Hagrid ordered a firewhisky.

"Not hide nor hair of a problem," Hagrid replied. "In and out smooth as can be. He got all he went for, too."

"I am pleased to hear that. It is time something went right for him, even something this small."

"Did ya know he lived in a place like that? Fair surprised me, it did. I was expecting something a bit, well, bigger."

"The first time I saw it was after his parents died. I, too, had not realized the extent of the poverty he grew up with. It helped explain some of his discomfort around the other students."

"Ya'd think he'd move, now that he's on his own."

"You know, Hagrid, I think he is afraid of spending the money. He was very careful in the bank to find a way to conserve his resources. It is as if it is his guarantee that he will not be poor again. I do not think he could find it in himself to give up that much."

"I can see that. I'd be scared t' go back to that kind of life m' self. Fair makes my hut look like a palace."

Dumbledore did not comment on the hut. He and Hagrid chatted a bit more, and then Dumbledore, too, returned to the castle.

The little table by the fireplace was covered with a green cloth. On it, back from the center, Snape placed a photo of his parents in a standing frame and, on either side, the pictures of his grandmothers, Gra next to his father

and Nana next to his mother. In front of them stood the voodoo doll and Lily's note, also encased in a frame. For the geniuses of the place Snape had rocks — smooth polished stones from the lake shore and a larger, rougher rock veined with green from the cliff. The forest had given him a pine cone. At the front of the table was a votive candle, an incense burner, and dish of clean gravel for offerings and libations.

It was, as near as Severus could tell, just as described in his book for later lararia. That was when he encountered the next problem. *How do you use a lararium?* He went back to his books to try to find some description of the rites involved. What he found was very sketchy. All he could figure out was that it was twice daily, and lasted about two or three minutes, but what words you said, or what exactly you did was a mystery.

What if I do it wrong? Will that negate the experiment? That, naturally, brought up the larger question of 'Is there a God?' The first thing Severus did was revisit his conclusions about belief. *Belief does not affect God. If God does not exist, my belief will not create God. If God exists, my non-belief will not cause God to disappear. I cannot use belief as proof.*

The next step was rather simple. *If God does not exist, nothing I experiment with will hurt me in any way. It can't get me into any trouble. The nonexistence of God brings no new problems, but no new comfort either.*

The possibility of the existence of God did bring problems. *It really depends on the personality of God. If God is gentle and kindly, any attempt to find God will meet with approval. If God is rigid and vindictive, any wrong action will bring punishment. Is wrong action worse or better than no action?*

The question could not be resolved empirically. Religion was not science. In the end, it was a leap in the dark. You might land in paradise, or you might plunge into the abyss, or nothing might happen at all, but you would not know which until you jumped.

Being by upbringing and inclination an agnostic, Snape was not overly concerned about the punishments of a rigid and vindictive God. *If I find out that what I am doing is not exactly right, I can change it. The point is to honor God and the spirits. All religions believe in spirits. Sometimes they call those spirits by other names, like angels, but they have them.*

By then it was supper time, and Snape went to the Great Hall, but he didn't stay long. Instead he took a morsel of bread and a small vial of — well it was going to be pumpkin juice, but the whole problem of combustibility made him take firewhisky instead — and returned to his office. There he agonized over the question of sacrifice and finally gave up a five-pound note. The

note, folded small, and the morsel of bread, he placed on the dish of gravel, the vial of firewhisky next to it. Then he lit both the candle and the incense.

It felt awkward, speaking out loud in an empty room. Standing in front of the table, Severus said, "I dedicate this place to God, whoever and whatever God may be, and offer these symbols of food and drink to represent my continued life, and money to represent my labor, in honor of God." With that he poured the firewhisky over the bread and money, and ignited it, watching the resultant fire with pleasurable interest. Then he continued.

"I honor the spirits of cliff, lake, and forest that shelter and protect Hogwarts. I honor the spirits of my parents and my grandparents, of my great-grandfather, and of Lily Evans. If they are still able to see and hear me, I ask their continued interest in my life. May good fortune attend all in this place. Let it be so."

That was it. It was somehow, except for the fire, unsatisfying, being far too short and simple. *Maybe the repetition makes it more meaningful. I have to remember to do this twice a day. Not the five pound note, though.*

Severus went back to the Great Hall for supper. He discussed plantings with Sprout and played cribbage with Flitwick, and to all appearances his flirtation with religion changed nothing.

The students returned for the summer term, and immediately the world of Death Eaters and the Ministry intruded itself into Hogwarts. Anna Prendergast and Richie Gamp came to Snape together to tell him that both their fathers had been sentenced to Azkaban. Snape let them mourn in the privacy of his office, then informed the other teachers, so that any teasing might be nipped in the bud.

The biggest, most pressing focus of the school, however, was far more normal than anything the outside world could force on them. The fifth and seventh year students were in the last stages of preparing for OWLs and NEWTs, and the library and study rooms were packed with serious, and occasionally panicky, scholars. Snape even held review sessions that reminded him of his tutoring days when he was a student.

And, of course, there was the upcoming Quidditch match between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff on the twenty-fourth of April, the last Saturday of the month.

"Who do you favor?" Sprout demanded of Snape two days before the match.

"Ravenclaw, of course. If they win, then the worst we can do is second place. But if you win we might end up in third place."

"Humpf," said Sprout. "You were a much nicer person when you didn't understand Quidditch."

Snape had been saying his private ritual in front of the lararium for about two weeks, minus the burnt offering, with indifferent results. At the beginning it had been hard to remember, and Snape had to force himself to stop, recollect, and say the words. At the end of a week it became more automatic, an almost habitual part of his routine. He still had no reaction from it until the night before the Quidditch match.

He was in a greenhouse checking the replanting schedules and stopped in front of a Lilium bulbiferum, Sprout's pride and joy. "Where am I going next?" the flower asked.

"One of the gardens," he answered. "I'm sure you'll like it there."

"Not the Magician's garden. He has roses, and I don't like them."

"I'm not sure which one. I don't know much about the gardens."

"Do you remember the first one we ever saw?" The flower was smiling.

"Of course. We had to sneak in."

"Whose stands were we in?"

"Hufflepuff's."

"Who lost?"

"Ravenclaw."

"Remember me."

Snape started awake. It was three in the morning, and he was shaking like a leaf in a storm. He lay for a while in bed, trying to recall who and where he was, the flower's voice as real and present as the touch of his sheets and pillow.

After about fifteen minutes, he got up and went into the office, where the embers of the fire still cast the tiniest of glows. The lararium was veiled in darkness, but Snape stood in front of it, looking towards the spot where Lily's shadowed note lay. *I remember*, he thought.

He sat for an hour and a half, until dawn began to soften the dark, staring at the embers. He knew little of the gardens, but he remembered the stealth of feigning to be Hufflepuff and his first joy of bludgers. It was a message he would heed. *I need a control. Every experiment needs a control.*

The control came at lunch in the form of Professor Kettleburn. Snape cornered him. "Make a bet with me."

"Who do you favor?"

"I want Ravenclaw to win, but I want to bet on Hufflepuff. Make a bet with me."

Kettleburn stepped back and eyed Snape suspiciously. "Why?"

"I had a dream. I just have to bet something on Hufflepuff."

"You got it. You want a galleon, a sickle?"

"Just a knut. All I need is a bet."

Kettleburn agreed with no hesitation, then went and placed all his other bets on Hufflepuff.

It was a hard-fought game, for Ravenclaw needed to win, but Hufflepuff needed to score. The yellow and black kept the blue and bronze away from the Snitch for over two hours, until the score favored Ravenclaw 150 to 120. Then, in a breathtaking bit of flying, the Hufflepuff Seeker found the Snitch, and the score ended at 270 to 150. The Hufflepuff stands went crazy.

Ravenclaw was in last place; they had won no games, so their total score was irrelevant. Hufflepuff had two victories and a total of 450 points. Slytherin had two victories and a total of 420 points, but with a game still to play. Gryffindor had one victory, 300 points, and a game still to play.

If Slytherin won their last game, then Slytherin would win the Quidditch Cup. Hufflepuff would be second unless Gryffindor managed at least 160 Quaffle points — not likely. But if Gryffindor won without Quaffle scoring, then they tied Hufflepuff for the Cup. On the other hand, a Slytherin Quaffle score of at least forty would beat out Hufflepuff . . . There was no way to explain it without a diagram. What it meant was that in the last game Slytherin had to win outright or, barring that, to outscore Gryffindor by at least forty points with the Quaffle.

Kettleburn cared nothing for the long-term planning. He'd bet Hufflepuff, and he'd won from everyone except Snape to whom he cheerfully paid the knut. "You tell me about any other dreams you have," he said as he left.

Did the Hufflepuff win mean what Snape wanted it to mean? Was that really a communication with Lily, or was it a subconscious desire of his own mind expressed in a dream? Snape had no way to tell.

True, the Hufflepuff victory had been unexpected, not so much because they won, but because of the way they won. To hold Ravenclaw from victory for so long while at the same time scoring so many points was not Hufflepuff's usual form of play. They now had a chance at the Quidditch Cup, something no one had anticipated in the fall.

Why would I dream that? Why would I dream anything about Quidditch at all? If Lily and my parents can speak to me, why don't I ever dream about Nana and Gra?

Another thing Snape now wanted to know was whether or not the dead

learned the truth about people. *Does Lily know that Sirius betrayed her? Has she learned what a hypocrite her husband was, pretending to hate dark arts and using curses, hexes, and jinxes on a daily basis, as pranks or as a means to intimidate other students? Has James found out what a fool he was, making a traitor his Secret-Keeper and causing his wife's death?*

The idea that the dead discovered the truth was a little eerie. *What is there about me that I would not want Lily to know?* In all honesty, he could think of nothing. She already knew about his demon. She would learn he'd been a Death Eater, but she would also learn that he'd turned against the Dark Lord and risked his life for her. In fact, the idea that Lily would know the truth after she died was, on the whole, a comforting thought.

One thing Snape was sure of was that he would continue to use the lararium. The dream by itself wasn't proof that it worked, but it certainly wasn't proof that it didn't work. He was rather hoping for more dreams.

The next weekend was a Hogsmeade excursion, and Snape had supervisory duties in the town. He wandered the streets for a while, then went into the Three Broomstick for a snack and something to drink. He'd just settled in a corner with tea and biscuits, when a figure rose from another table and slipped into a chair next to him. It was Gawain Robards.

"I thought you were supposed to leave me alone," said Snape.

"Moody is supposed to leave you alone. There was no injunction written against me."

"Are you going to try arresting me again?"

"That wasn't me. That was Moody and Scrimgeour. I did my job, got my conviction, and sent you to prison."

"I'm not in prison."

"No? That's not the impression I had. It doesn't matter. This is more in the way of a friendly conversation. I just wanted you to know that Moody's getting help adjusting — he doesn't want the help, but he's getting it. Crouch is out, and Scrimgeour is looking to move up, so he won't be after you any more. He's angling for a lot bigger fish."

"It's kind of you to tell me this."

"I don't do anything out of pure kindness. I want to know what you can tell me about him." Robards lay a piece of paper in front of Snape with the note 'L. Malfoy' written in one corner.

Can this be another trap? At least he's asking about someone specific, and not just for names in general. "His father hated . . . 'him,' and he wouldn't become

a . . . one of us until his father died mysteriously of dragon pox. I think it was his father's death that finally drove him to it."

"Mysteriously? What do you mean?"

"There hadn't been any outbreaks. It was an isolated case and . . ." Snape paused. It was the first time he had ever voiced the suspicion. "I know that shortly before it happened, the Dark Lord was interested in protection from dragon pox. The infection may not have been accidental."

"Did you know him well?"

"A little, from before, when none of us had yet joined. Afterwards, I hardly saw him at all."

"Do you know if . . . 'his' agents ever used Imperius curses on people?"

"Oh, yes. They did. I didn't know it at first, but I overheard some of them talking. That was a tactic I know was used more than once."

"So this person might be telling us the truth?"

"I don't know for certain, but it's possible."

"Did he ever go out on raids?"

"I don't know. I never saw him in any of my classes."

Robards seemed pleased with the information. "That'll help with the case. It gives me a better idea what to look for. You haven't been in contact with him recently, have you?"

"No, sir."

"Be sure you don't. You escaped the consequences for talking to one of your old colleagues. You wouldn't be able to wiggle out of this one." Robards rose to leave. "Well, thank you for the conversation. Enjoy your day with the students."

Snape watched as Robards left the Three Broomsticks and headed for the outskirts of the town, where he could apparate back to London. *Am I ever going to be free of the Ministry?*

When Snape was a student at Hogwarts, the mutability of time had always intrigued him. At the beginning of the school year, a month seemed to last an eternity. At the end of the year, a month sped by in the blink of an eye. It was the same as a teacher. As May rushed to its closing, the school was concerned with two things — exams and Quidditch, and Quidditch predominated. For the first time in years, it was not certain at all who would win the Quidditch Cup, or even who would be second.

SATURDAY, MAY 29, 1982 (THE FIRST QUARTER)

"Who's going to win?" was Kettleburn's first question. "Any dreams?"

"I haven't a clue," was Snape's response. "And none at all."

There were no house alliances at this game. Slytherin needed to win, or outscore Gryffindor with the Quaffle by at least forty points. Gryffindor needed to score and then win. Hufflepuff wanted a quick Gryffindor win with no prior scoring just to tie for first place. Only Ravenclaw went simply to watch a game. Whatever happened, they were in fourth place.

As the students packed the stands, the teachers, too, took their places. This time Snape and McGonagall were separated, with Sprout and Flitwick between them, Sprout next to Snape. They all knew it would be a short game. Once Gryffindor scored, both Seekers would be hunting the Snitch.

Madam Hooch released the four Quidditch balls, and the game began. Gryffindor got the Quaffle and made a run at the hoops. Slytherin blocked and took the Quaffle. Then it happened.

The Slytherin chasers rushed the Gryffindor hoops, and the Quaffle carrier entered the scoring area. Just as she made her pass, the Gryffindor Keeper suddenly looked beyond her and pointed. She paid no attention, taking advantage of his distraction to score, but there was no resounding cheer from the Slytherin stands. Instead, the entire school rose to its feet with a gasp of dismay.

Out in the center of the pitch, both Gryffindor Beaters had hit the same Bludger at the same time. Impelled by the double force, the Bludger rocketed forward with murderous speed and struck the Slytherin Seeker in the back. He tumbled from his broom and lay motionless in the grass.

Snape was out of his seat at once, running across the pitch, Madam Pomfrey right behind him. Madam Hooch called a halt to the game. As the silent stands watched, Snape and Pomfrey knelt by the unconscious Seeker. Dumbledore and the other teachers gathered around them.

Pomfrey checked the boy's back while Snape gently held his eyelids open and looked into his eyes. "I need to get him up to the hospital wing at once," Pomfrey murmured, "to check for internal injuries."

Snape shook his head. "Cracked ribs," he whispered. "He's had the breath knocked out of him, but I don't see anything else."

Pomfrey regarded Snape for a few seconds. "Maybe there's more of Constantina Rossendale in you than I thought." She rose to her feet and conjured a stretcher. "It looks like nothing serious. We'll move him to the sidelines

and I'll treat him for the injuries. I can't say yet if he'll be able to resume the game."

That was it. The game had to continue, with Slytherin minus their Seeker. This meant that Slytherin had no chance of winning the game, because only the Seeker could catch the Snitch. They would have to outscore Gryffindor by more than 150 points, a clear impossibility. Gryffindor could score its goal and hunt the Snitch at leisure.

But Slytherin wasn't going to let them do it. Fired and focused with anger, the Slytherin team now had one goal — to keep Gryffindor from scoring. The Beaters began aiming for the Quaffle, forcing Chasers to swerve away from the scoring area and even knocking the Quaffle itself away from the hoops twice. McGonagall protested, but Hooch pointed out that there was no rule about hitting the Quaffle with a Bludger. The Chasers, meanwhile, swooped and attacked each other like dog-fighting airplanes. The miraculous happened. Slytherin scored again, and it was 20–0.

Then, on the sidelines, Slytherin's Seeker appeared, talking calmly to Snape, Pomfrey, and Dumbledore, and it became clear that he would re-enter the game. Gryffindor's choices were narrowing. If they couldn't score, a Slytherin win would put them in third place and endanger their chances of winning the House Cup. If Slytherin scored twice more, even a Gryffindor win in this game would put Slytherin in first place for the Quidditch Cup. A Gryffindor win now would tie them for first place with Hufflepuff. It was a tense, split-second decision for the Gryffindor team, and their Seeker went for the Snitch.

Half of Gryffindor was screaming for him to stop, sure that they could keep fighting for a definitive win, but it was too late. In a breathtaking dive, the Seeker grabbed the Snitch. The game was over. Gryffindor won the game to share the Quidditch Cup with Hufflepuff. The Hufflepuff stands went wild.

"How strong is it?" Madam Pomfrey asked Snape as they climbed the hill back to the castle.

"Not very. Most of the time I can't see anything, but when someone's knocked out like that, there's no interference. Nothing blocking it, if you know what I mean. My grandmother had me do it once for an injured townsman."

"What did you see that time?"

"A ruptured spleen."

"That specific? It's good to know if there should ever come a time..."

Kettleburn caught up with them. "What a game! Who'd 've thought? I figured it was all over when your Seeker went down! Sprout owes you one!"

"How did you do?" Snape asked politely as Pomfrey left them and hurried forward to get back to the hospital wing.

"Not well. Lost some and tied others. I should have listened when you said you didn't have a clue. Well, there's always next year."

"Ah, but next year we won't have the same Beaters. They're seventh years."

"More's the pity. If you need help with the selection, let me know."

The mood in the Slytherin common room was almost like a victory party.

"Did you see it, Professor? Did you see!" Algie was as happy as it was possible for a losing player to be. "They put their tail between their legs and ran! They couldn't face us team to team! They took second best because they couldn't beat us!"

It was good that even defeat was a kind of victory, and Snape wondered if Gryffindor saw their victory as a kind of defeat. Probably not. That viewpoint usually belonged to the losers. Still, Gryffindor had clearly not wanted to take any chances against a full Slytherin team, and that was something that hadn't happened in a long time.

"I'm sorry you won't be here to help us win next year," Snape told Algie.

Chris joined them then. "I've been telling him he has to fail his NEWTs so he can keep playing. Then you really would win next year."

"I think we'll muddle along without the two of you," Snape said, and left the common room to its partying.

The next day, Snape asked to speak with Dumbledore in his office. He was requesting to be allowed to stay at Hogwarts during the summer break.

"It would give me a chance to do some curriculum planning, to rework lesson plans, to do research in the library..."

"Alastor has been ordered not to bother you." Dumbledore sat at his desk as Snape paced the office.

"The injunction expires in mid July. What if he does something then?"

"There are more people watching out for you, Severus, than you realize. Not just me, Hagrid, and Judge Bones, you know. Alastor's friends don't want to see him in more trouble. They will be keeping an eye on him, to be sure he does not transgress again. They will keep an eye on you, too, to be sure you are safe."

"Spy on me?"

"I agree that there is a fine line between protection and control, but I assure you that no one wishes any control beyond what the court order requires, and that is that you remain under my authority. I would like you to go home for the summer. I would like you to live a more normal life than has been possible these last few months. The 'spying' is intended to help you do that. Is it too much to ask?"

"No, sir," Snape replied.

June was well under way, and suddenly the Sunday when the OWL examiners arrived was upon them. Snape had proctoring duties for written exams in subjects other than his own, and partial supervision of the astronomy nighttime practical session. In addition, he had his own exams to give and grade.

And then it was over. Students, results in hand, were packing and saying their goodbyes for the summer, teachers were storing equipment and sealing their rooms, and the whole school was shutting down.

Professor Sprout arrived at the farewell feast beaming from ear to ear. When the other teachers finally got her to tell them why she was so pleased, they found she was spending July in the Amazon rain forest on an educational and plant specimen collecting trip.

"Anacondas," said Hagrid, having overheard the conversation.

"I beg your pardon," Sprout said, bewildered.

"Ya might bring back a breeding pair of anacondas. I'd like a snake or two t' keep the vermin down in the gardens."

"Don't they get rather big?" asked McGonagall. "I, for one, don't want any hundred foot long snakes eating the students."

"Maybe she could bring back snake eggs instead of snakes," Snape suggested.

"That shows how much you know," Hagrid informed them. "Longest confirmed measurement of a South American anaconda was twenty-eight feet, and they don't lay eggs. Ya been listening to too many stories."

"I stand corrected," McGonagall retorted, "but I don't want any twenty-eight foot long snakes eating the students either."

"You couldn't have anacondas here anyway," Kettleburn jumped in, this being his specialty. "They're water snakes. Can't support that bulk on the ground or in trees, just in the water. Think what the merpeople would do if we put giant predators into their lake. And if you brought a breeding pair you wouldn't have a couple of baby snakes, more like six dozen."

"No anacondas," said Sprout.

"What are you doing for the summer?" McGonagall asked Snape.

"Staying at home mostly. I have a couple of projects I'd like to finish. What about you?"

"My son and his wife are going to Thailand, so I'll be riding herd on the grandchildren for a few weeks. I'll need the time to whip them back into proper shape. Generally they are badly spoiled. These young folk don't know how to raise children."

"I am off to the upper Nile and the pyramids of Nubia," Flitwick announced. "It's something I've always wanted to do, and this year I am doing it."

Everyone else has interesting plans, and here I am thinking it's something just to have the nerve to go home. How pathetic can you get? Still, it had been several years since Snape was able to spend an extended time in his own town, and there was something to be said for the quiet life.

SATURDAY, JUNE 26, 1982 (2 DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)

Hogwarts was closing. Only Dumbledore, Hagrid, Filch and the house-elves remained to watch over the school. The graduating seventh years for the most part apparated out. Many other students left from Hogsmeade with their parents, while the rest took the train down to London. After they were gone, the teachers bade each other a pleasant summer and left as well.

Snape arrived back in Lancashire with his old Gladstone bag and a large parcel of books. He left the lararium in Hogwarts, having concluded that experiment for the time being. After setting his things down in the sitting room, he went back into his little kitchen to rediscover the fact that he had no food in the house.

Idiot! You have to go shopping! What do you get? He remembered his cookbook then, and went to the sitting room to open the parcel. Most of the recipes seemed very complicated, but then he settled on one for chicken paprikas with noodles that looked relatively simple. He started to make a list of things he would need, and included the eggs, milk, sausages, coffee and other things he could think of for breakfasts and lunches.

That was when Snape remembered that he didn't have any electricity for the icebox. *I could put a spell on the icebox to keep it cold inside. But the magic is traceable. On the other hand, I already used magic here for Hagrid's chair...* In the end Snape decided that one small spell on the icebox was worth the trouble. After that he went shopping.

The market on the other side of the river was bigger than he remembered, and then Snape realized that it was, in fact, new — a different place from the market of his childhood. It also carried a wider variety of goods. He took a basket and started to look for the things he needed, overwhelmed by the variety and the lack of experience that made it difficult for him to choose.

“You,” said a matronly voice behind him, “aren’t you Eileen Snape’s boy?”

Snape turned to find himself confronting a familiar face. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Hanson,” he said, “you have an excellent memory.” They chatted for a few minutes, then made their purchases and left to go their own ways. It was a pleasant encounter.

The chicken paprikas took twice as long to make as Snape anticipated, but it tasted quite good.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - E I G H T

T H E B A R R A C U D A

SUMMER 1982

Cookbooks gave recipes for four, six, or eight people. Snape quickly got into a routine where he would cook once every two or three days, then eat the same thing for every meal until it was finished. That way he had more time for other things.

At first he was nervous about stepping outside his door, looking carefully down the street for anyone even remotely odd, but after a while going outside became more routine, and he began to explore. It had been years since he'd been out on the moors, and he'd never before gone out with the purpose of just collecting plants, having always relied on his grandmother's garden as a boy. Now the neighbors, many of whom remembered him and his parents, started to think of him as the resident naturalist.

Snape knew he was seen as more than a little eccentric. It didn't bother him in the slightest — in fact, it made things easier. People greeted him with a pleasant 'Good morning' or asked if he'd had a profitable excursion, but recognized that he didn't want to socialize or visit, so the conversations were generally short. He could even pop into the local pub for a pint, sit for a while in a corner labeling the small clear bags that he put the leaves and flowers into, and not feel out of place.

True, the first time had been strange. When he'd walked in toward the beginning of July to get out of a sudden downpour on the way home, several of the men in the pub had stared at him as if he were from Mars, but he soon found out why.

"Afternoon," the barkeep said, ready to take an order. "Hope you don't mind my asking, but would you happen to be Toby Snape's boy Russ?" When Snape admitted that he was, men came over to shake his hand and tell him that they still missed his father. One or two even asked about 'that fancy

school' he'd gone to, which — to Snape's great surprise — Toby had apparently bragged about at some length. When he told them he was now a teacher at that same school, they agreed Toby'd have been proud, and pleased, too, that he would still condescend to come into a local pub to drink a pint with his dad's old mates.

They even tried once to get him into a game of darts, but it was soon clear that Russ Snape had inherited little or none of Toby Snape's instinctive skill, so they left him, for the most part, to his more academic pursuits.

Only Mrs. Hanson treated him with the familiarity that one expects from close friends. She had the right, certainly, since she'd sheltered him many times when, as a boy, he'd needed protection from his father's rage, or just to give his parents time to be alone. Whenever they met in the market, she'd ramble on about her sister's family and her arthritis. Snape visited her once or twice for tea. He'd always thought of her as old, but really she was only about sixty now, and just ten or eleven years older than his mother would have been had she still been alive.

August came all too soon, and Snape let the neighbors know that he'd be gone for the school year, so they wouldn't think it odd that the house stood empty. They agreed that it would be nice if he managed to make it back for a few days at Christmas and Easter, and then it was the first of August, and he was walking out into his own back area yard with his Gladstone bag and a large parcel of books, sheltered from view by the brick wall and the gate, and apparating back to Hogwarts.

It was the longest Snape had spent in his own home since he'd graduated from Hogwarts four years earlier.

Hogsmeade appeared just as quiet when Snape arrived on the edge of the town. He was walking calmly down the empty street past the Hog's Head when an all-too-familiar voice made him spin around in sudden panic, expecting an ambush.

"There you are, right on time. I see Albus has you well trained already." Moody's scarred face and disconcerting eye leered at Snape from the alley next to the inn.

"You're not supposed to talk to me," said Snape, noting with some relief that Moody seemed to be alone.

"That order's expired. I can have a nice conversation with an old acquaintance in a public street now any time I like just as long as Judge Bones isn't shocked by my behavior. I've just come to let you know I still take a keen

interest in your welfare, and that there's a place up north reserved with your name on it in case you decide to finally pay your debts."

"You can't threaten me."

"No? Think of it as advice. I'm watching. I'm waiting for you to make a mistake. The papers are all ready — just need a date and a signature." Moody advanced slowly until their faces were inches apart. "So you just keep your nose clean and your toes on the right side of the line, because you never know where I'll be or who on the street is working for me."

With that Moody backed away far enough so that he could apparate out, but near enough so that the percussion of his apparation pushed Severus back a couple of inches. When he was certain Moody was gone, Severus continued to the Hogwarts gate, wondering if he should tell Dumbledore what had just happened.

Many of the teachers were already in their rooms beginning to sort things out. They would all get together at breakfast for the welcome back and first staff meeting of the season. Snape decided that before anything he would go up and tell Dumbledore about Moody, mainly because he thought Dumbledore would want to know, Moody being a friend of his.

As he approached the spiral staircase to the headmaster's office, Professor McGonagall came down. She had a pinched I've-just-been-eating-lemons look on her face — more than usual — that made Snape quickly get out of her way. She glared at him as she flounced past, muttering "At least you knew something about potions!" and swept down the stairs to her own rooms.

Somewhat taken aback by the curtness of McGonagall's manner, Snape made his way up the stairs to Dumbledore's office. "Come in, Severus. Come in." Dumbledore called to him from across the room. "I trust the break was pleasant for you."

"Good morning, Headmaster. I... Have I done something to upset Professor McGonagall? She seemed abrupt with me."

"With you? No, no, no. With me. Do not worry. You shall hear all about it, and in spades, at breakfast. I just hope Minerva has calmed down enough by then to let us attend to other business as well."

"Well, that's good, then..." Snape caught himself. "No, it isn't good — it's unfortunate. I just meant that it's good for me that it isn't me... That I'm not responsible."

"Do not apologize. It is, in fact, very good for you that you are not involved. You should try to stay that way. Did you wish to talk to me about something, or is this just a social call?"

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean, I did want to tell you something, it wasn’t just a social call. I just bumped into Mr. Moody. Not really bump, of course. We just met in Hogsmeade.”

Dumbledore smiled as if gently amused by Snape’s awkwardness. “What did Alastor have to say to you?”

“He wanted to remind me to stay out of trouble because I’m still on probation, he’s watching, and Azkaban’s waiting.”

“He should not be doing that.” Dumbledore was serious at once. “I shall speak with him and, if necessary, with Judge Bones.”

“I don’t want to cause trouble.”

“I do not want you to have trouble. Thank you for bringing this to my attention.”

Snape went to unlock his rooms and survey them for a bit, but he didn’t immediately throw himself into doing things. He’d done so much the previous year, which he’d kept good records of, that much of his work was already done. Now he wanted to take his time, think carefully, and fine tune it.

Breakfast was better than he’d expected. During the school year, the teachers ate strung out along the high table, and many of them commuted to their homes in the evenings and on weekends, so they seldom had a chance to really talk to each other. August was the truly collegial time for the staff, when they sat around a lower table and talked without having to worry about the students.

Sprout was bubbling about Brazil, and Flitwick about Nubia. Sinistra had gone to the twenty-four hour darkness of the South Polar Plateau and the Amundsen-Scott Station to observe the stars of the Southern Hemisphere. Trelawney, with admirable restraint, simply ‘could not describe’ her encounters with a renowned selection of medieval mystics, all deceased, while Dawson had taken up archery at the age of fifty-seven.

The better part of breakfast was passed in chitchat, and then Dumbledore called them to order. After the usual administrative announcements, he came to what Snape quickly realized was the crux of the matter.

“We have also,” Dumbledore pronounced with some pleasure, “acquired a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. This is a lady of quite considerable qualifications whom I approached a couple of years ago, but who at that time was unable to accept because of the now recently ended ‘troubles.’ She was, in fact, targeted by Voldemort for her knowledge and expertise, and has spent the last few years overseas...”

There was a general gasp around the table. "You don't mean . . . ?" cried Madam Pince.

"I do mean, ladies and gentlemen, that well-known author, scholar and adventurer, Val Carmichael."

Snape's eyes widened at that, for he knew the works of Dr. Carmichael. A muggle-born witch, she was famous in both worlds not only for her adventures (and her five husbands), but also for her academic merit, for she was a student of anthropology as well as of the development of primitive magic, and was considered one of the world experts on voodoo. Snape had read several of her works, though he owned none of them, and had found them well-researched and valuable.

This was clearly, however, the news that had upset McGonagall, for she remained frozen in her seat, an expression of great displeasure on her face.

Dr. Carmichael arrived on Sunday the fifteenth, intending to be a resident teacher ('Until the divorce is final, of course. Silly American laws. You'd think all fifty states would be the same, but no. If I'd been married in California, I wouldn't have to worry about this year of separation business.') Her entrance onto the Hogwarts stage was so eagerly anticipated that almost the whole staff stayed for supper that evening, and the reception afterwards, just to meet her.

Snape was shocked when he walked into the Great Hall. It was almost as packed as at the start of term banquet. This time, however, the seats were full of Ministry types, reporters, influential rich people, and members of the wizard publishing trade. The return of Val Carmichael to Britain was quite an event.

The staff, in fact, was relegated to the lower tables, in McGonagall's case by choice. From somewhere in the center of the hall, Snape regarded Hogwarts's newest celebrity. It was impressive and amusing at the same time.

Val Carmichael had clearly once been a very handsome woman. She was tall and athletically built, even muscular, but the deep tans of her youth had prematurely aged her skin, and there was a vague mummy-like quality to the leathery folds of her face. If she had left it there, it would have added character. Her attempts to defy aging had led her, however, to dye her hair a garish red, and to bury her wrinkles and creases under makeup. She dressed in clothes a hair too tight, and heels a centimeter too high. Her fingernails were sharp, clawlike, and scarlet, while her fingers were adorned with a variety of rings. She was almost a caricature of what she might have been.

During the reception following supper, Dumbledore pulled Snape over

to introduce him in what must have been a long and boring line of Hogwarts teachers. Dr. Carmichael's acknowledgment was not routine.

"Well, I had begun to think Hogwarts was the male geriatric clinic of Northern Britain. I see I was mistaken. You must be the youngest teacher here."

"I was hired just last year to replace the retiring Potions professor."

"I love potions. I did a book on aphrodisiacs and other love potions. Not that I ever needed them. I must say it was a stroke of luck that other professor decided to retire."

Snape murmured an inaudible response and made way for Professor Vector, moving quickly himself to the outer areas of the Hall, where the refreshments were greater but the crowd less.

"What do you think?" Sprout gushed beside him. "Isn't it wonderful!"

"I don't know," said Snape. "She seemed a bit, well, over the top."

"Well of course, idiot. She's lived in America. She's a celebrity. That's what they're all like."

The clock ticked toward midnight, and the gathering thinned. All the aliens, from the Ministry, the media, and the mob, gradually left. Dr. Carmichael had been the sensation of the year, working the crowd like the professional she was, talking to everyone, stroking everyone.

"I need," she breathed in Snape's ear at about a quarter to midnight, "to get to know my colleagues better. I understand you are the absolute master of the dungeons. I love dungeons. All that writhing and screaming. Doesn't it keep you awake at night... wondering... longing...?"

"Good evening, Valeria dear," said McGonagall from Snape's elbow. "So sorry I didn't have a chance to welcome you earlier. You've met Professor Snape, of course. He was a bit after your time, though I believe you did share a year or two at Hogwarts with his mother. You do remember Eileen Prince? She'd have been right about the same time as you."

"Professor McGonagall. One of my best-remembered teachers. It's so good to see you've managed to hang on here. I suppose seniority can be a treasured commodity. You must be very proud of the niche you've carved out for yourself here at Hogwarts."

"I can treasure the fact that I, at least, have benefited the lives of those with whom I have come in contact. Self esteem. I am sure you join me in pitying those who do not have it."

"I was just suggesting to Professor Snape here that he might show me around the castle."

"And I was just about to see that he was able to relax from the tedium of the evening by being able to go to his quarters, alone, to get a good night's sleep. I'd be more than happy to show you to your own rooms, in case you'd forgotten the way."

"I'm still far too young for forgetfulness to hamper my lifestyle, though I can see why you might be concerned about its appearance in your contemporaries. I think I can . . . get to bed on my own."

"See that you do, dear."

"Good night, Minerva."

"Good night, Valeria."

The entire encounter left Snape with a deep desire to set out saucers of milk for the night.

They had brunch the next day instead of breakfast, so many of the staff needing to sleep in from the late hours of the night before. Snape rather thought that he might be the first, but McGonagall was there before him. "Severus," she waved from the table, "come over here and join me. We need to decide on the Quidditch schedule. Last year was a bit unusual." Within five minutes, the heads of houses were all together at the deputy headmistress's end of the table, Snape at the corner on McGonagall's left, Flitwick on her right and Sprout, at McGonagall's insistence, next to Snape on the other side.

"Last year," McGonagall said, "we had to rearrange the Quidditch schedule due to . . . well, you know . . . and this year we need to decide whether to keep it that way or return it to the way it was before. I tend to think we should go back to the traditional schedule, but it is something requiring the consensus of the heads."

"I rather liked the Gryffindor — Slytherin match at the end," Sprout said. "It made things more exciting, more rivalry during the year."

"Because we dislike each other so much?" Snape asked cynically.

"Of course, dear," replied Sprout. "There's nothing like good, old-fashioned, I'm-going-to-kick-your-face-in hatred to spice up a Quidditch game."

Snape glanced to his right, but McGonagall wasn't listening. She had turned and was watching the entrance, a small smirk of triumph on her face. Following her gaze, Snape saw that Dr. Carmichael had entered the Hall. Her gaze went right to the group at the table's foot, and she seemed displeased. After a moment's hesitation, she came over to them. "Good morning. I take it this is the scintillating end of the table?"

"Good morning, Valeria," replied McGonagall. "I regret to say that this is

the dull, house business end of the table. You might find conversation more to your liking with Albus, or some of the others. There's plenty of room along the table."

"But I love house business," said Carmichael, glancing pointedly at Sprout as if expecting her to slide over and make room for the newcomer on the bench. When Sprout didn't move, Carmichael went to the other side of the table to swing her legs over the bench and sit by Flitwick. It was McGonagall's turn to look displeased.

"We really do need to be informal," Carmichael gushed. "I want all of you to call me Val. That's what my friends do. I already know Minerva. You're...?"

"Pomona," said Sprout, a little waspishly, which Snape didn't quite understand since Sprout was usually so cheerful.

Carmichael looked to her right, and Flitwick replied, "Filius."

"Let me just jot this down in my notebook," said Carmichael, pulling a small spiral pad and a ball-point pen from her robes. "I swear sometimes, my head is like a sieve when it comes to names." Then she stretched her hand across the table so the tips of her fingernails were almost touching Snape's hand. "And you, the baby of the staff, what's your name, dear?"

"Severus."

"How sweet. I'm still looking forward to you showing me around the place." Snape noted that she did not jot his name down in her pad.

"I'm afraid that will have to wait," McGonagall said crisply. "Professor Snape and I need to go over the texts and coordinate our curriculum this morning. And I'm sure you'll want to work in your classroom and office. The last Dark Arts teacher left in the middle of the year, and you have quite a bit of work to do."

This took Snape by surprise, since McGonagall had never mentioned coordinating curriculum before, but Flitwick was acting as if it was perfectly normal, a tiny gleam of amusement in his eyes, while Sprout nodded affirmingly.

"Maybe later, then, Sevvv dear. We have the whole year ahead of us. Oh! There's Albus. Excuse me, I did want to ask him something." Carmichael was up off the bench and heading for the opposite end of the table before any of the other four could respond. They all turned to Snape.

"That woman," said Sprout solemnly, "is a barracuda. She's marked her prey, and she's circling in the water."

"Yes," said Flitwick. "I remembered last night. She's the former Valeria

Aurifosser, isn't she, Minerva?" When McGonagall nodded grimly, Flitwick smiled at Snape. "She collects trophies. She had quite a string here at Hogwarts by her seventh year."

"You'd better be careful," said Sprout, "if you don't want your head on the wall."

"Wait a minute," said Snape, suddenly realizing what they were talking about. "She's old enough to be my mother!"

"I never knew that to stop her before," said McGonagall quietly.

Snape managed to get a quiet word in with Sprout before going up to McGonagall's office. "Is it my imagination, or is there something more between that woman and Professor McGonagall?"

"It isn't your imagination. They clearly hate each other. But I haven't a clue what it's about. Maybe Filius will know. Are you going to let her get away with calling you Sevvv?"

"What am I supposed to say? She's old enough to be my mother, and famous into the bargain. I can't just tell her not to use a nickname."

"She starts calling me Pommy or Mona and I'll tell her fast enough."

Upstairs in McGonagall's office, Snape got a bit more information as well as a lot of advice.

"What Filius said about trophies is true. Her affairs are legendary, as is her callousness when she decides it's over."

"It sounded like she's about to divorce her fifth husband."

"Dear boy, she marries only the rich ones. I heard once that she'd bragged of making a conquest for every place she'd worked and every place she'd visited. I don't know if it's true, but I wouldn't be surprised. And she prefers them young. It's a bit like a game, a hunt. Your bad luck is that you're the only man here younger than she is."

"I could stay away from her."

"Will she stay away from you? Pomona, Filius, and I will help all we can, but it's going to be a long year."

Flitwick was a little more forthcoming. "She had quite the reputation in school for ruthlessness and vindictiveness. I always felt sorry for the young men she got her claws into. One in particular happened long after she left the school. She was twenty-three and already had her first husband, but she targeted a student who'd just turned eighteen, and he ended up dropping out of Hogwarts for her. There was quite a scandal, hushed up of course, but it ruined his chances for a career with the Ministry. Took the family years to recover."

"Is that why Professor McGonagall dislikes her so much, because she wrecked the life of one of her students?"

Flitwick looked embarrassed. "Listen, Severus, I would never breathe a word of this as gossip, but it looks like you're on her menu now, too, so you need to know exactly what you're up against. That young man . . . was Professor McGonagall's son."

"Why then would Professor Dumbledore hire her? Surely he knows about it?" Then Snape remembered the first of August, and McGonagall's anger as she left Dumbledore's office. *No wonder she was upset. How could Dumbledore have done this?*

Now Snape wanted more than ever to have nothing to do with Val Carmichael.

"So this is your little hideaway. How cozy! And so very private."

Snape looked up from his desk at the sound of Carmichael's voice, and immediately rose. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm rather busy at the moment preparing the inventories for the things we just got in."

"Tut-tut, Sevvv dear. All work and no play can make Jack a very dull boy indeed. Come on, now. You have to give me the tour of the grounds. I need to refresh my memory of the place."

It occurred to Snape at that moment that they were isolated down in the dungeons and that Carmichael was blocking the door. And that she was bigger than he was. "You're right," he said, "now would be an excellent time, before the students arrive in September. If you'll wait for me in the entrance hall, I can be with you in five minutes."

She would clearly rather have gone to the entrance hall with Snape, but it was hard to refuse his request without being rude. Carmichael wiggled her fingers in goodbye. "See you in five minutes, then."

Quickly clearing the papers from his desk and locking the drawers, Snape followed, being sure to lock the office door securely as well. He jumped as he heard Carmichael's voice again.

"Whatever do you have to seal the place like that for? It's not like there are students here."

"Potions," Snape explained. "Some of what's in there is poisonous."

Carmichael nodded in understanding, and they made their way to the entrance hall and out onto the lawn.

It was actually a rather pleasant afternoon. Dr. Carmichael had both studied and traveled widely, and had a lot of interesting observations. It was clear that her knowledge of dark arts was extensive, and she might very well be an

excellent teacher. She did, however, have a disconcerting habit of reaching out and touching him — his arm, his shoulder — that Snape didn't like, but he wasn't certain how to get her to stop it.

They saw the Willow, the forest, Hagrid's hut and then, at Carmichael's request, the grotto under the cliff where the boats docked with the first years. They went down to the boats from the top of the cliff, since Snape did not want to take her by Lily's rock. In the dark, narrow cavern she brushed against him once, only once, so he wasn't sure if it was intentional or accidental. Snape was beginning to get nervous, but then they were back in the sunshine.

Stables, hospital wing, library, it was a fairly full tour, and when it was over she thanked him very politely and went her way upstairs to her own rooms, leaving Snape wondering if she was really as dangerous as he'd been led to believe.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1982 (2 DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

Snape stood out on the lawn in the cool air of a September evening, the first in the month, and watched the rim of the moon peek over the low mountains. The day before the first day of a full moon cycle, almost werewolf time, and the arrival of a new group of first years. The thestral carriages had already left for the train station, and Snape was waiting for the sound of the incoming train whistle from across the lake as the Hogwarts Express pulled in from London.

Dumbledore stopped beside him. "Penny for your thoughts?" he said.

"I was just recalling a certain student who wouldn't have been able to come in on the train tomorrow night if he were starting now instead of eleven years ago. Have you ever tried that experiment since?"

"I have not yet had occasion to."

"You know, if you always had the train come in during a full moon cycle, you would always be sure there was no werewolf at Hogwarts. At least not at the beginning of the year."

"Interesting thought, Severus. And if I nailed up crucifixes and garlic, and insisted the train arrive before sunset, I would be certain there were no vampires."

"I stand rebuked and mocked," Snape sighed.

"Do not take it so to heart. It is only the mediocre who are never mocked, and the spiritless who are never rebuked."

"You are too kind, sir. What brings you out here on the first day, anyway? You weren't here last year."

"Tonight I anticipate the arrival of the eldest son of an old friend of mine. The boy's name is Bill. Bill Weasley."

"I'm not familiar with the name."

"You should be, though his parents were before your time. His father is Arthur Weasley, an employee of the Ministry, the one who managed to 'weasel' his way into your cell block and then inform me that you'd been arrested back last Easter."

"Ah!" said Snape. "I shall keep that in mind."

"You are under no circumstances to treat the boy any differently than you would if he were not connected to you in any way."

"Yes, sir. No, sir."

Later, shepherding the students in from the thestral carriages, greeting students that he happened to come face to face with, and generally maintaining order, Snape noticed that Dr. Carmichael wasn't there. *Pity. I'd have liked to find out if she can see the thestrals. Maybe no one warned her this was part of her job.*

When he entered the Hall, Snape was in for a shock, for Dr. Carmichael was sitting in what was supposed to be Kettleburn's chair which, since Snape sat at the end of the high table, made her his only dinner partner. Kettleburn, on her other side, raised his eyebrows in mock horror while she wasn't looking.

Trouble started even before the Hall settled or the first years entered for the Sorting, for Carmichael was definitely pressing her leg against his. After momentary panic, Snape rose, said, "Excuse me, Professor, I fear I am crowding you," and moved his chair six inches to the right. It allowed him to watch the Sorting in peace.

He didn't follow the Sorting as closely as the previous year, primarily interested in the student Dumbledore was interested in. As the list went through the alphabet and the number of unsorted students diminished, Snape began to wonder if it wasn't a tall, gangling redhead who, though quiet, seemed more confident of himself than most of the other eleven-year-olds. Sure enough, that year there were no Xes, Ys, or Zs, and the last name called was 'Weasley, Bill.' The Hat cried, "Gryffindor!" and the Sorting was over.

Dumbledore then rose to welcome the students back to Hogwarts, and to introduce the new Professor, Dr. Carmichael. Val Carmichael was known

by name to many of the students, and she got a warm round of applause. And then the feast began.

That was when the second stage started, for the tables were suddenly loaded with food. Carmichael observed the wide array of entrees and side dishes, and stage whispered, "They don't expect us to eat this, do they? Whatever is it?"

Snape looked around at the food. "It's the normal feast. The house-elves do somewhat lay it on, but it's all very good."

"I don't think so. What happened to the normal food we've been eating? The roast beef and roast chicken? The potatoes and Yorkshire pudding?"

"But when you were traveling all over the world, didn't you try new, exotic foods from different countries?"

"And end up with food poisoning? Or worse? Child, you have no idea of the bacteria and the bacilli, not to mention the viruses, running around in strange places and on strange food. You take your life in your hands every time you pick up a fork. Roast beef for me. Yorkshire pudding. You can't go wrong. What's that?"

The dish contained soft pieces of flesh in a savory sauce that was quite good. Snape had tried it once before. "I think it's sweetbreads."

"Sweetbreads! It's a gland! It's a calf's thymus gland. And if they ever serve you 'fries' in the States, it's usually potatoes, but sometimes it's testicles. Now I have a great fondness for 'fries,' but I'm not about to eat them. And those things. What are those?"

His face flaming scarlet, Snape struggled to explain. As he did, she leaned closer, and he felt her leg press against his once more. "Uh, scallops. I think they're called scallops. And those are shrimps."

"Sea vermin. I have never eaten a piece of sea vermin, and I never will. Stop fidgeting, boy." Her foot was now trying to wrap around his. "What's in this dish?"

"It's a paté, made from goose or chicken livers, I think . . ."

"Organ meat! Where I come from we throw this in the garbage where it belongs. You know, I've traveled among tribes that tried to feed me snakes and locusts. And larvae! And brains! And I always fooled them. I always brought my own food and managed to magic it in. You can't even trust what's in sausages. I'll eat bacon, and roast pork and ham, a leg of lamb from time to time, but it's mostly roast beef and a chicken or two with me. None of those fancy foreign sauces."

Snape managed with some difficulty to unwind his leg from hers. "I hope

you will excuse me,” he said. “I am the head of a house, and I do have to greet my prefects, and my Quidditch team, and the other students. Please. Excuse me. I’ll be right back.”

The Slytherin students were happy to see him, and they appreciated his attention. As he made his way down the table, a little group of girls pulled him aside.

“We thought you could use some advice, Professor. About the situation.”

“What situation?”

They glanced at each other. “Well,” one ventured. “When a boy tries that with me, with the leg and everything, well I just find a way to ‘accidentally’ step on his foot.”

Snape looked up at the high table and realized the whole under-the-table business was clearly visible to all the students at the Slytherin table. He turned back to the girls. “How do you keep him from getting mad at you?”

“Sometimes you can’t, but if you apologize enough, he can’t say anything.”

“Look, she can get me in real trouble.” They, knowing his Death Eater past, nodded wisely. “She can’t know that you know, and she can’t be embarrassed.”

The girls reassured him. “The whole table is mum, sir. We don’t see anything.”

Returning to his seat, Snape tried to steer the conversation away from unusual food. He himself took the plainest, most basic dishes there were, all three of them. Within minutes Carmichael’s leg and ankle were working again.

“Look at that!” Snape said to her. “They may be starting a fight.” He turned toward the Slytherin table, and as he turned his foot turned, his left heel coming down hard on her right big toe.

“You idiot!” Carmichael gasped.

“I am sorry, I am so sorry,” Snape exclaimed. “I can’t believe . . . I am so mortified . . . Please, do you want me to call Madam Pomfrey.”

“I’ll be fine,” Carmichael hissed, and a few minutes later found a reason to speak to Professor Dumbledore, leaving Snape alone at the end of the table.

Snape looked over at the Slytherin table. A hefty percentage of the students had managed to get something stuck between their teeth, for they all had their faces buried in their table napkins. Severus flashed a ‘thumbs up’ to the girls, and they responded in kind.

The feast ended without further incident, and all made it safely to their beds.

The next morning, Minerva McGonagall was making absolutely no headway with Maximilian Kettleburn at all. "I don't see why you can't make a small effort to be at meals on time so that you can sit in your usual place."

"And since I'm not a head of house, I don't see why it makes any difference where I sit." Kettleburn was, in fact, early in to breakfast since he'd spent the night at Hogwarts to make sure everything was going well for his first lessons, some of his instructional materials having minds of their own. The two were sitting in an otherwise empty Great Hall.

"If you prefer not helping a colleague in a difficult situation..."

"Severus? He can take care of himself. And if he can't it's time he learned. He was doing pretty well last night."

"He has less experience with this sort of thing..."

"He's twenty-two, Minerva. If he doesn't know yet how to escape the unwanted attentions of an older woman, it's about time he learned. And he'll only learn by doing. Don't wrap this one in cotton."

"It's just that I believe this to be more than simple flirting. The woman has a reputation..."

Kettleburn began to laugh. "Well good for Severus! There are young men who'd give their eyeteeth to be trained up by an expert with no strings attached. He's not getting any younger, you know."

The innocent subject of their conversation walked into the Hall, which was now beginning to fill. McGonagall waved to him. "Severus! Come sit by me. We have business to discuss. And you, sir," she added, turning back to Kettleburn, "may take your crude ideas to your end of the table. Trained up indeed!"

His eyes twinkling merrily, Kettleburn rose to give his seat to Snape. As the younger man approached, Kettleburn leaned forward with a conspiratorial air. "As long as they're giving it away, lad, there's no harm in taking a free sample." Then he strode, still laughing, to the end of the high table.

"What was that all about?" Snape asked McGonagall.

"Best you not know, dear. Sit down."

By the time Carmichael made it down to the Hall, Snape was well protected on both sides, and she had to make do with Kettleburn's company. She kept her eyes on the center of the table, and they were filled with a cold calculation. It wasn't Snape she was watching, however. It was McGonagall.

When breakfast was over, and the students filing off to their houses for the

opening talks and orientation, Carmichael managed to be beside McGonagall leaving the hall. "They're like birds," she said.

"I beg your pardon," McGonagall responded, puzzled.

"The harder you try to hold on to them, the more they struggle to be free. Hold too tight, and you kill them. I thought you'd learned that already."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I think you do." With that, Carmichael swept from the Hall, up the stairs to her rooms.

McGonagall sought out Dumbledore, not waiting to get to his office before starting.

"You have to do something about that woman, Albus. She's up to her old tricks."

"And what tricks would those be, Minerva?" Dumbledore was patient, but only somewhat sympathetic.

"She's trying to get her claws into that poor innocent young boy..."

"Last year he was that evil Death Eater who was going to bring Voldemort back."

"That was before. Now I know him better. You have to get rid of her for his sake. She'll ruin him."

By this time they were in the office. Dumbledore offered McGonagall a seat and sat himself at his desk. "Minerva, forgive me for being blunt, but we have had a similar conversation already. This time I believe that you are using Severus as a tool to attack Dr. Carmichael with. It is true that she has a somewhat overly physical lifestyle, but he is no child. He is an adult, and has been one for some years. He does not need my protection in this matter. Besides, I have seen no indication that he is even remotely attracted to her, and there is thus no problem."

"She is an evil, wicked woman who preys on..."

"Minerva," said Dumbledore gently, "have you considered the possibility that in trying to atone for mistakes you made in the past, you are in fact about to repeat them?"

"Are you telling me, Albus, that you consider me responsible for what that woman did? She should have gone to jail for what she did, a woman of her age and a mere boy! And now she's after another boy who doesn't have the experience to see..."

"May I remind you that she was, that other time, merely a year older than Severus is now."

"You can count age in more ways than by years! In terms of hardness and experience, the last time she was Severus's age she was thirteen."

"Now Minerva, you did not start teaching here until she was in her seventh year."

"I did the research twenty years ago. I know what happened. She should have gone to jail."

"But you cannot get around the fact that Severus is an adult. As Marcellus was an adult. They have and had the right to control their own lives. Holding a teenage boy is a little like holding a bird. Too tight..."

"You're on her side, aren't you?" McGonagall screeched, springing from her seat in taut anger. "You've been conferring with her on how to dupe me! Well I won't let you! There is such a thing as justice, and justice is finally going to be done!" With that McGonagall stormed out of Dumbledore's office in a rage.

Snape gave his Start of Term speech, which was well received, in the common room. He talked about Slytherin's responsibility to the wizarding world to show you couldn't label a whole group of people because of the actions of a few, and that adherence to the rules was not only protection, but an actual weapon against the malice of enemies. He'd spoken of the possibility of winning the Quidditch Cup and the importance of the tryouts, and of the House Cup and the advantages Slytherin had both in terms of discipline and academic achievement.

"Doesn't Ravenclaw outdo us on both?" called a voice from the back.

"Yes," Snape answered. "But now we beat them in Quidditch. If we can match them in discipline and academics, we have a chance at the House Cup for the first time in more than five years."

"You mean we won the House Cup when you were a student?" cried someone on the side.

"Once or twice. But we had a particularly cooperative group of Gryffindors who were always losing points for their house. You can't count on that now. You have to do it yourselves."

Tryout days for Quidditch were announced, along with preliminary plans for in-house tutoring and Death Eater family support groups.

Snape went to his office to go over the last of the files of those students newly sorted into his house. He'd start the interviews in the afternoon.

Lunch was made less tense by the fact that McGonagall was not there. In addition, Dr. Carmichael seemed to have decided to leave Snape alone, for she sat further down the table talking with Professor Futhark. This did mean

that she was facing Snape the whole time, and he had the distinct impression she was observing him, but it was better than playing footsie.

For the next two days, Snape had no contact with Carmichael at all, and on Sunday she merely asked him a question about the Dark Arts curriculum, an easy question that he knew the answer to and enjoyed talking about, though he rather had the feeling that she had already known the answer as well.

Gradually, over the next few weeks, Carmichael found more occasions to talk to Snape, and the conversations became longer and more involved. Snape found himself enjoying her company, even looking forward to it. There was no one else at Hogwarts he could talk to about the Dark Arts, and her knowledge was a gold mine.

Sprout and Flitwick relaxed their guard, certain that Carmichael realized now how unwanted her earlier attentions had been. Carmichael even found reasons to seek their advice, and had more than one long chat with Sprout about dangerous and poisonous plants, and with Flitwick about the nature of hexes and jinxes.

This new, more professional relationship with Dr. Carmichael seemed to bother Professor McGonagall even more than before, and she became irritable and withdrawn, her temper less under control, even shouting at her students during classes. She constantly warned Snape not to let down his guard, and had long meetings with Dumbledore that didn't seem to help at all.

September wore into October, and life at Hogwarts settled into a routine. Most of Snape's time was spent in his classes or in his office, but he was spending more time at meals in the Great Hall or in the staff room in the evening than he had the previous year. Hagrid was pleased because Snape was eating. Flitwick was pleased because it meant more card games. Even McGonagall accepted the arrangement since while Snape was talking to Carmichael in the staffroom, McGonagall could keep an eye on them. The world seemed a calm and pleasant place.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 23, 1982 (2 DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)

The first Hogsmeade excursion of the year was the Saturday a week before Halloween. They had brunch instead of breakfast and lunch that day so that the students who could go into Hogsmeade would be ready and able to leave around noon (and so they would be inclined to buy more in the village).

For the first time since the beginning of the term, Dr. Carmichael sat next to Snape at brunch. Once again she was commenting on the food.

"What in the world is that disgusting mess?"

"Stewed kidneys. They're part of the old, traditional English breakfast. Or what they used to call a hunt breakfast. At least that's what I understand. We never had them for breakfast at home." Snape's mother had cooked kidneys from time to time because they were cheaper, and steak and kidney pie was frequently served as pub food where he lived, but he didn't tell Dr. Carmichael that.

"Organ meat. How can you eat it? Do you know what kidneys do while they're alive?"

"Doesn't bother me a bit. They have a strong taste, and you do have to prepare them properly so they're not too strong, but I like them. I wouldn't recommend them to you, though. I don't think you'd like them at all."

"I'll make a deal with you. I'll try the kidneys if you'll take tea with me in Hogsmeade."

Snape thought about this for a moment. Hogsmeade would be crowded, so it would be impossible for anything serious to occur. "All right," he said. "You have a deal."

Taking a teaspoon, Dr. Carmichael filled half of it with a tiny bit of kidney and a little sauce, grimaced, and put it into her mouth. After a thoughtful pause, she said, "It's milder than I thought it would be."

"That's because they were cut up properly before they were cooked."

"How do you know that?"

"My mum used to make them. The house-elves here do a good job."

Carmichael had a few more bites of the dish to prove she really did like it, then rose, saying as she left, "I'll see you in Hogsmeade around tea time. At the Three Broomsticks."

Snape went at once to the Three Broomsticks, since it was a place from whose windows he could conveniently keep an eye on the largest number of students at once. He'd hardly sat down when he was joined at the table by Alastor Moody.

"Thought I might find you out here today. Lovely day, isn't it? We've missed you in London." Moody greeted him heartily.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to go on missing me. I haven't done anything wrong."

"I can keep hoping. How's the new professor doing?"

"Well enough. She has a good grasp of the subject, and the students are in awe of her."

"I hear she's a man hunter and a cradle robber. Is she working on getting you into trouble?"

"No."

"Pity. I could use the help. I'm not letting that little room up north go to waste. There's things that have to be paid for and a person who has to pay. It's just a matter of time."

"Mr. Moody, I understand that you consider me responsible for certain things that have gone wrong in your life, but I assure you that I never intended to cause harm, and certainly not to you."

"And yet look what happened. Somebody helped them out. Somebody's paying." With that, Moody rose and left the room, calling out, "See you in December," just before he disappeared through the door.

Snape sat quietly for a long time, staring out the window at the students with their bags of sweets, toys from the joke shop, new robes, and wondered how life could be so carefree for some and not for others. He couldn't remember any time when his world had been like that.

"You're pensive," said Carmichael as she settled into the chair opposite him. "Penny for your thoughts."

"I was envying their ability to relax and enjoy themselves."

"You need to regress, return to your youth — or in your case, your school days — pretend you're fifteen again."

"That wouldn't work. It might make things worse."

"Then get away from here now and again. I notice you don't take your nights off. Isn't there some young lady you're courting who can help you relax and forget this place for a few hours?"

Snape reddened and looked down at his hands.

"You've got to learn to control that. No sooner do I bring up sex but you blush like a girl. It gives you away every time." Carmichael leaned across the table and patted Snape's hand maternally. "Don't worry, I won't tell your secret. But you've got to find a way to get past that, or each year it'll get worse. Now I know a few..."

"I'd rather not talk about this," said Snape suddenly, and stood to leave, but her chair blocked his way.

"You promised to have tea with me. I'll drop the subject and we'll sit and talk about voodoo." Which is what they did until it was time to return to the castle.

After the Hogsmeade gates had closed on the last of the students trudging up the hill to the castle, Snape went directly to Hagrid.

"How is it I can close my mind off to the Dark Lord and Dumbledore, but people like her know what I'm thinking? I don't want her to know the intimate details of my life, but she does! She doesn't need legilimency, she knows! And not just her. Everybody knows!"

"Can't say as I know, so it can't be everybody. What kinds of things do all these people know about ya?" Hagrid was boiling something in a huge cauldron, probably laundry, and had his back to Snape.

"In school — they could always tell when I was scared, Rabastan, Sirius, it didn't matter. They could always tell, and they knew when to jump me."

"And this 'her' y're on about, that's riled ya. That wouldn't be Professor Carmichael now, would it?"

"See? Even you can do it. What good is occlumency if everyone knows what you're thinking? I may as well hang up a sign — Open brain. Feel free to walk around as much as you like."

"What does Professor Carmichael read in ya? If ya don't mind?"

Snape hesitated, but if anyone would lend a sympathetic ear, it would be Hagrid. "Every now and again she brings up the subject of... well... sex. And she knows that I... haven't." Hagrid was silent, kept his face carefully averted, and waited for Snape to continue. "This afternoon she told me I blushed like a girl."

"Ya do tend t' get a mite flustered when the subject comes up," Hagrid observed. When Snape's only reply was a sigh, Hagrid went on. "They ain't reading yer thoughts, lad. They're reading yer feelings. And it ain't coming out through yer brain, it's coming out through yer body. It's blushing, and looking away, and the sudden sharp way ya glance for the exits. Yer body speaks a language. Fang can read it easy. So can the thestrals. I bet You-Know-Who couldn't read it at all."

"Is there any way to control my body's language? I really don't want the whole world to know about my personal life." Or lack of it.

"Practice, I suppose. If y're used enough to a subject, bringing it up in conversation won't make ya blush. If ya know yer eyes give ya away when y're scared, ya can control what ya look at."

"I don't understand."

It was Hagrid's turn to sigh. He pulled over a stool and sat facing Snape, black eyes to black eyes. "I been caring for yer scrawny little carcass since ya was nigh thirteen, diet and rickets and bad teeth, and you ain't never realized

what a friend it is. Ya need t' move, it runs. Ya need t' climb, it climbs. It's a better weapon than a wand, and ya ain't never learned how t' use it 'cept to roll out of the way when someone aims a curse at ya. Ya want t' learn not t' blush? It's easy. Whatever embarrasses ya . . . study it. Learn every twist and turn of it. Get so ya can explain it all in loving detail, and when someone starts talking t' ya, ya won't care. It'll be old hat. Yer eyes go t' exits when y're scared. Check the way out every time ya enter a room so when trouble stirs ya already know which way y're jumping. Then turn t' ice and stare them down."

Snape had never before thought of training himself physically — the same way he might train a dog, or a horse — to conceal emotional responses as well as perform actions. He and Hagrid talked for a while, then Snape went to his own rooms to plan.

The following Thursday, Snape did take his day off. He went to his London bookstore to buy a book on sex and sexual customs. It was probably the most embarrassing book he'd ever read in his life, but it was invaluable. Sunday was Halloween, and by Halloween he'd read and reread enough so that he doubted if any casual remark could cause him any embarrassment at all.

HALLOWEEN, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1982 (THE DAY BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

The Halloween feast was set to begin at eight o'clock and last for two hours. The only other meal of the day was brunch, but an hors d'oeuvres table was set up at six. At the request of several of the teachers, who had enjoyed the welcoming feast, the six o'clock table concentrated on seafood.

Dr. Carmichael approached Snape. "The kidney experiment was relatively successful. Which of these little sea vermin should I try?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't eaten all of them. Those round things are scallops, and the curled pink ones are shrimps. The ones on the strange gray shells are oysters, and the ones in the narrow black shells are mussels."

"If you eat an oyster, I'll eat an oyster," said Carmichael. Snape agreed, though immediately after he swallowed his first oyster she whispered, "They're aphrodisiacs, you know."

Blest be Hagrid and blest be books, thought Snape as the dictionary definition of 'aphrodisiac' skidded across his brain. He picked up another. "They have that reputation, but it's more for shape and texture than any actual effect they have. The power of suggestion may be involved, however. I suppose

if you thought Yorkshire pudding was an aphrodisiac, it would become one.” He ate the second oyster.

Carmichael regarded Snape with narrowed eyes. “Are you sure you haven’t kidnapped Professor Snape and insinuated yourself into his place cleverly disguised? Where’s the sweet, innocent boy I had tea with last week?”

“Dr. Carmichael, I have been called some rather unpleasant names in my life, but you are the first person to have the temerity to use the words ‘sweet’ and ‘innocent’ to my face.”

She laughed, but to Snape’s great relief did not respond with more banter. He wasn’t sure if he could think of anything else to say that wouldn’t come out wrong. Instead Carmichael clapped him on the shoulder and said, “Round one to you, Sevvv. But I’m going to put your theory to the test. I’m going to eat a few more of these, and if you’re wrong, I may be hunting for you later — for dessert.” She turned away from him then and struck up a conversation with Professor Futhark.

McGonagall appeared at Snape’s elbow. “Thank goodness you were able to keep your distance. You have to be careful about that woman, Severus. She’ll probe for every crack in your armor, and just when you think you’re well defended, she’ll strike again.”

“Please don’t worry about me, Professor McGonagall. I’m really not attracted to her. She rather frightens me sometimes.”

“Good boy. But just to be on the safe side, you probably shouldn’t eat any more of those.” She steered Snape away from the oysters.

The Great Hall was festooned with jack-o’-lanterns, black cats, skeletons, and bats. Most of them were purely decorative, but one or two real bats did have to be ejected from the party after they made nuisances of themselves.

Many of the students had purchased costumes in Hogsmeade the week-end before, which caused a bit of a problem since, after about half an hour, it became apparent that some of them were trying to infiltrate the tables of the other houses behind the anonymity of masks for the purpose of gathering information to be used as weapons later on. This only came to the attention of the staff when Gryffindor started the first round of ‘Hunt the Spy’ and chased an unlucky Hufflepuff boy halfway around the Hall before his mates came to his rescue.

At that point, all four tables began a spy search, which quickly escalated to a food fight. The staff sprang to do its duty, with about as much success as one

usually has with two hundred eighty teenagers at a party, while Dumbledore watched from the dais with a beatific smile on his face.

After savoring the chaos for all of five minutes, Dumbledore rose. "Enough!" he thundered, stopping the trajectory of mashed potatoes and gelatin salad in mid flight. "Everyone will kindly sit down and resume the feast, or there will be no dessert." The students obeyed, returning demurely to their benches as the teachers went back to the high table and Dumbledore removed the mess with a wave of his wand.

Snape got back to his chair to find that Dr. Carmichael had moved next to him. She patted the seat of his chair with her heavily ringed hand. "Come sit beside me, Sevvv." He had the impression she may have had a glass or two too many. He took his seat, afraid that if he refused she might cause a scene, and fairly sure of Kettleburn's support on her other side if she got too much out of line.

"I'm sorry if I offended you earlier, dear," Carmichael whispered, leaning towards Snape and slipping her arm into his. "But you really are a sweet boy, and I really would like to know you better. It must be such a strain for you, surrounded by all this temptation, forced to stay aloof, alone. I can help you, make it easier for you..."

She had to be tipsy. Snape glanced over at Kettleburn, who was also looking worried. Just as Snape was thinking that the two of them should get Dr. Carmichael out of the Hall, McGonagall came and stood behind them.

"What do you think you're doing," she hissed quietly at Carmichael. "exhibiting your brazenness in front of the whole school? It's bad enough you behave like a hussy when the students aren't present, but on display like this?"

"Dear Minerva," replied Carmichael, turning slowly to face McGonagall, her voice also low so that the student tables couldn't hear, "there isn't a student here who doesn't do the same or worse behind the sofas in the common rooms after midnight. Believe me, they are not shocked."

"How dare you assume that these children are like you. Just because you were a wanton doesn't mean the rest of the world follows your example."

Snape, his arm firmly gripped by Carmichael, couldn't move, but Kettleburn was on his feet heading for Dumbledore, knowing that an explosion was coming and coming soon.

"Wanton, am I?" Carmichael started to rise but, not relinquishing her hold on Snape, found it difficult to do. "At least I don't chase them away by dying my nose indigo. You stifle them, and they run..."

“Professor McGonagall, if you would kindly step into the side chamber, I would be obliged,” said Dumbledore, who now joined the fray. “And Professor Carmichael as well. Severus, would you assist Professor Carmichael. She may be unfamiliar with the room.”

McGonagall glared at Dumbledore, her temper already flaring, but turned and stalked to the side chamber with great dignity. Snape rose, bringing Carmichael to her feet with him, Kettleburn helping on the other side. Carmichael was quite capable of standing and walking by herself, but both men wanted her restrained in case she decided to lash out.

They managed to make it to the side chamber without the students being aware that anything was happening. Once they were inside, Dumbledore had each of the ladies sit on opposite sides of the room while Kettleburn returned to his seat. Snape was sent for coffee for Dr. Carmichael. He could hear Dumbledore’s voice as he opened the chamber door on his return.

“... last year because of the lack of a Dark Arts professor for the second and third terms.” Dumbledore turn at the sound of the door. “Thank you, Severus. Dr. Carmichael, I strongly advise you to drink the coffee. Severus, you should stay since it seems, will you nill you, you are part of this. Now, Minerva, as I told you earlier, we were able to avoid disaster last June by concentrating all our efforts on the fifth and seventh years so that they could pass their OWLs and NEWTs, but the other years were seriously neglected and far behind where they should have been. The school needs — I need — a Dark Arts expert. Dr. Carmichael has already been able to make up most of the deficit in just two months. By June all of the classes should be well prepared for their exams.”

“Does the moral character of this school stand for nothing! That woman is a disgrace —”

“Minerva!”

“A bad example to our students. She practically encourages lewd and immoral behavior.”

“Have you ever seen her behave in anything but a professional way with the students.”

“No, but at the welcoming feast and this evening she was exhibiting a level of inappropriateness that was unacceptable.”

“She called me names, Albus,” said Carmichael menacingly. “Unpleasant names.”

“You were crawling all over a male professor in full view...”

“Linking arms doesn’t constitute crawling...”

“Ladies!” The room was silent. Then Dumbledore turned toward the door. “Severus, public demonstrations aside, are Dr. Carmichael’s attentions in any way disagreeable to you?”

Snape was taken aback by the question. He thought for a moment. “I would rather it were kept on a professional basis,” he said, noting both McGonagall’s smugness and Carmichael’s anger.

“Very well. Professor McGonagall, I expect you to behave professionally when you come into contact with Dr. Carmichael. You should stay separated from each other at meals and exchange as few remarks as possible at official occasions.”

“Sir, I want to register my opinion that this woman is not fit to teach children and should not remain.”

“Opinion registered. Now you will follow my instructions.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dr. Carmichael, the same. And you will not initiate any kind of flirtation with Professor Snape.”

“Just keep her away from me, Albus. That woman is vindictive and dangerous.”

“Enough from both of you! Now, we must maintain appearances. Severus, you will leave first and go to your place at the far side of the table. Then, Minerva, you will take your seat at the center. Valeria, you will follow me out and remain at this end. None of you should look at each other for the remainder of the feast. We do not want the students to know there is discord among the staff. The rest of the staff should not be forced to deal with it either. Is that understood?”

They all agreed and went to their separate places without comment. The rest of the Halloween feast passed in apparent calm and good cheer.

After the students had retired to their dormitories, the teachers collected in the staffroom for a final round of drinks and a little friendly chatting. McGonagall went immediately to the far corner to help Sinistra fill the little goblets with sherry, and to stay as far as possible from the general crowd.

Most of them had been served when, a few minutes later, Carmichael walked in. She stayed near the door and carefully kept her face turned away from the other side of the room so that she and McGonagall wouldn’t look at each other. Most of the teachers didn’t notice.

“Is it all right if I ask you to get me a glass, too?” Carmichael asked Snape, and there was a bitter note in her voice. “You wouldn’t interpret it as an attack or anything like that?”

"Of course not," Snape answered. "What would you like? Sherry? Port? Mead?"

"A glass of sherry would be nice."

Snape made his way to the other end of the room. "Could I have a goblet of sherry for Professor Carmichael," he asked Sinistra.

"Let me get that for you," said McGonagall, turning to pour the glass from a bottle on the counter and handing it to Snape who took it to Carmichael.

Carmichael received the goblet with thanks and returned to her conversation with Futhark, drinking the sherry in a couple of mouthfuls. A moment later a funny look came across her face. "Dear," she said turning to Sprout. "Is there a ladies room on this floor? I think I'm going to be sick."

Sprout went with Carmichael to be sure she found the way, and the rest of the teachers began clearing up, as it was after eleven o'clock. No one thought much of it until fifteen minutes later when Sprout came running into the staffroom in great agitation.

"Madam Pomfrey!" Sprout called. "Is Madam Pomfrey here?"

"Over here, Pomona," said the nurse. "What's wrong?"

"It's Dr. Carmichael! She's terribly sick, Poppy. I've never seen anything like it."

Sprout and Pomfrey hurried out of the room, while the rest of the staff exchanged concerned glances. McGonagall went over to Snape. "You've got the youngest legs. Go up and let Albus know. He'll want to be with her."

Snape sprinted up the stairs to the seventh floor, and was admitted to the spiral staircase. A few words, and Dumbledore was speeding down to the first floor staff bathroom to find out what was happening. The teachers hovered around the entrance hall and the staffroom, worried and wanting to help.

Sprout appeared among them and was inundated with questions.

"The poor woman," she said. "It's like her system is trying to purge everything inside her. Diarrhea, vomiting, it won't stop. And in between bouts she just keeps pacing, waiting for the next one. Her skin's all clammy, and she's shaking like a leaf."

Dumbledore came to the staffroom. "What was she doing just before she took ill?" he asked.

"She walked in fine," said Futhark, "and we got to talking. There was nothing wrong. And then like that — suddenly she got all queer in the face and said she was going to be sick. Just one second to the next."

"Did she eat or drink anything?"

"I think she had a glass of . . . what was it?"

"Sherry," said Snape. "I gave it to her."

"And where did you get it from?"

"Over there. Professor Sinistra . . . no, Professor McGonagall poured it for me."

"Where is the glass now?"

The glass had been cleared away and cleaned, and placed with the others in the cupboard. There was no way to tell which it had been, or if found, what it had contained. Meanwhile, Madam Pomfrey stayed by Dr. Carmichael's side, unable even to take her to the hospital wing until the purging was finished.

"Right now," Pomfrey told Dumbledore, "I'm most concerned about dehydration. She's losing too much fluid, and her stomach won't hold anything that I give her."

After two hours, the strength and frequency of the bouts of purging seemed to abate to the point where Pomfrey was ready to take Carmichael to the hospital wing on a stretcher. By this time Carmichael was beset by chills, shivering with cold even though wrapped in a blanket.

Dumbledore sent the rest of the staff, including McGonagall, to bed, but asked Sprout and Snape to stay with him in the hospital wing. He had need of their expertise.

"What could cause this?" he asked them.

Pomfrey joined them. "It's over," she said. "Dr. Carmichael is fine. Vomiting, diarrhea, chills, all gone. It's as if she was never sick. First she's shivering in one of my beds, then she's fit as a fiddle. I've told her she has to stay here until morning, and she's agreed."

"Diagnosis?" Dumbledore asked.

"No disease that I know of. Pharmacological."

"Which means?"

Snape answered. "It may be a result of poisoning."

"What could cause this?" Dumbledore repeated.

"It could be something that's both cathartic and emetic. Blue flag . . . May apple . . ." Snape said. "Or a combination of a cathartic with an emetic."

"Do we have these things at Hogwarts?" Dumbledore asked.

"Headmaster," said Sprout, "there are poisons all around us. The bulb of a daffodil could have caused vomiting like that . . . though at that strength it would have killed her hours ago. Finding them isn't difficult if you know what to look for."

"All right," Dumbledore sighed. "We must consider ourselves in the midst of a full investigation. Severus, have you been within view of someone else at all times tonight?"

"Yes, sir. Except when I went upstairs to get you."

"Will it be possible to confirm by witnesses that from a certain time you have not gone back to your own rooms?"

Seeing where the questions led, Snape paused, trying to fight the surge of bitterness that rose in him. "Yes, sir. I've been visible since this afternoon."

"Good. I need to go down and seal your rooms, and you need to sleep somewhere else for the rest of the night. Pomona, how secure are the greenhouses?"

"Ordinary locking, but I shut them down Saturday morning, and I could tell if anyone had opened them."

"I shall seal them tonight as well. As for the more available poisons, we shall have to try to account for as much as we may. I fear classes must be suspended tomorrow while I talk to the staff and the Ministry."

Snape went with Sprout and Dumbledore first to his own rooms, which were sealed against him, and then to the greenhouses, which were sealed against Sprout. That they were also sealed against everyone else seemed irrelevant.

"Where am I to sleep tonight, sir," Snape asked Dumbledore. By this time it was nearly four in the morning. Notices had been placed that there would be brunch instead of breakfast, and that classes would not be held.

"The house-elves have prepared one of the guest rooms on the sixth floor. You should be comfortable there for a day or two. Until we see how serious the situation really is."

Snape went to the sixth floor, immensely tired and more than ready to sleep. The guest quarters turned out to be far more spacious and comfortable than his own rooms, if a bit sparsely supplied with things like books. He had, in any case, no need of books that night—or rather that morning—and could remedy the lack if he had to stay longer than a night.

It was easier to get to sleep than he thought. Random speculation about who might be responsible for the attack on Dr. Carmichael succumbed to exhaustion, and he was asleep very quickly, dreaming of clams and mussels having an obstacle race past the Whomping Willow while Lily cheered 'Mudbloods! Mudbloods! Go . . . mudbloods!'

When Snape woke the next morning, it was nearly nine o'clock. It took him a moment to remember where he was and why, then he dressed quickly

and went downstairs. Most of the staff was filing into the Great Hall for brunch along with a highly elated group of students who were ecstatic to find their classes canceled for the day. McGonagall wasn't there.

"I hear she's still in the hospital," said Kettleburn, not having to explain who 'she' was.

"I think it's just a precaution. She was feeling better around three o'clock."

"You were up that late? Guess it goes with the potions job. My wife wasn't happy with the hour I got in, even if it was Halloween, but when I told her what happened she was as concerned as I was. What did they find out?"

"I'm not sure I'm supposed to talk about it," said Snape, and left it at that.

At ten o'clock, the team from the Ministry arrived. By this time, most of the students had finished in the Great Hall and gone outside or to the library to study. After inviting the Ministry team to join the staff at brunch, Dumbledore turned the Great Hall into an interview room. The team spoke to the teachers one by one, cautioning each not to reveal anything of the session to the others.

McGonagall had finally come downstairs. "Is all this really necessary?" she asked Dumbledore, waving toward the Hall. "It is a serious disruption of the school's routine."

"I fear it is necessary, Minerva. Yesterday's episode is unprecedented in Hogwarts history, at least since the end of the Middle Ages, and Val Carmichael is a very well-known person. We must see that all procedures are correctly followed."

Snape, since he was one of the principal witnesses, was one of the last called. Sitting before the investigators reminded him of his trial nearly a year earlier.

"Did you get Dr. Carmichael a glass of sherry?"

"I did."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because she asked me to."

The investigation droned on in a dull litany of seemingly pointless questions.

"Where was the sherry?"

"In the far corner of the room."

"And the glasses?"

"The same."

"Did you ask Professor McGonagall for the sherry?"

"No, I asked Professor Sinistra."

"Did Professor Sinistra give you the sherry?"

"No, Professor McGonagall did."

"Did she know it was for Dr. Carmichael?"

"Yes."

On and on, for over two hours, the Ministry team questioned Snape, while he locked and sealed every feeling he had under double doors and hatches in order to remain calm. They reviewed the timing of the glass of sherry repeatedly, then extended the questioning to earlier occasions, including a detailed account of Carmichael's 'attentions' to him. Fortunately, his study on the subject had its continued good effect in making him impervious to both the questions and their implications, and at no point did Snape become embarrassed or blush.

"Are you certain that you never encouraged Dr. Carmichael?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Did you ever do anything to make her feel that you took pleasure in her company?"

"I did take pleasure in her company. She has a excellent understanding of her subject, and I enjoyed talking to her."

"So Dr. Carmichael had some grounds for feeling that you might be attracted to her?"

"I have no way of knowing what Dr. Carmichael felt. For that you should ask her."

"But Professor McGonagall tried to discourage you from association with Dr. Carmichael?"

"On several occasions, yes."

When the questioning was over, Snape was asked to take the team to his office. There, in the presence and with the help of Professor Dumbledore, they broke the seals on the door and entered.

"Are these the only rooms over which you have control, Professor Snape?"

"There's also the classroom."

"We'll check that, too. Do you have an inventory of everything in this room?"

Enormously grateful now for all the meticulous work he'd done since taking the potions job, Snape pulled the inventory files from their cabinet and gave them to the inspectors.

"Is this the only place where you keep poisons?"

“Yes.”

“You may go for the moment. We may have more questions after we finish here. Don’t discuss this with anyone.”

Snape left them reluctantly, knowing they were about to sort through everything he had at Hogwarts. *That’s what I get for being the only one here who regularly deals with poisons.* He went to the staff room. It was still only mid afternoon, but since the investigating team had taken over the Great Hall, dinner would be served to the students in their dormitories and to the staff in the staffroom. Meanwhile, a refreshment table had been set up.

“Good Lord, Severus,” Sprout exclaimed when she saw him, “we thought they were never going to let you come up for air. Here, have a bite to eat and something to drink. You must be exhausted.”

“Just pumpkin juice, Pomona, thank you. I’m supposed to hold myself available for further questioning. They’re searching my rooms now.”

“Whatever for?”

“I’m not supposed to discuss it.”

“If this is how they treat you,” said Flitwick gravely, “what do you suppose they’ll do to Minerva?”

“Have they inspected the greenhouses?” Snape asked Sprout.

“Not yet, though I’m sure they will. They’re not going to find anything there but plants, though.”

“Right,” said Snape. “Perfectly harmless things like mandragora, henbane, and monkshood. Nothing suspicious there at all.” Sprout looked suddenly nervous.

Flopping into one of the leather chairs, Snape sipped his pumpkin juice and let the conversation flow around him, feeling no desire whatever to join in. It would have been pleasant just to relax for an hour in the staffroom were it not for the certainty that his interrogation wasn’t over yet. Sure enough, the hour had barely passed when he was called back into the Great Hall.

“Professor Snape, we wish to thank you for making our job so easy. Have you always kept such detailed accounts of your inventory?”

“This is my second year at Hogwarts. Last year I had to start everything with no prior records. The detailed inventories were necessary.”

“And before that?”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Is it true, Professor Snape that you were a Death Eater?”

“Yes.”

“What were your duties?”

"Making potions, inventing a few spells, teaching basic self-defense . . ."

"Did you keep such detailed accounts in your potions work there?"

"Of course."

"Were you ever asked to brew poisons?"

Three heartbeats. "A couple of times."

"Define 'couple.'"

"Four."

"Is there any reason why you tried to minimize the quantity by using an ambiguous word?"

"No."

"Were you ever asked to produce a poison to be used specifically against Val Carmichael?"

"No."

"Are you certain?"

"Positive. I was never told what things were used for."

"So they might have been used against her without your knowledge."

"It is a possibility."

"Professor Snape, who are these people?" The photos from the lararium were pushed across the table.

"That's me with my parents at Blackpool."

"Muggle pictures?"

"My father was a muggle. This was my witch grandmother, Constantina Rossendale, and this my muggle grandmother, Leonora Smith."

"And this?" It was the framed scrap of paper from Lily.

"A classmate who died during the troubles. I didn't have a photograph."

"Who was it?"

"I would prefer not to say."

There was a pause as they noted that he would not answer the question. Then they started up again. "It seems, Professor, that you have some unusual reading material in your room." The book about sexual practices was placed in front of Snape on the table.

"I got that at the suggestion of a colleague. I was unfamiliar with some of Dr. Carmichael's references, and he suggested I learn more about the subject."

"You bought a book like this to understand flirtatious nuances?"

"Dr. Carmichael has extensive experience."

That silenced them for a moment as each member of the team apparently tried to imagine what Carmichael may have said to Snape. Then they resumed.

“Who was the colleague?”

Two more heartbeats. “Hagrid. But he will not want to say so if he feels he is violating my confidence.”

“You also have a set of murder mysteries in your private collection.”

“Yes.”

“The third volume in the series deals with deadly poison put into food that will only be consumed by one person.”

“I believe it does. The poison involved is aconite.”

“Is there any aconite at Hogwarts?”

“Yes, the monkshood plant grows in the greenhouses, and I have aconite in my stores. But you are not looking for that.”

“Why not, Professor?”

“Aconite poisoning affects the heart. Whatever was used on Dr. Carmichael affected the digestive tract, both upper and lower.”

“You know a lot about poisons.”

“I’m the potions master. It’s my job.”

The interrogation of Professor McGonagall was widely anticipated and even wagered on, this last inspired and encouraged by Kettleburn. The entire staff watched from doorways and behind pillars as McGonagall marched proudly down the marble staircase and into the Great Hall, the massive doors closing behind her.

No one overheard the interview, and the Ministry never made it public, but the Hogwarts staff witnessed the faces of the investigative team as they left the Great Hall several hours later. They were all in shock. McGonagall had, of course, taught them all in Transfiguration, and had been head of house to two of the three. She knew their deepest secrets, and was not a woman to forego the use of ammunition when the situation required it.

“They had the nerve,” McGonagall told the rest of the teachers later in the staffroom, “to suggest that I might want to poison the woman! As if I would waste good poison on her! What did they ask you, Severus?”

“They instructed me not to talk about it,” Snape replied. When the others pressured him, he continued, “And I am sure that in light of my experiences of last year, you can all understand why I am reluctant to defy their orders.”

That silenced them all, even McGonagall, though she did whisper, “If there was something I really needed to know, you would hint . . .?” He assured her that he would, if there were.

The only other worry was that the team called Hagrid late into the

evening. Snape had his fingers crossed that Hagrid would, in fact, tell them the truth, and was on pins and needles until the session ended.

"They told me ya said ya'd talked t' me," Hagrid admitted to Snape later. "Now how would they know that unless ya really told them? So I told them 'bout our chat."

"The whole thing?" Snape asked, cringing inside, though careful reflection had already told him that no amount of embarrassment about his sexual innocence could ever compare to being suspected of attempted murder.

"Well, how was I supposed t' know what was important and what was not? Sure I told them the whole thing."

"And you did well, Hagrid. You probably helped me a lot. Thank you."

"Glad I could, too. You been known t' get yerself into the strangest of scrapes."

"I know, Hagrid. Thank you again. I appreciate it."

The investigative team stayed on for a few more days, then returned to the Ministry in London. Classes had begun to resume even while they were still on the grounds and, except for Dark Arts, were in full swing before the end of the week. And then — the remedy for all ills — the first Quidditch game of the season was upon them.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 1982 (TWO DAYS BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER)

It was Slytherin versus Gryffindor, the heads having decided to return to the traditional schedule. Snape was sorry that Algie and Chris were gone, both having graduated, but eager to test the talents of the new team. Lionel Atherton, a sixth year now, continued as seeker. Rhonda Shoemaker, David Commyns, and Saffron Magee were the chasers. The two new beaters were Sergey Duval and Josh Van Zandt, while the new keeper was Richie Gamp.

Snape was a little concerned about Richie's safety, since his father was known to have been a Death Eater, now in Azkaban. What was not known, not even to the Ministry, was that both Beaters and the youngest Chaser, Saffron, also came from Death Eater families. Snape had warned them all that he did not want the game to get too interesting.

Val Carmichael made her first public appearance at brunch on Saturday, the sixth of November, sitting next to Dumbledore while McGonagall sat at the far end of the high table from Snape, closer to her own house table. The atmosphere was deceptively calm.

"How does it look?" Kettleburn had stayed the night just to be on the grounds early for the game. "Are they in fighting shape?"

"It depends on what kind of fight you're looking for."

"Are you serious?"

"Professor Kettleburn, do you see that tall, blond Beater over there at the Gryffindor table?"

"Peterson? He's in one of my classes."

"He dropped out for a couple of months last year over the Death Eater business."

"I remember. Tried to take on one of your boys, didn't he?"

"Exactly. The boy he attacked is now our Keeper."

Kettleburn's eyes widened. "Thanks for the tip," he said, and moved off to make a side bet or two.

In the early afternoon, the whole school trooped down to the Quidditch field. Snape was surprised to see that a large number of spectators were coming through the gates from Hogsmeade. Many of them were total strangers to him.

"First opening game at Hogwarts since the whole You-Know-Who business ended," McGonagall whispered. "Last year they were still hunting Death Eaters. This year everyone feels safe."

Extra viewing stands had been set up to accommodate the visitors, among whom Snape recognized Alastor Moody, who waved at him but did not approach. Students were leaving the school groups to greet their parents, and Snape noted that the first year boy, Bill Weasley, ran over to a tall, thin man and a short plump woman, both with red hair, who must be Arthur Weasley and his wife. They were surrounded by a horde of young children, the youngest of whom seemed to be still a baby, though Snape was not good at judging children's ages. All of them had red hair, and most of them were distressingly active and noisy.

Dumbledore went over to speak with the Weasleys, and Mrs. Weasley glanced at Snape, then rather pointedly turned her back to tend the children. Arthur Weasley, however, followed Dumbledore to where Snape stood next to McGonagall.

"Minerva," Dumbledore said, "I am sure you remember Arthur. Arthur, this is our newest teacher, Professor Severus Snape."

Weasley stuck out his right hand. "Pleased to meet you, Professor."

Snape shook hands. "The honor is mine, sir. I understand that you did

me a kindness earlier this year, and I welcome the opportunity to tell you how grateful I am.”

“Not at all, not at all. I hear you’re taking good care of Bill.”

“Your son is quite competent at Potions,” — an overstatement — “but I understand he excels at Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“Yes, yes. We’re quite pleased with his marks.”

They parted then, McGonagall and Snape to sit with Flitwick and Sprout between them while Dumbledore joined some of the people from the Ministry.

Snape was not pleased to note that Val Carmichael had attached herself to Alastor Moody, and that the two of them were deep in conversation.

Madam Hooch started the game, and from the beginning it was apparent that Gryffindor’s main tactic was to score by taking out the Slytherin Keeper. The first Bludger hit Richie in the shoulder, and the second was going for his head when Sergey managed to beat it back in time. In a way this was not a bad thing for Slytherin as long as they could protect Richie. It meant that Gryffindor, would rather narrow-mindedly keep the Bludgers around the Slytherin goal hoops where they were convenient to use against any Gryffindor Chasers who might approach, while the Slytherin Chasers were free from having to worry about Bludgers. It was a bit of a strain on Richie, though, who was the principal target.

Things began to heat up when a Gryffindor Beater ran his broom into Richie’s. Madam Hooch’s whistle stopped the action. “Foul!” she called. The Quaffle went to the Slytherin Chasers. Saffron made a pass at the right-hand hoop, suddenly dove out of the scoring area as she passed the Quaffle laterally to Rhonda, and Slytherin scored the first goal.

Cheers from Slytherin. Boos from Gryffindor. Snape was growing aware that the visiting crowd was mainly pro-Gryffindor, with the entire Weasley clan at its center. Mrs. Weasley, in particular, was loud and passionate not only in her support of Gryffindor, but also in her opposition to Slytherin.

“Isn’t Mrs. Weasley taking this game a bit too seriously?” Snape whispered to Flitwick.

“Don’t mind her. It’s probably good for her. She was always an emotional student, and it’s been hard the last couple of years having to hold everything in for her family’s sake.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Did you ever hear the names Gideon and Fabian Prewett?”

Snape remembered the day the squad of Death Eaters returned to headquarters with the news that they'd killed the Prewett brothers. There had been something of a celebration. All he said to Flitwick was, "Yes."

"She's their sister. Molly Prewett."

That explained her coldness and turning her back when Dumbledore wanted to introduce Snape to them. She probably knew about Richie's father, too. Snape tried to ignore the screaming visitor stands.

The game had become a war. Normally Quidditch was a highly physical game, but this one was a running battle that was now racking up more fouls than clean scores. Chasers were wrestling the Quaffle from each other's grasp, and two of them even locked brooms, bringing both crashing to the ground, still fighting for the Quaffle, and earning simultaneous fouls against both teams.

Richie was slammed against a goal post, removing him from the game for fifteen minutes. Slytherin made the foul shot, but Gryffindor began rushing the hoops and scored five times while there was no Keeper to defend them. Josh and a rival Beater got into a fist fight as both the Gryffindor and Slytherin stands screamed for blood, and Madam Hooch had to pull the two out of the game until they cooled off a little. Then Sergey's club hit the end of a Chaser's broom, knocking it and her to the ground and the Gryffindor stands began to empty onto the field ready to riot.

The game was stopped as the teachers struggled to get the students back into the stands. Dumbledore placed a barrier down the middle of the pitch at ground level to be sure no one could cross, and the game resumed. It was 90-70 in favor of Gryffindor, and after nearly an hour of play, no one had seen the Snitch.

Still the battle raged. The noise from the stands drowned out any possibility of conversation; the air around the pitch was pulsing and throbbing with the sound, the wooden stands vibrating from the stomping and pounding. Then a Gryffindor Beater hit a Bludger into the Hufflepuff stands forcing students to dive for cover, and Hufflepuff spilled onto the pitch, certain it was in retaliation for their support of Slytherin.

The sun was low in the sky and the score stood 140-130 when the Snitch finally appeared. Both Seekers saw it at the same time and plunged toward the earth, jostling and shoving each other while the electrified stands urged them on. The Snitch won, eluding both Seekers and streaking around the pitch with a whining hum. But now it was only a matter of who would get it

first, and the scoring at the hoops became secondary as Beaters tried to break the concentration of Seekers and Chasers tried to throw them off course.

The end was a neck-and-neck race as the Snitch soared high into the air, both Seekers leaving the rest of their teams far below, and then the Gryffindor Seeker was chasing Lionel with murderous intent as he streaked back toward the ground with the Snitch firmly clasped in his right hand.

Slytherin had won, and all Gryffindor wanted was revenge.

Getting the students back into the castle was an exercise in riot control. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw went first, directly to the Great Hall for supper. Another barrier was placed down the middle of the hall to prevent projectile contact between the two sides as Hufflepuff and Slytherin followed them in. The teachers postponed their own meals to patrol the aisles, allowing the noise to continue, but silencing any attempts by either side to insult the other. By the end of supper, the mood had calmed considerably, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were no longer enemies, and everybody was ready for the common rooms and bed.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - N I N E

BLACK MAIL

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 1982 (THE DAY BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER)

Dr. Carmichael made her next move on Sunday.

"You have quite a fan club in Alastor Moody," she cooed as she settled into the seat next to Snape at brunch and helped herself to an omelet. "We were comparing notes."

"That must have been dull. It was lucky you had the Quidditch to liven things up." Snape was selecting his usual kipper, toast, and coffee.

"On the contrary, it was fascinating. A young, unattached male Death Eater with an interest in sex and murder. It sounds like material for a popular novel. How many parents would feel comfortable with someone like that in daily close contact with their teenage daughters? Think of the scandal if I should happen to slip and mention it in an interview with *The Daily Prophet*."

"Are you trying to blackmail me?"

"You do cut right to the chase, don't you."

"I see no reason to waste time with someone as direct as you."

"Good boy. Now, what would you do if your position here was suddenly attacked by outraged mothers?"

"You're behind the times. It already has been, and Professor Dumbledore stood behind me all the way."

"Ah. That was the Death Eater business. I'm talking about sixteen- and seventeen-year-old girls in your NEWT level classes. There's not that much difference in your ages. Don't tell me you've never been tempted." Carmichael stretched out her hand as she spoke and turned Snape's jaw so that he faced her, meeting her eyes. "Oh," she said quietly, and looked away again. "There's more to this than I thought."

It was a shock to Snape as well to discover that Val Carmichael was something of a legilimens. His mind raced quickly over the past couple of months,

trying to recall any incident when looking at her had brought unexplained random thoughts to the surface, but there were none. This was the first time she'd tried legilimency on him.

"Does it bother you?" he asked.

"Not at all, but I can see where it might bother you, dear. Intimacy does require a disturbing degree of . . . openness, doesn't it? Not something you're good at—or comfortable with—I imagine. I am now on the horns of a dilemma." Carmichael toyed with her food, then continued. "I'm beginning to see why someone like you might reject the advances of someone like me. Or of anyone for that matter. That little shell of yours is going to be very painful to crack, and I'm not into pain—quite the contrary. On the other hand, I have a reputation to protect. Men don't reject me, at least not publicly."

"What would you suggest?"

She considered him speculatively. "Whatever happened to the sweet, innocent boy of last month who blushed at everything I said? I rather miss him. At least there was some warmth there. This new one has gone all cold on me."

"I'll try to conjure up a blush."

"You'll conjure up more than that. Thursday's your night off. You're taking me on a date."

Snape's fork stopped in mid air as he glanced sideways at her. "Why?" he said.

"I told you. I have a reputation to protect. I'll leave you alone here at Hogwarts if we give the impression something's happening outside."

"Why don't you just choose someone else?"

"Who? Binns is a ghost, Flitwick and Dumbledore are too old. The others are married."

"Hagrid? Filch?"

Carmichael glared at him. "I'm trying to let you off the hook, and you're insulting me. I can get nasty, too, you know."

"What kind of date were you contemplating?"

"They tell me you're a muggle-raised half-blood. I'm muggle-born. How about dinner and a movie?"

Snape thought for a moment. It didn't seem like such a bad proposition, as long as they kept it platonic. "Anything in particular that you want to see?" he asked.

"Surprise me."

And that was it. Snape had a date for Thursday evening.

The next problem was deciding where to go for dinner and what movie to see. Fortunately, Snape knew something of Dr. Carmichael's taste in food, and there was more than one restaurant, nice restaurants with good atmosphere (at least that was how they appeared through the windows), that catered to the plain, British, roast beef taste. On a Thursday evening in November there should be no problem getting a table.

It would, however, be more expensive than Snape was used to, which meant he would have to take a relatively large sum out of his bank account, necessitating the use of his cash card. He didn't really want Dr. Carmichael to know he had a muggle bank account, but there was no help for it.

That left the choice of a movie. Snape had restarted his subscription to the *Guardian* with the beginning of the new school year, and he pored over the listings trying to find something that he could watch with her that wouldn't be suggestive of a closer relationship.

That proved hard to do. It was November, and the movie listings were mostly films that had come out in the spring and the summer. Snape had saved old newspapers and was able to check the reviews, and was appalled at how many of them had either a romantic theme or were blatantly risqué. One or two looked promising on the surface, until he read the review. One, which he'd hoped to be a scholarly work, turned out to be very graphic. *It's a good thing I have the newspaper. I'd hate to think what would happen if I took her to that one.*

In the end, the only one that seemed safe was a film about a man who got himself trapped inside something called a computer. Since much of the movie itself was actually made on one of these computer things, Snape thought it might be interesting to watch.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 1982 (3 DAYS AFTER THE LAST QUARTER)

McGonagall caught him at the top of the dungeon steps when he came up for breakfast on Thursday morning.

"Severus, you are not spending the evening with that woman!"

"How did you know?"

"It is true, then? She's talking about it at the high table, how you've been planning a romantic evening for ages, but it had to be postponed because of the 'unpleasantness.' And whenever she says 'unpleasantness,' she turns and smirks at me. How could you?"

"It hasn't been for ages, and I have no intention of it's being romantic, but please don't make a row. She wants this, and I don't need any more enemies."

McGonagall regarded him with just the tiniest touch of sympathy. "All right, I won't say anything. But you keep away from that woman's claws. She's a shark."

"Sharks don't have claws."

"Jaws, then. Or think of her as a tigress, ready to tear you to shreds."

"Nice image. I'll keep it in mind," said Snape, wondering if McGonagall had talked to her own son this way. When Carmichael was younger, talk like that might have been counterproductive.

Dumbledore was informed that neither Snape nor Dr. Carmichael would be at supper, and when Snape left his dungeon rooms late that afternoon dressed neatly in Victorian black frock coat and trousers with an overcoat against the cold, Carmichael was waiting for him in a rather elegant green cocktail-length dress, a thick, warm, hooded cape over her arm. Students on their way to the Great Hall paused to watch.

Taking the cape, Snape said politely, "You look very nice tonight," and held the cape open for her to step into, which she did leaning back a little so that her face turned toward him as she replied, "So do you." Around them students were whispering and stifling giggles, but Snape did his best to ignore both them and the amused teachers as Carmichael slipped her arm through his and they walked out into the November evening.

Neither spoke much on the way down the hill. Snape didn't look back either, but Carmichael did, and raised her free hand to wave. "We have an audience," she told him, which didn't make Snape feel any more comfortable about the whole business.

Once outside the Hogsmeade gate, they apparated to a little alley near the Leaky Cauldron. Snape led the way first to a cash machine in Leicester Square to get the necessary pounds while Carmichael watched, fascinated.

"You're a very strange wizard, even for a half-blood," she said. "Half the muggle-borns forget how to do things like this the moment they pick up a wand. It's as if they had a frontal lobotomy."

The restaurant was exactly what Snape had hoped, elegant and formal, where they could order perfectly normal soup, salad, and roast beef. Both oysters and escargot were on the menu, but neither of the two felt adventurous.

"So," said Carmichael as they waited for their dinner. "Tell me about yourself."

"There isn't much to tell. My mother was a witch, my father a muggle..."

"Was? Are they dead?"

"Car accident. It was a long time ago. I went to Hogwarts, and now I teach there. That's all there is."

"Except for the excursion into the Death Eater business."

"I'd rather not talk about that. Besides, no one could top Moody's fertile imagination. What about you?"

"Muggle-born in a community with a large wizard population, so the Hogwarts letter came as no shock. It was harder for muggle-borns then, but Professor Dippet recognized my potential and had a job arranged for me in the Ministry with Muggle Artifacts. Unfortunately there was a change of teaching staff in my seventh year, and one of the teachers wasn't very experienced. As a result, we weren't adequately prepared for the NEWTs and I couldn't have the job. I got a job with a muggle company instead and met my first husband, Mr. Wolfstone. He was a muggle."

"So it turned out all right, then?"

"It did not. Jacob and I fought like cats and dogs. By the age of twenty-three I was in the middle of my first divorce. That was when I met Ignatius Carmichael. We traveled the world together, he and I, and I started writing. That's why I kept his name, even after the divorce."

Snapes's face and mouth remained closed, but Carmichael leaned across the table and patted his hand. "You don't have to ask. Five husbands, five divorces. I'm beginning to think maybe it's me. There was Mulberry, then Pendennis, and the one I'm currently dumping is Buntley. Those are the ones I actually married. Variety is the spice of life."

"I don't think I could do that," Snapes said.

"Dear, as tight as you've locked yourself up, I'll bet there's a lot you can't do. I wouldn't wager money you could even talk to a girl, much less go to... Oh, dear," she began to laugh, "I've got you blushing again!"

The food came then, and for a few minutes neither of them spoke.

"I'll bet," said Carmichael, pouring herself a second glass of wine, "that you've been wondering why Professor McGonagall doesn't like me."

"It isn't really my business."

"But you're stuck right in the middle of it, dear. I'd say that makes it at least a little bit your business."

When Snapes didn't respond, Carmichael went on. "When I was in seventh year, Professor McGonagall's son started in first year. He was a cute little boy, and because she was one of my favorite teachers, I kind of adopted

him — helped him with his homework, things like that. Then I left, got married, and six years later, in the middle of the divorce, I came back to Hogsmeade to have some quiet time and reflect on the direction my life was going. It happened to be an excursion weekend, and Marcellus recognized me and came over to say hello.

“Well, he wasn’t eleven any more, he was seventeen and an adult. Smart and good-looking. And worried about his future. His mother was trying to push him into a career he hated. He needed someone to talk to, I needed someone to talk to, and so we talked. I met him the next excursion weekend, and then over the Christmas break. By then we’d both realized that we wanted more than talking.

“McGonagall raised the roof. She threatened him, and she threatened me. She went so far as to tell him she would disown him, and even hired spies to follow him. He was going crazy. During the Easter break he told me he had to get out of the situation and asked me to help. What was I to do? He dropped out of Hogwarts, and we were together for six months. Then he went back to her and patched things up while I took up with and married Ignatius. We’ve never seen each other since — I understand he’s married and has children and is very happy — but McGonagall’s never forgiven me.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. It was more than twenty years ago.”

They talked a little more about other things, then Snape said they had to leave to catch the movie. The cinema was just on the other side of Leicester Square, and they had plenty of time to stroll leisurely over to it. Snape had been in a cinema once or twice as a boy, and to the theater more recently, and so managed to figure out the box office and the tickets with a minimum of trouble.

Just before they went in, Carmichael looked over the posters with some distaste. “Are we sure we want to see this?” She asked.

“I thought it might be interesting. It’s the cutting edge of computer graphics technology.”

“If you say so, dear, though I never thought I would ever watch something called *Tron*. Sounds like a cartoon monster to me.”

“You can’t tell me you enjoyed that!” exclaimed Carmichael as they left the cinema. “It made no sense at all.”

“But it did,” Snape replied. “It was fascinating. The master program was taking over all the peripheral programs and incorporating them into itself. If it couldn’t take over all of a program, it diverted its functions into non-vital

areas, then eventually erased them.” He was thinking of the NASA computers that ran his beloved Apollo and Voyager spacecraft. “Governments and large companies are all using computers like that. I think they’re even marketing a couple that you can use in the home.”

“How would you know that?”

“I read a newspaper.”

“Okay, smart guy, in the movie, how did the person get into the computer?”

“That was because of the orange.”

“What orange?”

“The one they were experimenting on. The one they separated into its molecules then put back together. The computer used the machine on him.”

“Sounds like ‘Star Trek’ to me.”

Snape stopped dead in the middle of Leicester Square. “What’s ‘Star Trek’?” he asked. “Because there’s another movie out that has ‘Star Trek’ as part of its title.”

“It’s a television show I used to watch with my third husband, Peter Mulberry. He was a muggle, too. That would have been about fifteen years ago. They were always sending things to different places by mixing up their molecules.”

“Maybe I’ll go to that one next time. Science and the stars. Sounds interesting.”

“Science fiction and the stars. There’s a difference.”

“Didn’t you like anything about the movie?”

“Tron was cute. I wouldn’t mind crawling into a computer with him. Flynn wasn’t too bad either. What do you say to a little nightcap?”

“Do you mean a drink? I can’t. It’s time for rounds at Hogwarts, and I have to get back.”

“Pooh!” snorted Carmichael. “Back it is, but I accept the date for next week.”

“What date?” Snape was taken aback.

“To see the ‘Star Trek’ movie, of course. I wish I’d known earlier that you were into this science thing. We could have had a wonderful September and October.”

Snape stopped again. They were almost at Charing Cross Road and their apparation point, but the conversation had taken a dangerous turn. “I can’t do this with you again next week.”

“Why not?” Carmichael’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

It was an embarrassing moment, and Snape knew he was blushing again, though the darkness of the night mercifully hid it. "I don't have the money. I mean, I can't afford to spend that much money every week. I haven't got a lot, and I need to be careful."

Carmichael threw back her head and laughed. "If that's all, dear, don't you fret for a moment. I'll take you out. After four divorces and into my fifth, and two of them well-to-do muggles, not to mention all my book sales, I have more than enough to support your taste in movies. I've supported tastes in much more expensive things before now. You just support my public reputation, and you can write your own ticket."

They apparated back to Hogsmeade and walked up the hill to the castle. As they neared the staff room, Carmichael began to tell a joke, so that Snape was smiling when they walked in to greet McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout. McGonagall glowered, but offered sherry. Carmichael accepted, but insisted on pouring it herself. The tension was hidden behind masks of civility, and for the most part Snape paid no attention, instead explaining the movie to the others.

"What's a computer?" Sprout asked when he was done.

"Never mind," Snape said, shaking his head. "It's a muggle thing."

That answer apparently gave Dr. Carmichael great satisfaction, for she raised her glass in a mock toast to Professor McGonagall, a look of triumph on her face. "Yes," she said as she set down the goblet and wished the others good night. "There are certain things that only we muggles can understand."

"Well, that's over with," said McGonagall when Carmichael had left. "You don't have to do that again."

"Yes, I do," replied Snape. "We're seeing another movie next week." He ignored McGonagall's angry glare.

The next day, Snape was introduced to another aspect of his 'date' with Carmichael — the students. The first time a couple of girls stopped to watch him as he walked past them, he thought it was his imagination. By the short time it took him to cross the entrance hall and go in to breakfast, he knew it wasn't. He felt like the focal point for every pair of eyes in the school. Boys smirked, girls giggled, and it took every ounce of control Snape had not to start blushing again.

Kettleburn didn't help. "Well," he asked as soon as Snape sat down, "how was she?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"How was she?"

Toby's demon was back with full force, and Snape wanted to smash a fist into Kettleburn's nose. Rigid with anger and a growing sense of humiliation, he replied icily, "We went to dinner and a movie."

"And then?"

"We came back here to join the others in the staff room."

"And then?"

Before Snape could answer, Val Carmichael walked into the Hall, clearly rejoicing in the fact that she was the center of attention. And she had changed. Her hair was a gentler honey color, her makeup subtle and flattering. She wore robes of a demure heather green, and her soft, low-heeled shoes were soundless on the stone floor. In making no attempt to hide her age, she'd somehow managed to appear younger.

Both men rose as she approached, and Kettleburn relinquished his seat to her automatically, as if the place next to Snape was now hers by right. She settled in, naturally and comfortably, as little groups of students at the different tables began whispering. In the center of the high table, McGonagall glared, her nose pinched with anger.

"I slept very well," Carmichael began sweetly. "There's nothing like a romantic evening to relax you and give you a good night's rest."

Snape said nothing, but Kettleburn was grinning from ear to ear.

It got worse as the day progressed. Students paid scant attention to their assignments in his morning classes, and Snape caught tiny snippets of their conversations as he moved from cauldron to cauldron.

"... what she sees in him ..."

"... enough to be his mother ..."

"... better than Filch, I guess ..."

"... both must be desperate ..."

"... imagine them kissing ..."

Toby's demon seethed inside of Snape, his manner becoming colder and colder as he struggled to keep his anger in check. He hardly dared say anything to the students for fear that it would be the wrong thing, or that he might lose control and scream at them, which would just make matters worse.

Lunch was an ordeal, the whispers and stares more pronounced, the level of mirth in the students' faces rising. When Carmichael came in and sat beside him, there were open giggles. Snape hardly spoke to her at all.

Then, in the afternoon classes, he found out that she had been talking about him. Talking about him to her classes. Peterson of Gryffindor didn't

even try to hide the laughter in his voice as he settled into his seat before class began. "It's okay if you don't have our papers corrected from yesterday, Professor. We heard you were . . . occupied." His quip met with general laughter from the Gryffindor students.

Without even thinking of it, Snape had his wand out of his sleeve and in his hand, striding quickly over to Peterson's desk. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second, then Snape was pushing the demon down with all his strength, forcing it into hiding, strapping it into the most hidden corners of his mind and bolting all the doors.

"I might have occupied myself with your paper, Peterson," Snape said in a voice that was deceptively soft and gentle, "if it had contained even one iota of a useful idea. As it was, the unending stream of senseless drivel drove me to seek intellectual stimulation elsewhere, before the infection of its stupidity turned me into the same kind of mindless dolt as its writer. Now, are you going to attempt the assignment, or am I going to take points from Gryffindor?"

Standing there, icy calm, wand in hand and eyes black as jet, Snape radiated more menace than could be accounted for by the mere threat of deducting points. The room was silent, and Peterson backed down. Cold, palpable anger kept Snape's classes under control for the rest of the afternoon.

Snape paced his office in the time between the end of his last class and the beginning of supper. *How dare they! How dare they think my private life is nothing more than fodder for their jokes and gossip! They have no right! It isn't bad enough that I'm jailed up here in the middle of nowhere, with a mad auror thirsting for my blood and an aging nymphomaniac blackmailing me to escort her — not to mention being the focus of McGonagall's guilt and misguided maternal instincts, or Kettleburn's desire for vicarious titillation . . . Gad! What might Sprout and Flitwick be saying about me behind my back!*

There was a knock on the door, and Snape snapped, "Come in!"

It was Hagrid. "Begging you pardon, Professor, but I come to see how ya was doing. Seems there's some concern about yer, uh, mood."

"So they've gotten to you, have they? That didn't take long. I presume the owlery has been busy all day, too. Maybe they should take out notices in *The Daily Prophet*."

"Yes, I can see where they might get the idea ya was bitter."

"I feel like a bug stuck on a display tray with a pin through him. Well, what I do in my free time is none of anyone's business including yours. Is that what you came for?"

"If it's any help, ya 've always been the subject of some speculation."

"What!"

"Well, for that matter, so have I. Where I come from, and why I'm so big. Flitwick — they try to figure out why he's so small. Trelawney — they've made up a whole history 'bout her 'tragic' life. They got so they almost believe it, too. She's the kind it's easy to imagine things about. You, y're a natural, being so close t' their ages and all. And the whole Death Eater thing."

"Why do they have to gossip at all?"

"Boredom. Stuck out here away from family, friends. Ya got t' get yer entertainment where ya can find it. Happens you and Professor Carmichael, well you're hot news at the moment. It'll die down."

"And until it does?"

"Don't let it get t' ya. It ain't the first time, it won't be the last. And you ain't the first nor the last neither. It's just that with you..."

Snape spun around at the hint of mirth in Hagrid's voice. "What about me?"

"Y're such an easy target, lad. So stiff, so straight-laced. They get a chance t' pull you down to earth, make you seem human and fallible, well they're going t' take it."

"Not if I can help it they won't. There's nothing human or fallible about me. No chinks in the armor. They start making me the butt of their jokes, especially those monsters from Gryffindor..."

"Now y're playing right into their hands. Y're letting them rile ya. Got t' stop that, lad. Teenagers are like sharks. They smell blood, and they'll tear ya t' pieces. Don't let 'em smell blood. Cool, that's the ticket."

"Right. Cool. Cold as ice. They aren't important and they don't exist. What do I do about Carmichael?"

"Rumor is she's got a ring through yer nose and she's leading ya t' slaughter. You got your own reasons for keeping company with her, but ya could show a mite of independence in front of the students. Keep 'em guessing. Show 'em she might be exaggerating when she says she's calling the shots."

"Is that what she's telling them?"

"Don't know if she is. That's what they're saying. Might just be 'cause she's older and you're... well... not in her league when it comes t' experience."

"They know that, too!"

"Don't nobody know nothing. It's just talk. Ya handle it right, and ya can squelch it. Just don't hide from them."

"Meaning you want to be sure I go to supper and eat something."

"I always knew ya could see right through me, Professor."

There was something in what Hagrid said, so at first Snape behaved quite normally at supper, acting pleased to see Dr. Carmichael and chatting with her about unimportant things. Then he excused himself to go and speak for a moment to Professor Flitwick. The moment stretched to nearly ten minutes, until Carmichael began to look annoyed. Snape returned then to resume their conversation, but made a point of including Professor Kettleburn, making it clear that Carmichael was not controlling whatever relationship might exist between them.

At the end of supper, as they were rising to leave the Hall, Flitwick came over with the cribbage board. "Fancy a game or two?" he asked, and Snape agreed. They stayed in the Great Hall for the game, and Carmichael left in a huff. Snape glanced once at McGonagall, and she seemed pleased.

A couple of hours later, when Snape and Flitwick went into the staff room, Carmichael was there. She came over, and Snape didn't try to avoid her. "You are still taking me to London next Thursday," she said, making it sound like a question, though both of them knew better.

"Of course," Snape replied.

Dinner the following Thursday was at a restaurant that specialized in seafood. "Now," Snape told Carmichael, "you can have something safe like fish and chips, or you can be as adventuresome in your food as you are in your life and order the platter."

"What's on it?"

"Shrimp, clams, mussels, squid, and abalone."

"Sounds terrible."

"Fish and chips, then?"

"No. I'll take the platter."

The dinner turned out to be amusing. Dr. Carmichael kept her voice at a suitably low level as she explained in excruciating detail why clams and mussels (crabs and lobsters, too, for that matter) had to be alive at the moment of their cooking. This didn't upset Snape at all, since he already knew the sordid details, and they didn't bother him. Then she pronounced the squid the equivalent of tire tread in texture and insisted that Snape take hers—a bonus for him since he liked them very much. An exposition on mussels followed, comparing the black shells to the souls of Death Eaters which, on opening and exposing, revealed a much more attractive soul inside.

"Has anyone ever cracked your soul open, dear?" Carmichael asked.

"I don't crack easily," Snape replied.

The movie, however, was entirely for Snape. He completely forgot that Carmichael was there. It took time to adjust for the fact that most of the audience seemed already to know the characters, and that there was a preexisting situation that he was supposed to be aware of. Then Snape noted the close-up of the book spine that said *Moby Dick*, wondering for future reference if it was a real book, and entered into the story.

The most fascinating aspect was the idea that the molecules of a sterile world could be rearranged to form a new world that contained the seeds of life. This, combined with the characters' habit of disarranging and rearranging their molecules to travel long distances had Snape thinking of the whole question of transfiguration. *I wonder if Professor McGonagall knows she's temporarily rearranging molecular structure?*

Obsessive revenge and heroic sacrifice combined on screen with magical present and scientific future to form a 'reality' in which muggles and wizards might work together. It was a revelation. The film makers were not, of course, thinking of magic when they made the movie but Snape, watching it, was.

Afterwards, walking back towards the Leaky Cauldron, Snape tried to explain it to Dr. Carmichael. "Everything we do has its counterpart in the scientific world, even if for the muggles it's still speculation. Potions is chemistry. Transfiguration is molecular physics. There's a meeting place, a point of mutual understanding. In the muggle world that point still inhabits the realm of science fiction, but that could change any day . . ."

They reached the little alley behind the Leaky Cauldron, Snape still rapt and enchanted by the movie and, as they prepared to apparate, Carmichael twined her arms around his neck and started to kiss him.

Snape instinctively jerked backward, eyes wide as a startled deer, and instantly shut down, barely registering the blow as his head struck the stone wall behind him.

Carmichael rubbed her knuckles where they, too, had abraded against the stone. "Well, that was hardly subtle. I guess I don't need to ask you your opinion of my feeble attempts at seduction. I don't think I've ever been rejected quite so emphatically before."

"You took me by surprise."

"And you interpreted it as an attack. You've got to lighten up a little."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"The man repels any closeness from me and has the gall to hope I'm not offended. Am I so repulsive?"

"No, no, don't think that. You're not repulsive. It's me. I'm not ready for this."

"You're twenty-two. When are you going to be ready?"

They apparated back to Hogsmeade in silence, and in silence went to the staff room for a nightcap. Carmichael once again poured her own drink and brought one to Snape. The heads of houses did their rounds a half hour later, and then they all went to bed.

Two days later, on Saturday, Snape asked to speak to Dumbledore.

"I take it you do not reciprocate her affections," said Dumbledore calmly as he handed Snape a cup of tea.

"Not in the slightest. It's like being with your mother, or one of your teachers. It just isn't right."

"Hardly something that Valeria would understand, I fear. I trust she has not yet found out that Eileen was at Hogwarts at the same time she was."

Snape paused in the stirring of his tea. "She's the same age as my mother?"

"I believe there was a five year gap. The older one gets, of course, the less important these minor age differences become, but if you feel awkward being with someone of your mother's generation, there is nothing that is going to swing you to the opposite viewpoint."

Snape considered this for a moment. "No," he said finally. "Nothing is."

Dumbledore sat at his desk, hands steepled in front of him. "Then—excuse me for asking—why do you take her to London every Thursday?"

"She insists on going. I wish I could find someone else for her to be interested in. I don't even know why she picked me. I'm not exactly the best looking, and even she's hinted that it isn't my personality."

"It is youth, I fear. And a narrow field. It was she, alas, who decided it would be best to reside in the castle instead of commuting. I could hardly insist, as she has been in America all these years and did not really have a British home to commute to. And it has been wonderful for the students. This year's NEWT classes are already a little ahead of where they should be, the OWL candidates are performing well at level, and the lower years are catching up rapidly. And I have interviewed the students. The progress is real. So in that sense, her being here is a great boon to Hogwarts, but it keeps her caged. Kettleburn and Futhark are married. Binns is a ghost. Single live males, in descending order of age, are me, Flitwick, Hagrid, Filch, and you. You are the only one younger than she is."

"My rotten luck."

"Pardon me, Severus, but why do you allow her to insist? You do not have to go."

Snape looked down at his hands. Very softly he said, "She's pointed out that by showing an interest in older women I'm relieving parental concerns that I might have an interest in . . . younger women."

"None of our parents has expressed any such concern. I have seen no evidence of a problem." When Snape didn't reply, Dumbledore continued. "Has she threatened to make it a problem?"

It was a question Snape didn't want to answer, not with Carmichael talking to Moody. There was a saying about Furies and a woman scorned. Carmichael, *The Daily Prophet*, and Moody were a combination that could get him arrested again. "It's nothing I can't handle," was what he said to Dumbledore. Then he looked up. "I know it's none of my business, but she told me about the problem with Professor McGonagall's son. If it's true, I think the antagonism between the two of them is making my problem worse."

"That the two ladies are battling each other over your soul? It is a possibility. Minerva may see history repeating itself in this situation."

"Professor, is it true that Professor McGonagall's son was trying to escape from his mother's control?"

"Is that what she told you?" Dumbledore thought for a moment, then spoke carefully. "Marcellus did feel at the time that he was being pressured into a career he did not want. And he was quite taken with Valeria. Minerva, for some reason, considered it a personal attack against herself."

"Professor, when did the . . . incident . . . occur?"

"Let me see . . . Marcellus started first year just before Minerva began teaching, which was December 1956 . . . It began in the autumn of 1962, I believe."

Snape left Dumbledore's office still uncertain how to handle the Carmichael problem, but with a disturbing piece of information. Carmichael had spoken of a change in teaching staff in her seventh year and a new teacher whose inexperience had left Carmichael unprepared to pass her NEWTs. Could Professor McGonagall have been that inexperienced teacher? And if so, was it possible that Carmichael had influenced McGonagall's son as revenge for having had her own career plans destroyed? He could think of no way to uncover the truth of the matter, but the situation was looking far more complex than it had an hour earlier.

The next several weeks saw Snape and Carmichael at a variety of restaurants and movies. Carmichael seemed to have decided that experimenting

with new types of food was a way to show her trust in Snape, and to bring them somehow closer together. By the end of November she'd sampled escargot and pronounced it 'better than I expected,' and had developed quite a taste for Moroccan food.

McGonagall, on the other hand, was becoming more and more agitated. On several occasions she pulled Snape aside to warn him that Carmichael was dangerous. She never allowed an opportunity to pass without making some kind of snide comment about Carmichael's relative age, and the two women were constantly sparring.

December progressed, and the Christmas break began. With the student population down to nearly nothing, the resident teachers, reduced to a skeleton staff, would have a lot more time together.

On the morning of Sunday, December 19, the students left. The staff was having an afternoon Christmas party, and then the nonresident teachers would leave to be with their families for the break. Before noon, Hagrid and Flitwick had finished the decorating — hauling in and trimming the trees, and hanging the mistletoe.

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The Christmas party started with lunch at noon. When the meal was over, the few students who'd remained on the grounds went to their common rooms, giving the teachers a chance to fraternize. It was a pleasant few hours. Normally during term they hardly ever spoke. At meals they were generally in their assigned places keeping an eye on the students, and so Snape, at one end of the table, never had a chance to talk to Sinistra or Dawson at the other end. Both of them commuted, so he never saw them in the staff room either.

Professor Dawson in particular wanted to pick Snape's brain about banks. She taught Muggle Studies, and had somehow heard about the cash machine and the long-term deposit, and the two of them spent nearly an hour going over Snape's whole experience at Barclay's. Snape didn't pay much attention to the others until Dawson said, "I think I'm appropriating too much of your time."

Snape looked around. Dr. Carmichael was watching them and seemed irritated. "I enjoyed our conversation," Snape told Professor Dawson, rose and went to talk with Futhark and Pince. As long as he kept moving, Carmichael didn't seem to care, but as soon as he devoted too much attention to one teacher, especially if that teacher was female, she started circling.

McGonagall was circling, too. Twice she pulled him away to ask a question just as Carmichael approached to claim him. It would actually have been amusing if Snape hadn't been the focal point of their rivalry. He wondered how many of the other teachers noticed and were hiding laughter. He tried to pretend that he didn't notice and to act as if everything was perfectly normal.

Around three o'clock, Carmichael finally cornered him. She began talking about a Christmas she'd spent in the Himalayas, and as she talked she edged closer. Snape, uncomfortable with her nearness, shifted his own position several times to maintain a more neutral distance. He was totally unaware of what she was doing until Carmichael suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, look! We're under the mistletoe!" leaned forward, and kissed him in front of all the others.

There was general laughter and applause. Snape, who'd been at a loss as to what to do, had simply stood there and let Carmichael take the lead. The rest of the teachers seemed to think the incident was cute and harmless. Carmichael even smiled as she said, "See. It doesn't hurt. You didn't melt or burst into flames."

Only McGonagall refused to accept that the moment was harmless fun. Storming across the room to confront Carmichael, she hissed, "Leave him alone! Can't you see he doesn't want your attentions? Have you no shame? A woman of your age! It's humiliating for him."

"Dear Minerva," replied Carmichael in a calmer tone, "there is nothing I could do that would humiliate anyone as much as the scene you're creating right now. As for my age, I have always respected your skills in Transfiguration, but I think you lack something in math."

"Lack something, do I? You weren't Hogwarts' only student. I looked up Eileen Prince, and she was still in school when you entered Hogwarts."

Carmichael turned to look at Snape. "She was being serious? Your mother was Eileen Prince? Hufflepuff's gobstone queen?" Snape nodded, fearing the explosion.

"Eileen Prince," McGonagall continued. "Not only are you old enough to be his mother, you went to school with her. Now back off and leave him alone!"

Fire glinted in Carmichael's eyes. She had a rival to defeat and an audience to play to. None of the other teachers went to find Dumbledore for fear they would miss some of the action. Teachers are not so very different from their students, after all.

"You envious, dried-up old prune," Carmichael said quietly. "There's

more to age than years. From the moment you were born, you were old enough to be his mother.”

“Cradle robber!” McGonagall cried. “I know what you’re after. You string them along as tools for your own purposes, your own vindictiveness, and then when they’re not useful to you any more...”

“I don’t need to string them along. They run to me to get away from you!”

Snape was moving slowly toward the door, not wanting to have anything to do with the battle.

“You’re a heartless vampire, sucking the life...”

“You smothered one ’til he had to run in order to breathe, don’t smother...”

McGonagall jumped forward, fingernails reaching for Carmichael’s face as the staff moved into the fray to restrain her and keep the two apart.

“Ladies, please control yourselves.” Dumbledore stood in the doorway, some sixth sense having told him there was trouble in the Hall. “Minerva, please sit down over by the Gryffindor table. You seem overwrought. Valeria, I think you need to relax a bit, too. Pomona, would you...”

“That’s all right, Albus. Severus and I were going to London today anyway,” Carmichael said with considerable satisfaction.

“Is that true, Severus?” When Snape nodded, Dumbledore said, “Then maybe it would be a good idea if you continued with those plans. It would keep the two of them separate for a while.”

“Since there are no students right now,” Carmichael added, “there’s no need to be back for curfew. So if you don’t see us until tomorrow morning...”

“Valeria!” Dumbledore admonished as McGonagall rose from her bench. “Severus, get her out of here.”

“Yes, sir,” said Snape, steering Carmichael out of the Hall. Behind him he could hear McGonagall saying, “Albus, you can’t let her...” and Dumbledore’s reply, “Minerva, it is not up to you to control his life...”

They got to London far earlier than they’d intended, too early for dinner, so Carmichael insisted they go to a pub where, starting with a pint of beer and advancing to gin, she regaled Snape with her colorful opinion of anyone who allowed a grudge to last for that long. Snape merely sat and listened.

By dinner time, Carmichael had calmed down to the point where they were able to have a more normal conversation. Deciding this was the wrong time to experiment with new foods, Snape suggested they go to the seafood

place they'd eaten at before. There he got her to talk more about the Himalayas, and then they went to the movie.

The movie was a comedy about a man who had to pretend he was a woman in order to get a job. There were moments, many moments, when the actor's portrayal of the female part was so good that Snape had trouble believing it was a man playing the role. *I would love to be able to act like that, to fool people into thinking what I want them to think of me, to step out of my own life.* For the first time he began to think of acting as a skill, a talent, an art.

The movie wasn't a long one, and by nine o'clock Snape and Dr. Carmichael were back out in Leicester Square. "Let's stay in London," she said. "Let's find a place and not go back to that horrid school until morning, and shock them all!"

"I really don't think that's a wise idea."

"How did you get to be so old so young? Where's your sense of adventure? Of fun?"

"I really should get back to Hogwarts. You could stay, though."

"By myself? No, dear, when you go I go. But not this early. Come on. Just into the pub for a couple more drinks."

Snape agreed, if only because he didn't want Carmichael to run into McGonagall when they got back to the school. The conversation over drinks, however, quickly became difficult for him.

"Stay the night with me here in London. The older you get, the harder it'll be. We have the opportunity, we have the time. I could teach you so much..."

"Dr. Carmichael, I don't think this is the proper..."

"Who cares about proper? We're two adults who enjoy each other's company. It doesn't have to get any more complicated than that. There's so much in life that you're missing, good things, enjoyable things."

"Look," said Snape, trying to choose his words carefully, "I like your company. I like to talk to you. I enjoy these evenings here in London, with the restaurants and the movies. And you have taught me a lot because you've done so much with your life, but..."

"Ah, that famous word. But what, dear?"

"I'm really not physically attracted to you. It's probably because I'm too young to appreciate..."

It was too late. Carmichael's face had closed, set into lines of cold, offended rage. When she spoke, her voice was low, the menace clear. "And for

how long have we known that we had no physical attraction for each other? From the beginning? Have you been allowing me to pay for your food and entertainment all these weeks with no intention of reciprocating? Have you been misleading me?"

"No," Snape protested, "I've never said I wanted to be closer to you. The opposite. I've made it very clear that I wasn't ready for any kind of relationship with you."

"You asked me out to dinner and a movie because you didn't want to have a relationship?"

"I didn't ask you — you asked..."

"To see a movie about computers? Why would I invite any man to watch a movie about computers? The movie was your idea. Trying all those strange foods was your idea. Don't blame that on me."

"Look, can't we just forget we had this conversation and continue on..."

"Forcing you to go out with someone you find repulsive?"

"I didn't say that!"

"What's not attractive about me? My age? You like them younger? Say seventeen?"

"No, that's not it at all."

"Or maybe it's the seventeen-year-old boys... that's a fine hobby for a school teacher."

"Dr. Carmichael..."

Carmichael stood and finished her drink in one gulp. "We're going back to Hogwarts," she said. "Now."

Snape followed her out into the dark street, trying to calm her down, but every word he spoke seemed to make her angrier and angrier. It was well past nine-thirty when they apparated into Hogsmeade. By the time they got to the entrance hall it was nearly ten. There were quite a few teachers in the staffroom since some of the commuting staff were still there, and Snape tried to get Carmichael to go to her rooms so that she wouldn't run into McGonagall.

Carmichael, however, insisted on the staff room, and there was no stopping her. McGonagall was in the far corner where the drinks were prepared. Carmichael immediately struck up a conversation with Kettleburn as someone handed Snape two cups of punch. He gave one to Dr. Carmichael, who barely acknowledged his presence.

"You're back earlier than expected," Sprout said at Snape's elbow. "Kettleburn was sure it would be at least midnight, just for appearance's sake."

“Change of plan,” said Snape, and then the sound of breaking glass diverted his attention.

Carmichael had dropped her cup on the floor and was holding her stomach. “They’ve done it again,” she gasped. “Gad, they’ve done it again.” She reeled from the room, heading for the girls bathroom, Pomfrey and Sprout with her, the rest of the teachers remaining in the staffroom in stunned silence.

This time both St. Mungo’s hospital and the Ministry of Magic sent teams immediately. The staff room was left exactly as it was, and all who had been in the castle or on the grounds were asked to notify their families that they would be delayed in returning home. Snape found himself in the guest quarters on the sixth floor, his rooms once again sealed against him. *At least now there are no students. They’d have a wonderful time with this one.*

Once again Snape waited until nearly the end for his own interrogation. It took a turn that was not totally unexpected.

“You gave her the glass of punch.”

“Yes.”

“Where did you get it?”

“I was handed two. I gave her one.”

“Who gave them to you?”

“I didn’t notice.”

“How did you know which one to give her?”

“I don’t think I understand the question. I was given two. I gave her one. It didn’t matter which one.”

“Why were you given two?”

“I don’t know. I presume because they saw us come in.”

“Are you and Dr. Carmichael considered a ‘couple’ by the staff here?”

“I don’t think so. We’re not a ‘couple.’”

“You been dating for several weeks.”

“‘Dating’ is a little strong.”

“Do you know any other teachers on staff who are keeping company with each other?”

“No.”

“So there might be grounds for other teachers to see you as a couple.”

“I suppose so.”

“Professor, do you brew poisons?”

“Of course.”

“Please elaborate.”

"It's part of the curriculum. My sixth year NEWT class will be analyzing poisons next term."

"Are those poisons already brewed?"

"No."

"What were your duties as a Death Eater?"

The question took Snape by surprise. "I brewed potions, invented spells, and taught rudimentary self-defense. This is all on record."

"What other Death Eater made potions?"

"None that I know of. I didn't know much about other departments. None of us did."

"Were you ever asked to brew poisons?"

"No."

"Do you know anyone who was asked to brew poisons?"

"No."

"Are you sure you wish that to be your answer?"

Nervous now, Snape replied, "Yes. That's my answer."

"We'd like to ask you now about your most recent date with Dr. Carmichael."

Snape's interrogation had, by this time, lasted two hours and gone into minute detail.

"Where did you go first?"

"To a pub."

"At your suggestion?"

"No, at hers."

"Did you eat or drink anything?"

"She had beer and a couple of glasses of gin. I had a glass of wine."

"And then?"

"We went to a restaurant."

"What did you eat and drink?"

"We had the same thing. Oysters Rockefeller, Caesar salad, and shrimp Alfredo. With white wine. Chocolate mousse and coffee."

"Did Dr. Carmichael seem ill at dinner?"

"No."

"Did she seem ill during the movie?"

"No."

"Did she eat or drink anything during or after the movie?"

"Not during, but she had another glass of gin at the pub afterwards."

"Did she seem ill when you arrived at Hogwarts?"

“No.”

McGonagall was last, not until Tuesday in fact, and it was noted by the staff that after five hours of questioning she seemed tired and drained. A rumor started that her son Marcellus was to be questioned as well. Then the team was gone, and the staff was notified that everyone was to remain available for further questioning after the Ministry analyzed the evidence.

Then, on the morning of Thursday the twenty-third of December, two representatives of the Ministry of Magic arrived at Hogwarts to escort Professor Minerva McGonagall to London for questioning in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement concerning the poisoning of Dr. Valeria Mesalina Carmichael, aka Aurifossor, aka Wolfstone, aka Mulberry, aka Pendenis, aka Buntley. Headmaster Dumbledore was informed that the Ministry was not at that time able to tell him when Professor McGonagall would be able to return to Hogwarts.

Snape was distraught. He'd reached the point where he regarded everything that was happening at Hogwarts as his fault. He hated himself, his naïveté, his bluntness, even the lack of critical thinking that allowed him to hand an untested cup of punch to a colleague. He couldn't face the others with the knowledge of his own guilt, and he had to help McGonagall. And he had to do it without implicating anyone else.

That evening, without telling anyone, Snape apparated to London and went to the entrance of the Ministry of Magic. Granted entrance after some argument, he went to the desk in the atrium and asked to be allowed to speak to Judge Bones if she was still there. They took information about him and directed him to sit in a little waiting room while they checked with the judge.

It must have been a half hour later when a voice, a familiar voice, said, “Merlin preserve us, the Death Eaters are turning themselves in.” It was Moody, leaning against the door post at the entrance to the room.

“I didn't come to talk to you,” said Snape.

“I know, but she's tied up in chambers, and someone had to come up here and give you the greeting that's your due. You checking in at Azkaban this evening?”

“I'm not talking to you,” Snape repeated.

Mercifully, Judge Bones arrived then, accompanied by Gawain Robards. “What did you wish to see me about?” she asked.

“It's about Professor McGonagall. She's been arrested for something she couldn't have done.”

Judge Bones looked at him shrewdly. "Let me get this straight," she said. "You came here to try to prove that Professor McGonagall is innocent?"

Snape was puzzled. "Of course," he replied. "Why else would I be here?"

The judge stepped to the door. "Alastor," she called, "I want you in here, too. Now, if you please."

Hating the fact that Moody was present, Snape nonetheless sat where he was told and waited for their questions. Robards was taking notes.

"Who sent you here, Professor Snape?" Judge Bones asked.

"No one sent me. They don't even know I'm here."

"Albus doesn't know? So if we arrest you and send you down to a holding cell, no one will come to get you out?"

"You won't arrest me. I haven't done anything wrong. He might," Snape nodded at Moody, "but you wouldn't."

"Tell me about Professor McGonagall."

"She couldn't have planned to poison Dr. Carmichael because no one knew we were going to be there. Dr. Carmichael stated quite publicly that we'd be back later than usual, maybe not until the next morning. Even if we got in at eleven, the others would have gone home or to bed. The staff room would be empty and there wouldn't be any punch left."

"Are you telling me that you're the only one who knew what Dr. Carmichael's movements were that evening?"

"That's right."

"Why are you protecting Professor McGonagall?"

"I'm not protecting her. I'm telling you what the truth is. McGonagall couldn't have done it because poisoning requires preparation, and she didn't know the opportunity would be there."

"Do you have any idea who did do it?"

"I'm sorry, no, I don't."

Judge Bones looked over at the other two. Robards was thoughtful, and Moody had an unreadable expression on his face. "I'm going to tell him," the judge said, and neither man objected.

Turning to Snape, the judge said, "We're a bit surprised that you came here tonight to speak in Professor McGonagall's defense because she isn't our chief suspect. You are."

"I don't understand," said Snape, too bewildered to be wary.

For answer, Robards handed the judge a small book that she opened to a certain page. "Val Carmichael wrote this more than three years ago," the judge said, handing the book to Snape and pointing to a particular paragraph.

In the spring of 1979, the forces of the self-styled Lord Voldemort changed their tactics. Since all of their direct physical attacks had failed, they started to use more subtle and clandestine ways to get rid of me. Chief among these was poison. Twice I actually consumed a brew intended to kill me, and on both occasions only the quick thinking of my husband and my publishing agent saved my life. It was this new, cowardly bid to exterminate me that finally led to my most difficult decision — leave Britain and emigrate to the United States. It was the only way to stay alive.

Snape closed the book. Its title was *Battling the Darkness*, published in the summer of 1979.

“When did you become a Death Eater,” Judge Bones asked.

“July 1978.”

“And when did you become Voldemort’s potions brewer?”

“January 1979, but . . .”

“Yes?”

“I wasn’t asked to make poison. No one ever mentioned attacking the Dark Lord’s enemies with poison. I never even heard of Dr. Carmichael when I was a Death Eater.”

Judge Bones sighed. “Do I have to remind you, Professor Snape, that you already have a well-established reputation for concealing vital information from this Ministry. And may I also remind you that in an earlier interview you stated that you had been asked to brew poisons four times. Why should we believe you when you can’t even keep your story straight?”

Snape looked down at his hands. His voice became very small. “Are you going to arrest me?” he asked, and it was clear he expected the answer to be yes.

The other three exchanged glances, and then Moody got up and left the room.

Robards leaned forward. “No, we’re not going to arrest you. And we haven’t arrested Professor McGonagall either. Dr. Carmichael tells us you both have a motive for trying to harm her, but that by itself isn’t enough.”

“What’s ‘enough?’”

“I can’t tell you that, but believe me, when we have it, you’ll be one of the first to know.”

The same words coming from Moody would have been a threat, but somehow Snape knew that from Robards they weren’t. Robards had done his job, and done it devastatingly well, at Snape’s trial, but he’d never gone beyond

that, never harassed or threatened. "May I go back to Hogwarts now?" Snape asked.

"Certainly," Robards said. "And thank you for your information. If you wait about fifteen minutes, though, you can go back with Professor McGonagall."

"I think I'll do that," said Snape.

It was closer to twenty-five minutes before a clerk escorted McGonagall into the little waiting room. "They said you were here," she snapped, "but I thought it was a trick. What ever put the foolish idea into your head to come here now?"

"I wanted to tell them you couldn't possibly be guilty."

"I could tell them that myself, and did." McGonagall retorted, fussily straightening his collar, "so there was no reason for you to go getting yourself into more trouble. Now, take me back to Hogwarts."

"Yes, ma'am," Snape replied, and together they left the Ministry.

Carmichael left the school the next day to spend Christmas week with her publishing agent's family, so the atmosphere was much more relaxed for the holiday. It was just Dumbledore, the four heads of houses, Hagrid, and Filch, with a handful of students. They spent the day relaxing, chatting, playing cribbage, and never mentioned Carmichael once.

That changed on Monday, the twenty-seventh. Snape came out of the dungeons on his way to brunch to encounter an enraged McGonagall who waved a copy of *The Daily Prophet* under his nose. "Look at this!" she ordered him. "That woman deserves to be in jail!"

Snape took the paper with a feeling of dread. On the third page was an interview with Val Carmichael in which she talked about her career, her return to Britain, and her teaching at Hogwarts.

"There!" said McGonagall, pointing to a section two-thirds of the way down. "Read that."

Reporter: It must be pleasant for you to return to your native land without the threat of death hanging over you. Do you find your life more relaxed now that You-Know-Who is gone?

Carmichael: I did at first, but I've come to realize that his fear and hatred of my opposition to him stretch beyond the grave. There are still Death Eaters roaming free who are bound to fulfill their master's will, and twice now I've been targeted for execution. Luckily the attempts were unsuccessful.

Reporter: It's amazing under the circumstances that you can remain so calm.

Carmichael: The Ministry of Magic is investigating the incidents. I have great faith in them, and expect an arrest very soon.

“So that’s her motive for me, that I’m still obeying the Dark Lord. At least she didn’t mention my name or that it happened at Hogwarts.”

“With all the scandal last year about your past, do you think it’s going to be hard for some people to guess? Why is she switching her attack from me to you, anyway?”

“I turned down an offer. I told her I wasn’t attracted to her.”

McGonagall snorted. “And this is her revenge. Well, something good is coming of this, at least.”

“What’s that?” Snape asked.

“She’s not going to be wanting to go on any more dates with you.”

The next day *The Daily Prophet* printed a retraction, apologizing for having interfered with an ongoing Ministry investigation. Snape would have to wait until the start of the next term to find out what, if any, damage had been done.

C H A P T E R T H I R T Y

C H A R G E

Dr. Carmichael returned to Hogwarts at the end of the week, to find herself facing Dumbledore's displeasure. Within an hour of her arrival, she was asked to come to his office. It was a conversation the details of which Snape never learned, but it did not make Dr. Carmichael a more friendly person. The first and most dramatic change was that she found a place in London and began commuting on a daily basis. Evenings at Hogwarts were more relaxed from that moment.

Then the students returned, and Snape found himself the subject of the rumor mill again. Whether or not Carmichael was fueling it in her classes was unknown.

"She dumped him?"

"Wouldn't you? I mean, look at him."

"I never understood why a woman like her would go for a skinny runt..."

"You think maybe he's never had a girlfriend?"

"Imagine being that desperate..."

Only the students in Slytherin house gave him any moral support at all, and he had to ask them to remain silent on the subject in public after one particularly embarrassing shouting match between two Slytherin and three Gryffindor girls in the entrance hall, during which the phrases 'like kissing a raven' and 'just as short as the rest of him' came up. Snape did not eat supper in the hall that evening.

"They're kids," Hagrid said, dropping by Snape's office with a plate of food that Snape didn't feel like eating. "They'll forget it in a couple of weeks."

"But during those couple of weeks I'll have to endure their whispering and giggling in my classes, in the library, in the Hall, and anywhere else students gather. I hate them. I hate them all."

"Ya can't let 'em smell blood. They'll hound ya for the rest of the term if ya do. Ya got t' show them they're not hurting ya."

"How do I do that?"

"Haven't got a clue."

Snape got a clue two days later in fifth year Potions when Daniel Peterson muttered "sex-starved git" under his breath.

"I beg your pardon, Master Peterson."

"I didn't say anything."

"Yes, you did. Not only I, but half the class heard it quite clearly. Totally aside from the fact that you are projecting your own biological frustrations onto other people, it was not an acceptable comment. Do you see that desk in the corner? You will leave your cauldron and go to that desk immediately, and you will write. 'Professor Snape is a sex-starved git' one thousand times with a nonmagical pen. If you do not finish during the class period, you will return for the hour before supper and again after supper. Only when you have completed this happy task will you be allowed to finish your Potions assignment, which must be accomplished before you retire for the night. I shall speak to Professor McGonagall and explain why you might not make it back to Gryffindor house before curfew."

Peterson had no choice but to obey, and the rest of the class was quiet for the remaining time.

"He has to write what!" McGonagall exclaimed when Snape told her.

"I thought maybe after he's written it a thousand times, he'll be so tired of it that he'll never say it again," Snape said as he helped himself to roast chicken at supper. Over at the Gryffindor table Peterson was nursing a sore hand, having made it through over half of his punishment. "And the others will be more circumspect about what they say in my hearing."

"They'll still talk about you behind your back."

"I can't help that. But talking behind my back is just being sneaky. Saying something to my face is a challenge. I wanted him to know I wasn't afraid of the words."

"You may have succeeded. He doesn't look like he wants to be flippant right now."

When Peterson came to finish his task after supper, Snape didn't say anything, simply waving the boy to the corner desk as if the situation were totally routine. It was after eight o'clock when Peterson laid the finished sheets of parchment on Snape's desk. He then went to his cauldron and spent the next

two hours doing alone an assignment that he could have finished in half the time with a partner.

At ten-thirty, Peterson put the vial of potion on Snape's desk, his cauldron area already cleaned and ready for the next day. "Thank you, Master Peterson," Snape said quietly.

"Yes, sir," Peterson replied. Snape had no more problems with him in class for the rest of the term.

Midway through January, Rhonda Shoemaker and Anna Prendergast asked to speak to Snape privately. "It's Professor Carmichael, sir. We think she's trying to make trouble."

"Why would you think that?"

"From what the others say. She's talking in her classes."

"About me?"

"We don't know about that. We do know she's talking about Professor McGonagall."

Snape asked them to sit down while he settled behind his desk. "What's she saying about Professor McGonagall?"

The girls exchanged glances. "Anna and I haven't heard her because she doesn't talk in front of the NEWT levels. We think it's because all four houses are mixed together in those classes. The lower levels say she sometimes talks about Professor McGonagall to the Slytherin students. We think maybe she talks about you to the Gryffindors."

"What do the others say she says?"

"That Professor McGonagall hates her because the Professor's son was once in love with her, and that McGonagall always treats Slytherin students differently from the others, that she's unfair. That she holds grudges."

"Does she talk about this on a daily basis?"

"No, but occasional comments a couple of times a week."

"Do you think Professor McGonagall is unfair?"

Anna spoke this time. "We used to think that because she's so strict. We didn't know how she treated the other houses. But now I'm taking Transfiguration for my NEWTs, and she's just the same with a mixed class, and the others don't seem to think it's any different from before, so I guess she treats us all the same."

"You should tell the others that, and tell them not to believe everything Professor Carmichael says about other people."

"What about you, sir?" Rhonda asked.

"Well, we don't know that she talks about me."

"We can find out." Rhonda had the air of a girl with a mission.

Snape wasn't sure that he wanted to find out, but he was already thinking that he would have to go to Dumbledore about the problem, and in order to do that he'd need more complete information. "All right," he sighed. "But just the broad picture. I really don't need any details."

Dumbledore met first with the four heads of houses. Snape reported on what the girls had discovered. "It isn't a running tirade. It's just isolated, occasional comments. She's mentioned both of us in her Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff classes and Professor McGonagall in her Slytherin classes. My students can't check with the Gryffindor students, but one Ravenclaw girl told them the Gryffindor students have heard things about me."

"This is most awkward," Dumbledore said. "and I must consider also the welfare of the students. The very first thing we must do is check to be certain that the classes are following the curriculum and that the students are being prepared for their exams. Dr. Carmichael was brought in to correct a deficiency, and if that deficiency is being corrected I would not wish to punish the students by removing her if some other solution can be found."

That stage proved to be easy. Each head of house checked privately with their own students about all their subjects, so as not to single out any particular teacher, and reported back that Carmichael's students were all doing well and had an excellent grasp of the subject matter. Snape, and even McGonagall, admitted that there seemed to be no prejudice or favoritism shown between the houses, and that Carmichael's assignments and grading appeared fair and impartial.

"So whatever it is she has against the two of you, it does not spill over into other aspects of her job." Dumbledore thought for a moment while the heads of houses were silent. "Minerva, Snape, do you think you can you make it to the end of the school year without any explosions? Assuming the circumstances stay the same as they are now, of course, and do not escalate. We are, in any case, still waiting for a report on the Ministry investigation, and there is little I can do until then except reprimand her."

"I think so, sir," said Snape, and McGonagall reluctantly agreed. After a quick consultation, they both asked Dumbledore not to say anything to Carmichael. They didn't want to take the chance that her behavior might worsen.

The beginning of February brought the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff Quidditch match. This was an important game for both teams, since Gryffindor had lost its first match in November against Slytherin, and Hufflepuff had

won its match in December against Ravenclaw. If Hufflepuff won, Gryffindor's chances to win the Quidditch Cup would practically disappear. The whole school was turning out to watch, though the weather was too cold to expect visitors.

Snape, however, was doomed not to be able to see the match, since Robards arrived from the Ministry right at the beginning of lunchtime that Saturday, asking to speak with Dumbledore. Half an hour later, Snape was called to Dumbledore's office.

"You sent for me, Headmaster?" was all Snape said when he entered the room, his face cold and closed.

"Yes, Professor Snape. Mr. Robards has come to advise me of the progress of the Ministry investigation. He has asked that you accompany him to London to take a formal deposition."

"Isn't Saturday an unusual time to be doing this?"

"We thought," Robards said, "that it would be less obvious and cause fewer problems for you if it didn't disrupt any of your classes. With a Quidditch game going on, most of the school won't even notice."

"I would prefer not. My memories of the interior of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement are not of the best."

"I understand. The deposition will be taken in front of Judge Bones. There will be a stenographer and myself. You'll be back before supper."

"No Moody?"

"Mr. Moody will not be there."

Snape agreed, and the two walked down the hill together while the school finished lunch, and apparated to London.

"You know," Snape remarked as he followed Robards down into the depths of the Ministry, "this is the first time I've been this far that I didn't have my hands tied. Except for the trial."

"I trust this experience will be a bit less unpleasant."

"I note that you don't expect it to be pleasant."

"Things like this never are."

They entered a hearing room and went to the table at the front. Judge Bones came in a moment later with the stenographer. "Thank you for accommodating us, Professor," she said, and they all sat down, the stenographer at another table, out of Snape's line of vision.

"You need to know," continued the judge, "that you're the last person being deposed in this case, unless something totally unexpected surfaces. We'd like you to be as candid and detailed as possible in your responses. I do have

to warn you that all of this is under penalty of perjury, so at the same time you need to consider carefully what you are saying.”

The first questions were routine, about Snape’s identity and his job at Hogwarts. Then came a series of questions about his being a Death Eater, which turned out to be easier than he’d expected since Robards didn’t ask him any names or to betray any trusts.

“When did you first meet Dr. Carmichael?”

“Last August. There was quite a gathering of outsiders to welcome her to the school.”

“What did you say to each other.”

“I was introduced to her in a reception line. She made a comment on my youth. We didn’t speak for the rest of the gathering until the end.”

“Is it true that Professor McGonagall tried to keep you apart?”

“I believe so. After a while I got the impression they didn’t like each other.”

“Did you know at that time about Professor McGonagall’s son?”

“No. Professor Flitwick told me about it later.”

“Did she know at that time that you’d been a Death Eater.”

“I don’t think so.”

“When do you think she found out?”

“After the first poisoning incident. There was a Quidditch match, and she sat talking to Mr. Moody the whole time. I suspect he told her, because after that she knew.”

“Before that, how did Dr. Carmichael speak with you?”

“She used highly suggestive language, and teased me about being embarrassed by it. I was trying to find ways to maintain my composure.”

“Is that why you purchased the book on sexual customs?”

“Yes. It was helping, too. Some of the things she said to me later weren’t such a surprise, and I was able to control my reactions. Until she threatened to use the book against me, of course.”

Robards and the judge glanced at each other. “Did you tell her about the book?” Judge Bones asked.

“No. I got the impression that Mr. Moody told her about it at the Quidditch game.”

Another exchange of glances, and Robards jotted something down in a notebook. Then Robards took up the questions again. “What kind of threats did she use?”

"She said she could spread rumors that I was interested in my students in inappropriate ways. She said that if I kept company with her, an older woman, then I wouldn't be vulnerable to rumors like that."

"Did she happen to say why she was interested in you?"

"She said she had a reputation to maintain, and I'm the only male teacher at Hogwarts who's younger than she is."

"Is that when you asked her for a date?"

"I didn't ask. She told me to take her to dinner and a movie. I asked what movie she wanted to see, and she told me to surprise her."

There followed extensive questions about the movies and the restaurants. Then, "Did she ever mention Professor McGonagall to you?"

Snape told them Carmichael's version of the incident involving McGonagall's son, then added, "I think the inexperienced teacher who was responsible for her not being prepared for her NEWT was Professor McGonagall."

This brought another exchange of glances. "Did she ever express any particular enmity toward Professor McGonagall?"

"Only that she thought the Professor was responsible for driving her own son from Hogwarts, and that it wasn't reasonable for her to blame Dr. Carmichael for it."

"Professor, how much did you know about Dr. Carmichael before August?"

"I read a couple of her books. They were very good. Very informative. I didn't know anything about her, though."

"Do you know anything about the poisoning attacks that caused her to leave Britain in 1979? The attacks ordered by Lord Voldemort."

"No."

"Were you ever asked to brew poisons?"

Snape hesitated. "Yes, four times. I was told it was for safe houses that were kept free of traceable magic, and were to kill vermin, rats. I used arsenic and strychnine. Neither would have produced the symptoms Dr. Carmichael experienced."

"Did you ever hear of anyone assigned to attack Dr. Carmichael?"

"No."

"Did you read *The Daily Prophet* that appeared two days after Christmas?"

"Yes. I considered it directed at me personally."

"Why would she attack you personally?"

"I'd told her a few days earlier that I wouldn't stay with her in London and that I wasn't attracted to her."

"Was she at Hogwarts at the time you read the interview in the paper?"

"No. She was spending Christmas week with her publishing agent." A light came on in Snape's head. The page from the book that Judge Bones had shown him in December credited Dr. Carmichael's survival of the first poisoning attempts to the quick action of her husband and her publishing agent. "Wait a minute," he said quickly, "if this was an idea of her agent's it might explain why I never heard anything..."

"Please, Professor Snape," said Judge Bones quietly. "Don't speculate. Confine yourself to things that you know from personal experience."

Snape looked from Judge Bones to Robards. "This isn't new to you," he said. "What have you found out about..."

"Professor Snape," said Robards sharply. "If you think we're going to discuss the particulars of a case with one of the suspects..."

"Thank you, Gawain," said the judge. "Professor, you're here to answer questions. While Mr. Robards has been more brusque than I would have been, the point is well taken. It would be wrong for us to discuss the matter with you outside the area of your own knowledge. Now, if we can return to the deposition?"

The questioning went on to Snape's experiences since the appearance of *The Daily Prophet* interview, and he was able to tell them what Rhonda and Anna had brought to his attention. Then the questioning turned to poisons and his knowledge of their effects. Snape had to confess that he didn't know what poison might have caused Dr. Carmichael's symptoms.

Several hours after it had begun, the deposition was over. Robards escorted Snape back up to the London streets, and watched as he apparated back to Hogwarts. So far as Snape knew, his business with the Ministry was over for the time being, but the experience had given him a reason for starting an investigation of his own.

"You must know something!" Snape insisted, following Madam Pomfrey around the hospital wing like a shadow. "You took samples—both times. Those samples were analyzed by the staff at St. Mungo's. You must have some idea what the poison in them was."

Pomfrey wheeled on him in exasperation. "Severus, St. Mungo's isn't going to tell me anything in a criminal case. Listen carefully. I. Do. Not. Know. What. They. Found!"

"Look," Snape insisted, not wanting to let go. "In both cases the reaction was violent but not fatal. What if there was never an attempt on her life?"

What if she administered the poison to herself? What if this is all part of a publicity stunt that was started four years ago?"

"You can talk until your jaw drops off, Master Snape. I can't tell you what you want to know because I don't know it, and if I did, I still wouldn't tell you. Now run along and bother someone else."

The next step had to be planned carefully because Snape didn't know how Professor McGonagall would react. If she was like Pomfrey, any hint of what he was doing would remove forever any hope of assistance from her. He waited until the middle of the month to make his move.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 1983

Valentine's Day that year was a Monday, and the staff was discussing the decorations the Friday evening before. That Saturday was a Hogsmeade excursion.

"Just not too much pink," said Kettleburn. "Ghastly color, pink, and not really a Valentine's color at all."

"No?" said Sprout. "I thought pink was very Valentiny. I've always seen it."

"Red and white," rejoined Kettleburn. "That's Valentine colors. Red and white."

"And brown," added Dawson. "For the chocolates, of course."

"Where would I go," Snape asked incongruously after a moment's silence, "if I wanted to find out something about a student's family?"

"You have the Slytherin files," said Flitwick. "If it's a Ravenclaw student, you ask me."

"No," Snape said, "I mean further back than that. I have a student — you know Kate Digby?— who's killing herself because both her parents got Outstanding in all their OWLs, and I want to find out if it's true. Because if they're lying to pressure her into trying to match them, I think I should know about it."

"Archives are on the fifth floor," said Flitwick. "The wall just past the statue of Gregory the Smarmy. You identify yourself as a teacher, and the wall should let you in."

That evening Snape went up to the fifth floor. He spoke to a couple of non-responsive walls before he found out what 'just past' the statue of Gregory the Smarmy meant, but he eventually made it into the archives.

From there it was easy. Graduating class of June 1957, file of Valeria Messalina Aurifosser. Snape's hands were trembling a little as he opened the rather large file folder. What he found made him settle into a quiet, deadly calm.

Aurifosser, Valeria Messalina. NEWT Results: Ancient Runes: Acceptable; Arithmancy: Exceeds Expectations; Charms: Acceptable; Defense Against the Dark Arts: Outstanding; Potions: Exceeds Expectations; Transfiguration: Disqualified for cheating.

Snape studied the page carefully until he was sure it was committed to memory then, with a feeling of intense guilt, as if he were carrying out some heinous crime, he found the file of Marcellus McGonagall.

It was a thick file, for the boy seemed to have been constantly defying authority. Looking at the incongruous disparity between Outstanding and Poor grades, Snape couldn't help but have the feeling that young Marcellus had been deliberately failing exams, and wondered if it hadn't been to avoid a future he didn't want, for those failed exams were ones that would have helped him the most in a Ministry job.

So Carmichael was lying and telling the truth at the same time. And what of McGonagall? She hasn't lied because she hasn't said a word about either Carmichael's school career or her son's, except for the incident that ended it in his seventh year. But why would Dumbledore hire a Professor who'd cheated on a NEWT?

Back in his own rooms pondering the question, it occurred to Snape that Dumbledore hadn't been headmaster at the time, and was therefore not involved with the cheating incident, which had been in Transfiguration. But what subject did Dumbledore teach?

Saturday morning at brunch, Snape asked Flitwick.

"Dumbledore? He taught Transfiguration for decades. I believe he has the longest teaching career in Hogwarts history. Except for Melusine FitzMarmaduke in the 12th century, of course. And Gertrude Hexenmacher in the 18th and 19th. And how could I overlook our own Professor Binns? And then there was Cantilupe Smith..."

"But if Professor Dumbledore was teaching Transfiguration, why did they hire Professor McGonagall?"

"Oh, that! And in the middle of the school year, too. Such a shock. Poor Armando. That was when Professor Dippet had his first attack. Took us all quite by surprise when he showed up like that right in the middle of the fountain court... Dear, dear. Well, Albus was Deputy Headmaster, and he

had to take over Armando's duties for a while, until the attack subsided, of course, and they brought in Minerva to handle Transfiguration since Albus had so much to do."

"What was wrong with Professor Dippet?"

"At first they said it was jeranculus fever, but then it turned out that it ran in the family. They had to institutionalize his maternal grandfather, you know. He'd be fine for a long time, then have these spells that lasted for months. Dumbledore covered for him — wouldn't let the Board of Directors dismiss him — it wasn't dangerous or contagious so it didn't bother the rest of us. But poor Albus certainly had his hands full."

Full enough so that minor things like a student caught cheating wouldn't attract his attention? Very possible. So I can accept the probability that Professor Dumbledore didn't know. And what is important for Carmichael's job now, of course, is Dark Arts. Not just that Outstanding she got but, even more important, all the experience since.

The Hogsmeade excursion promised to be easy on the teachers. It was cold enough at the beginning of February that most of the students would stay indoors somewhere, and in any case the main attraction was Honeydukes Sweetshop, where they were buying Valentine treats for girlfriends, boyfriends, and just friends. Snape went to the Three Broomsticks.

That turned out to be something of a mistake, since shortly after Snape settled into a booth at the back of the main room, a shadow covered his table.

"You been trying to get me into trouble, haven't you?" growled Moody as he joined Snape in the booth. "Don't get up now. This is just going to be a 'friendly' chat."

"I haven't done anything to get you into trouble."

"No? It's not bad enough you lose me an eye and near get me killed, you've got to be spreading tales that I give Ministry information to outsiders."

"I don't understand."

"You told Robards that I was telling Carmichael about the results of an investigation into possible criminal activity. Now where'd you get that idea?"

"The remarkable expansion of the extent of her knowledge following a Quidditch match. Quidditch doesn't increase that kind of mental acuity, and you were the only one talking to her during the game."

"How would you know that?"

"When I'm in the water, I always keep my eyes on the predators. A confluence of sharks is a sign of danger."

Moody leaned forward and spoke in a low, conspiratorial tone. "A lot of Death Eaters are walking free, but most of them blame their slips on Imperius spells. You're the only one who claims to have double-crossed your lord. That's Top Secret right now, but it won't be forever. Maybe Azkaban isn't the worst place for you to be." Then he rose and stumped out of the Three Broomsticks.

Moody's arrival and departure did not make Snape change any of his own plans for the day, nor did it cause him any great concern, which was a matter of some interest to him. *A year ago, he would have had me locking myself in my rooms in the castle just by his appearance. What's changed?*

It didn't take long to identify. Moody was alone. Scrimgeour had forgotten Snape completely, it seemed, and neither Robards nor Judge Bones trusted Moody. Or at least they distrusted him enough to check out Snape's allegations in his deposition. *I don't have the whole Ministry against me. Just one disgruntled auror. True, he could be dangerous, but still... It's one on one now.* It was a satisfying thought.

And he can't threaten me with Azkaban anymore. That's interesting. He'd like to, but it isn't as immediate a possibility as it was last year. That's why he's threatening me with the revenge of other Death Eaters. But who do I really have to worry about? Malfoy? Avery? Neither one wants more trouble. The Carrows? They're not a threat to me. Everyone really dangerous is in Azkaban, and no one escapes from Azkaban.

The afternoon wore on without any further problems, and shortly before supper Snape assisted the other teachers in shepherding the last of the students through the Hogwarts gates and up the hill to the castle. Snape was, in fact, so calm about the incident that he didn't even mention it to Dumbledore.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 1983

The last week of February brought Gawain Robards back to Hogwarts on Tuesday the twenty-second just before lunch. Dr. Carmichael was called to Dumbledore's office first, and some little time later Snape and McGonagall together. The only unpleasantness was that Carmichael was on the second floor in front of her rooms as if waiting for them, but when they passed on the stairs she did nothing more than wrinkle her nose, turn abruptly, and slam the door shut behind her.

Robards brought good news. "We're suspending the investigation. Other than her symptoms, we've been unable to uncover any evidence that she was poisoned at all. Nothing showed up in lab analysis. Your own meticulous records, Professor Snape, proved invaluable in showing that no school poisons are unaccounted for, and even Alastor Moody helped your case, though he hated doing it."

"How was that?" Snape asked, more curious than he would have admitted.

"He's been having you followed. We can trace every moment of your time off Hogwarts grounds since you learned that Dr. Carmichael was going to be teaching here. At no time did you have an opportunity to purchase or gather poisons. Everything on the grounds has been accounted for."

"So this whole ridiculous thing is over?" McGonagall asked.

"No. Not over. Suspended. Should new evidence come to light, or should another incident occur, it will be reopened immediately."

Snape and McGonagall followed Dumbledore and Robards down as Dumbledore escorted Robards out of the castle, and thus witnessed a scene on the second floor, for at the sound of feet on the stairs, Carmichael came bursting out of her office, a book in her hand.

"I want you to know this isn't over," she snarled at Robards. "They tried to kill me, and I'm not going to rest until they're jailed for it!"

"We understand that you might be upset," Robards replied calmly, "but as we have no concrete proof that poisoning took place..."

"Because you couldn't detect it? That means nothing!" She waved the book under his nose. "When I was in South America, I wrote a whole treatise on undetectable poisons, and if you'd ever read it..."

"I assure you, Dr. Carmichael, that your expertise in undetectable poisons was one of the things we examined closely in our investigation."

Carmichael froze, her eyes glittering dangerously. "How dare you!" she spat, venom in her voice. "I risk my life every day in this place, murderers sitting at the same table with me..."

"Valeria," Dumbledore interjected, "I understand that you are upset, but has it not occurred to you that you have been mistaken..."

"Mistaken! I am being denied justice! And if I can't get justice from the Courts of the Ministry, I'll get it from the Court of Public Opinion!"

"I wouldn't advise that," said Robards calmly. "All sorts of things can come up in a libel suit, nasty little things from the past. It isn't one-sided, you know."

"I don't care! I want the people who tried to kill me! If you won't do it, I will!" Carmichael stormed back into her office.

"I apologize, Gawain," said Dumbledore. "I really must see that Valeria is all right. You can see yourself out, I am sure." And then Dumbledore went into Carmichael's office as Robards continued down the stairs.

March started with intense disappointment and went downhill from there. The Slytherin—Ravenclaw game was on Saturday the fifth. A Slytherin win would put Slytherin in first place, since Gryffindor had beaten Hufflepuff the previous month, and it would shut Ravenclaw out of any hope of winning the cup. The Snitch, however, put in an early appearance, and was caught by the Ravenclaw Seeker. Snape was now immensely grateful for the high-scoring game against Gryffindor at the beginning of the season, as was McGonagall. Only the winners of each of the next two games would have two wins for the season. The Quidditch Cup would go to whichever of them had the overall highest score.

The seventh of March brought more trouble. Tuesday's *Daily Prophet* contained another interview with Val Carmichael.

Reporter: Is it true that you've moved into a place in London? That you're not living at the school anymore?

Dr. Carmichael: It was a necessary precaution. There's a limit to how much protection one can be given in an environment where potentially dangerous people are under little supervision or control.

Reporter: Are you saying that there are people at Hogwarts who are a danger to you?

Dr. Carmichael: I have been attacked twice, and despite my offers of assistance in evaluating the evidence, the Ministry has been unable to locate the agent involved. At least that's what I've been told. I thought it best to limit my time on the grounds and look out for myself.

Reporter: Do you have any idea who's behind these attacks?

Dr. Carmichael: I hesitate to say. I've even been threatened with legal action for speaking of my doubts, and by the Ministry, no less. But there are people there who still have connections to You-Know-Who, and who are still loyal to him and bound to carry out his death order against me, perhaps even the children of his followers. And of course, a person in my position is the subject of jealousies and false accusations, so there are those who bear grudges, however unwarranted...

Reporter: Well, we all certainly hope you stay out of harm's way, and that the perpetrators of these attacks are discovered and stopped.

The whispers started again with the appearance of the interview, and

Snape became aware that it was common report that he'd tried to ingratiate himself with Carmichael in order to have an opportunity to poison her. Outside of Slytherin house, it was considered fortunate that she'd discovered his nefarious intentions before he succeeded.

There was nothing Snape could do. Any attempt to squelch the rumors only intensified them. Every aspect of his private life was suddenly under a microscope again — his appearance, his past, his mannerisms, his relationships or the lack of them — the students dissected them with relish. He hated them all, and a longing to knock their heads together raged in him. The sheer physical effort of controlling his actions was taking its toll. It found release in a cold, bitter manner and in his tongue.

"Fascinating, Carmody, that you should consider yourself better qualified at Potions than the author of the book. Tell me, when you reversed the order of the ingredients, did you intend to produce green slime?"

"Thought you would hurry things along by adding a catalyst, Palmer? Gryffindor always did have a tendency to mistake reckless stupidity for brains. Now you get to clean it up and start over."

"A remarkable essay, Saltensall. It would never have occurred to me that one student could make so many errors in such a short piece of writing. You've set a personal record, possibly a school record."

One result of *The Daily Prophet* interview and its aftermath was that Dr. Carmichael no longer came to the Great Hall for any meals. Students speculated that it was from fear of poison. Another result was that Snape no longer left the school grounds on his evenings off. Every time he went somewhere, students began discussing what he might be up to.

It was at the height of this unpleasantness that the spring term ended and Easter break began. Students swarmed to leave the school, and it appeared that for two blessed weeks Snape would not have to close his ears to murmurs and innuendo. There was nothing he wanted more than to escape the very sight of Hogwarts.

"Leave the school for the Easter break, Severus? That is rather unusual. Normally the heads of houses stay." Dumbledore and Snape, along with the rest of the staff, were walking up the hill from having seen the students safely onto the train.

"I just have to get away from here, sir. A change of scenery, a chance to relax. I was thinking of going home for the break if you permit it."

"Very well, Severus. You have permission to spend the break at your

home, as long as someone else is empowered to watch over the Slytherin students who are staying.”

The someone was Sprout, and by mid afternoon everything was arranged. Snape walked back down the hill around three o'clock, feeling more light-hearted than he had in weeks, and apparated to Lancashire.

Mrs. Hanson saw him walking in from the moors and called out, “Hoo, darrie, that school of yours out so soon? I didn't know you'd come back.”

“I just got in this morning, Mrs. Hanson. I thought I'd walk from the station. It's a nice day's outing and a good change from books and papers. I'm on Easter holiday.”

“The exercise is good for you, too, Russ. Eileen 'd be pleased t' know her son was caring for his health. How long will you be with us?”

“Two weeks, if all goes well.”

“Then you'll be coming to take tea with me.”

“I will, and with pleasure.”

“Good. Tomorrow, tea time, and we'll have a chat.”

“I look forward to it. Have you taken to using a cane now, Mrs. Hanson.”

“It's the arthritis, child, the arthritis. If you've got healthy joints, thank the stars for them.”

“Let me know if there's anything I can do for you.”

“You've always been a good lad.”

Snape bade her ‘good afternoon’ and went to his own home, throwing all the windows open to the April breeze and fixing himself a cup of tea. For a couple of hours he just cleaned and straightened things that were already clean and straight, then began to think about supper.

I don't want to go shopping, not now. Maybe a light supper at the pub. It turned out to be an excellent idea. Many of the regulars were already there, some with their missus, and a dart game was in progress. Snape was greeted with ‘Lookie here, it's young Snape back from that posh school!’ and his first pint was on the house. He ordered steak and kidney pie, just to spite Carmichael, and enjoyed it thoroughly as he finished his pint.

Sunday evenings tended to be jolly in a quiet sort of way, most of the men having to work the next morning. They hauled Snape from his table to join the dart game, and this time he managed to hit the board more often than the wall, to good-natured cheers and laughter. Then he got a dart actually in the center ring, which earned him pats on the back, another pint, and the accolade ‘maybe there's a bit o' ol' Toby in you after all.’

That evening Snape got home about ten o'clock. He went right to bed and slept soundly.

Monday Snape wandered up to the top of Pendle Hill just to survey the surrounding country. It gave him a sense of peace, and the order of things. In a way, he could sympathize with the wizard distrust of the muggle world in the past, but he was beginning to have trouble understanding the reluctance of muggle-borns and half-bloods to acknowledge their muggle roots. Now, at last, after the turmoil of the last few years, he was beginning to realize once more how much strength and stability it gave him.

At tea time Snape appeared punctually at Mrs. Hanson's door, to spend a gentle hour and a half listening to all the gossip with a willing ear. It was good to know whose bird hound had just dropped a litter of fine pups, and which of the neighbors had spent three days in lockup for drunk driving, and how Mrs. Jackson's Mary and Mrs. O'Shay's Catherine were both after the same young man. There was an innocence to it that was worlds away from the rumor mill at Hogwarts.

For the next couple of days, Snape was lazy. He roamed the countryside, took tea with Mrs. Hanson, and supped at the pub where he was beginning to really improve at darts. Then, on Wednesday, he decided to start cooking at home.

Shopping was a pleasure. He was now somewhat familiar with different kinds of foods and spices, and had a particular dish in mind when he looked for meat, vegetables, and condiments. He was debating which of two quite nice pork chops to buy when he was greeted by Mrs. Hanson.

"It's good t' see a young man shopping for himself, and doing the cooking, too, by the looks of it."

"I'm trying some new things, Mrs. Hanson. Perhaps if I'm successful I'll invite you over for supper one of these days. I don't want to subject you to an experiment though."

"That's all right, dearie. I've subjected myself to enough of my own."

Snape moved on to the fish and seafood counter. They didn't carry shrimp, not that day at least, but there were mussels and oysters.

"Best buy them now while you can," said Mrs. Hanson. "This is the last until September. You're not supposed to eat them in months without an 'R', you know."

Snape made his selection of oysters then asked, "Aren't you going to get any, Mrs. Hanson?"

"Me? Love you, dear, but I can't. Five hours after I eat them, I'm as sick as a dog. I got me one of them allergies."

"That's too bad," Snape replied. "to be deprived of something you enjoy because of a reaction. Can I help you with your bags? I'm on my way home now, too."

Mrs. Hanson handed him her bags, chatting briskly now that she was free of their weight. "You always were the politest little thing, even late at night when you got hauled out of bed t' get you out of your dad's way. Always 'yes, ma'am' and 'no, ma'am' and no backtalk. And I won't pretend it's not harder with the cane, getting all unbalanced and all. I saw one of them walker things in a magazine. I wouldn't normally go with a walker, not being ninety, and half in my grave, but this one had a grocery basket on the front so it was more like having a little wheeled cart, and wouldn't that be grand for shopping with no bags to carry..."

"Mrs. Hanson?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I don't mean to be rude, but what happens to you five hours after you eat oysters?"

"La, child! You don't want t' know. I get sick out both ends and shaking like to have the ague. You don't want no particulars."

Snape's mind was working out the time difference between appetizers and late glasses of sherry. "On the contrary, begging your pardon, Mrs. Hanson. I think I know someone who would be fascinated. He's writing a treatise on allergic reactions, and I think he'd love to talk to you. Maybe even as soon as tomorrow tea? I could let you know for certain as soon as I give him a ring."

"Someone wanting my allergy for a tree-tis? Love you, dearie, that's one for my old age! But it's good t' have company for tea. If he wants t' come, he can come."

Snape saw Mrs. Hanson home and her bags onto the kitchen table, then he went to his own home and apparated to London from the area yard. In the atrium of the Ministry of Magic, he asked to speak to Gawain Robards. Once again he was directed to a waiting room.

"I didn't expect to see you here," was Robards first comment as he entered the room fifteen minutes later. "Has something happened?"

"Maybe, but I'd rather not color your viewpoint by telling you too much. Do you think you could talk to an old muggle woman tomorrow around four o'clock? I believe she has information that could assist you in your case."

"A muggle?"

"A lady I have known from my childhood. She mentioned something today that might interest you."

"And it concerns a certain author of our mutual acquaintance?"

"Most likely."

Robards met Snape in Manchester the following afternoon at three, and they apparated together to the moor land outside Snape's home town. Even before going to his house, Snape insisted that Robards alter his choice of clothing.

"The tweed jacket and the plus fours aren't too bad if you pretend you're a golfer, but the bowler hat has got to go."

"I thought it was required for a businessman."

"Twenty years ago with a three-piece suit. Take my word for it. No bowler hat."

They arrived at Mrs. Hanson's at precisely four. Mrs. Hanson was arrayed in a flowered dress from about two decades earlier, and appeared to have taken more than usual care with her hair and makeup, which Snape knew was a tribute to the special nature of the occasion. It was not every day that perfectly mundane little Mrs. Hanson was interviewed for a tree-tis, and Snape was immediately on his guard that Robards treat her with the proper respect due her.

"Mrs. Hanson," Snape said, "thank you for your kindness in allowing us to visit. May I present Dr. Robards, who holds a government position and is researching allergic symptoms. Dr. Robards, Mrs. Hanson."

"Charmed, Mrs. Hanson," Robards said as he took her hand. "I hope we are not inconveniencing you too much."

"Not at all. Not at all," she replied, ushering them into her small house. "Please come in. Sit yourselves down in the parlor, and help yourselves. I'll pour tea."

Inside the parlor was a brave little show of watercress, cucumber, and egg salad sandwiches, the crusts trimmed and cut into triangles. Mrs. Hanson had baked scones as well, and splurged her pension on clotted cream. One little plate even held a half dozen petits-fours. Snape wished he'd thought to fill Robards in on the widow's relative poverty, but could only trust for the moment to Robards' good sense.

They ate sandwiches and sipped tea for a quarter of an hour, engaging in local gossip that Robards added the occasional comment to, then Snape took over. "I hope you'll excuse me, Mrs. Hanson, but I thought it might be

a good moment to bring up Dr. Robards' research. He's studying allergies, and I mentioned yours to him."

"Ah, yes," said Robards. "I am most anxious to hear of your symptoms."

"Well, it don't seem quite right t' be talking about it while we're eating..."

"Do not worry, Mrs. Hanson," Robards said quickly. "I am quite used to it, and it will not bother me at all. What are you allergic to?"

"Oysters, love you. Didn't Russ tell you?"

"And what happens to you when you eat oysters?"

"Nothing for five hours. Fit as a fiddle. Then I start t' get nervous and anxious, then a bit queasy, and then I'm sick as can be. It happens all sudden like, from one moment t' the next."

There followed a detailed account of diarrhea, vomiting and chills, but Robards made it all sound very official and flattering, as if Mrs. Hanson's answers would solve the riddles of disease and poverty on the earth. He wanted to know everything, and the sordid little details of nausea and toilets became, in his handling, the clinical wonders of modern science.

"And for how long did you suffer these extraordinary chills, ma'am?"

"Nigh on forty-five minutes, but when they got better, I knew I wasn't going t' be sick any more."

"So when the chills abated, the allergic attack was basically over."

"Yes. I'd say that was it."

"Now ma'am, if you'll excuse me, there are one or two details..."

On the way back to Snape's house, Robards was more skeptical. "Wizards and witches don't have allergies."

"Do you think she's lying?"

"That old woman? She's as innocent as the day is long. I don't think she understands the word 'lie.'"

"You'd better be respectful, because 'that old woman' has taken care of me since before I knew I was a wizard. Though you're right about her honesty."

Robards stopped right there in the street and regarded Snape with some interest. "I don't usually think of wizards as growing up in muggle communities. You mean everyone here knows you, what you are?"

"They know me, but they know me as a person, not as a wizard. They knew my mother and father. I think Mum and I were the only wizard folk here, but no one knows about that part of it. At least I don't think they do. There's a village east of here where my grandmother lived, and they knew she was a witch. She was the local healer."

Robards shook his head in wonder. "I guess some of the old tales about this country are true." He didn't elaborate on what those tales might be. "The point being, however, that whatever Mrs. Hanson's allergy may be, witches and wizards don't have them."

"How do you explain that the symptoms are identical, right down to the period of time after eating oysters? And remember, Dr. Carmichael is muggle-born." Snape got some satisfaction out of seeing Robards pause to reflect on that bit of information.

"You have a point. She isn't pureblood, and that might make a difference. I'll check with St. Mungo's. I might be visiting Hogwarts in the near future."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd wait until Easter break was over."

Nothing else of moment happened for the rest of the break. Snape read, worked on potions, experimented with cooking and asked Mrs. Hanson to dinner. He collected plants specimens and got marginally better at darts. The holiday was over far too soon.

C H A P T E R T H I R T Y - O N E

C O U N T E R C H A R G E

MONDAY, APRIL 18, 1983

On April 17, Snape apparated back to Hogwarts feeling more relaxed than when he'd left, though the sight of the great castle on the hill did cause some of that good feeling to evaporate. *One more term to go, and I'll be free of this place for a month. I can hardly wait.*

Monday classes were as routine as they could be for students who'd just woken up to the fact that they had less than two months before their OWLs and their NEWTs. Snape announced that special tutoring sessions would be arranged in the Great Hall for those who wanted the extra help.

During his last class of the day, Snape received a message asking him to go to Dumbledore's office before supper. Gawain Robards had come up from London.

Snape met McGonagall on his way up the stairs. They were both clearly going in the same direction. When they walked together into Dumbledore's office, they found not only the Headmaster and Mr. Robards, but also Madam Pomfrey, Dr. Carmichael, and a plump little man with wispy brown hair and watery eyes who was introduced to them as Tristan Platt, Carmichael's publishing agent. From the moment Snape entered, Carmichael glared at him with undisguised loathing.

Dumbledore began, "Mr. Robards has just been explaining to us the nature of a certain condition called an allergy. He believes Dr. Carmichael may have one. His says you brought this to his attention, Severus. What have you to tell us?"

Surprised by the directness of the question, Snape hesitated, then considered there was nothing wrong about speaking in the present company since either they already knew of his muggle blood, or they had no reason to hold it against him.

"I went home for the Easter break, and while shopping one day I chanced to speak to a neighbor lady about the seafood for sale. She said she couldn't eat it because of an allergy, and described her reactions. They seemed identical to Dr. Carmichael's, and since no trace of poison was ever found, I thought the information opened up another line of inquiry for the Ministry."

Carmichael jumped in immediately. "You already knew about this allergy business, and you deliberately selected an undetectable poison that mimics the symptoms. Admit it, Death Eater. I'm a witch! I do not have muggle ailments! You're trying to get away with poisoning me!"

"Madam Pomfrey?" Robards said.

The nurse cleared her throat. "It is true that muggle-born witches and wizards do not generally suffer from the common diseases of the muggle world, so that we have a very low incidence of things such as measles, chicken pox, et cetera. But it is also true that from time to time a case will crop up. Even half-bloods and purebloods occasionally catch colds. My understanding is that this allergy is not a disease, however. It is something that originates in the body itself as a malfunctioning of the immune system. St. Mungo's has records of a few cases..."

"I am not allergic to oysters!" Carmichael shrieked. "I'm being poisoned!"

"There is a way to find out," said Snape. "Bring in a bowl of oysters, and we all eat some. Then we wait five hours. If they're poisoned we all get sick. If you have an allergy, only you get sick."

"I refuse to engage in a barbaric and humiliating test as if I were a guinea pig or something. The two of you are working together, from vindictiveness and a loyalty to the dark forces, and I'm going to let the whole world know."

"Then," said McGonagall very primly, "I shall sue you for slander."

"Wait a minute," said plump little Mr. Platt, his cheeks growing pale, "I'm sure we can arrive at a more amicable solution."

"I think not," said McGonagall. "If she slanders me, I shall sue."

"You've hated me ever since your son fell in love with me. From the moment I came here, you've been trying to thwart me, to hurt me. You even tried to stop me from being friendly with him just for spite." Carmichael gestured wildly at Snape.

"If I was trying to hurt you, why would I want you to stay away from someone who wanted to poison you? Wouldn't I have encouraged it? And Marcellus did not fall in love with you. You went out of your way to lure him."

"He saw me in Hogsmeade and came to my table."

"You waited for him in Hogsmeade and called him to your table."

"How would you know?"

"He told me. After it was all over, he told me. You waited until he was of age so that you couldn't be accused of misleading a minor, and then you pounced."

"Why would I do something like that? Answer me! Why?"

Light that had already been glimmering on the horizon suddenly dawned. "Your NEWT," Snape said. "You considered Professor McGonagall responsible for your failing the exam."

Dr. Carmichael stared at Snape for a long moment, then stormed to the door. Her hand on the latch, she snapped at Platt, "Come on! We're leaving!" The little man followed her down the stairs for all the world like a pet dog at heel.

The others stared at Snape. "What do you know about Dr. Carmichael's NEWTs?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

"She told me that she got low marks on an important one because of the incompetence of a new teacher. She didn't say, but I assumed she meant Professor McGonagall. But when I checked the archives I found she'd been disqualified in Transfiguration for cheating."

"Oh, really?" Robards said. "I think I should hear about this."

Snape briefly told them Dr. Carmichael's version of the NEWTs, how her chances for success with the Ministry had been destroyed by lack of proper preparation for the exams, how she had married her first husband and accidentally met Marcellus McGonagall in Hogsmeade during the period of the divorce. Professor McGonagall remained silent the whole time.

"Well, Minerva," said Dumbledore when Snape had finished. "What is the other version of this? The part Dr. Carmichael did not tell Severus."

McGonagall sat stiffly on Dumbledore's sofa, her hands folded in her lap. "Valeria," she said, "was not a good student at Transfiguration. The only subject I think she really excelled at was Dark Arts. I didn't know her well, as I was there only during her last year, but she had that reputation with the instructors. Almost as soon as we arrived at Hogwarts, she took a fancy to Marcellus — he was in first year — and adopted him. She'd help him with his studies and his assignments — she was very motherly. She professed great surprise when she found out that I was his mother. Her favorite teacher and her favorite little kid, she said. It wasn't until the end of the year that I found out why.

"Just before the examiners came, she asked me if I could give her a hint

of what the questions and tasks would be. I told her that I'd given as much information as I could in the class, and I couldn't give her any more. She said she thought we had a special relationship, and I said that what she asked went beyond what was proper. Then she came 'round again saying that she'd done me a favor, taking care of Marcellus, and it had cost her study time. It was my responsibility to make that up to her by helping her out with the questions. At about the same time Marcellus began acting up, and I found she was feeding him a story about how wicked I was.

"When the examiners came, she tried once more, and once more I turned her down. I went to the examiners and reported what had happened. One of them, d' ye remember Dr. Prudhoe, asked me to give her wrong information, but I refused. He then asked me to put a folder into my desk where only a student searching for information to cheat would find it. I did, and Valeria gave the planted answers on the test. She never even bothered to check if they were right or not. She accused me of telling her the false answers on purpose to make her fail, but the examiners bought none of it."

"Why did I know none of this, Minerva?" Dumbledore asked.

"Och, Albus! That was the June that Professor Dippet decided he was a canary bird and kept trying to fly. Ye were a wee bit busy."

"Ah, yes. I remember it now. But I do recall that Marcellus's dislike of your plans for him postdated Dr. Carmichael's time at Hogwarts."

"I fear ye may be right there, Albus. I did so want him to have a good career, but he's happier now. But that woman, when she came back, she was trying to lead him out of Hogwarts and out of a Ministry career to spite me."

"Are you sure of that?" Robards asked.

"Aye. Marcellus told me, after it was all over. It was something she harped on. That and her conquests. The way she could twist young men around her finger, lead them down the primrose path, and play with them like a fish on a hook. So when she started casting flies at our Severus here . . . Well, hasna he had enough troubles this past year?"

"And yet, Minerva, your interest may only have made matters worse."

McGonagall looked up at Dumbledore. "I see that now. I didn't see it then."

"Who can witness to this besides you?" Robards asked.

"Marcellus can. Dr. Prudhoe has retired, but I'm sure he's still alive. Professor Tofty did the OWLs that year, but Dr. Marchbanks was administering NEWTs. 'T is all in the records."

"Excellent," said Robards. "I have a feeling this is one case we can solve to almost everyone's satisfaction."

"Mr. Moody's?" Snape asked.

"I said almost everyone's. Don't worry about Alastor. We can keep him in line. He's even mellowed a bit since last year."

"Funny," said Snape, "I hadn't noticed."

"That's because you don't have to live with him on a day-to-day basis. Believe me, he obsesses on you a lot less than he used to. When he finds he put his money on a losing horse, he'll back off from the pure shame of it."

"I suppose that should make me feel better."

"It should. I actually once witnessed Alastor admit that he'd been wrong. It was several years ago, and the circumstances were admittedly traumatic, but miracles do happen. Albus, I need to return to London now, but I'll keep in touch. Professor McGonagall, a pleasure as always. Madam Pomfrey. Professor Snape." Then Robards was gone, heading out to Hogsmeade where he could apparate back to the Ministry.

Two big contests were looming, Slytherin against Hufflepuff in Quidditch, and Snape against Carmichael in public relations. Carmichael struck first.

The Daily Prophet article contained a subtitle — "Prejudice at Hogwarts?"

Reporter: And so, Dr. Carmichael, in spite of your fame, your credentials, you have found yourself the subject of anti-muggle-born prejudice even at an institution as venerable as Hogwarts School?

Dr. Carmichael: It is so difficult to accept. Of all places where I thought the accidents of my birth and ancestry would not be held against me, Hogwarts rated the highest, especially under the guidance of Professor Dumbledore. But even the best of us may be swayed by clever subterfuge, and the still-loyal agents of You-Know-Who are working their insidious mischief even there.

Reporter: Can you give us any particulars?

Dr. Carmichael: Do you realize that I have been threatened with legal action, with public hounding in the courts, just for speaking the truth? And yet there is a teacher there, a teacher whose connections to You-Know-Who and his minions have already been documented, who is allowed to slander me with impunity and prejudice even the Department of Magical Law Enforcement against me. And I am not allowed to defend myself. He is joined by another professor, one who hopes to hide behind a mask of propriety, who has hated me ever since she began teaching because I had the temerity to fall in love, something her prudish narrow-mindedness could not accept. And this vindictive harridan and her Death Eater

partner have marked me for death, hiding their machinations behind the facade that it can all be blamed on the impurity of my muggle blood.

Reporter: That is monstrous, Dr. Carmichael. And you can't identify these miscreants for us?

Dr. Carmichael: If I do, I shall be forced to face the full might and power of both Hogwarts and the Ministry on my own, without any other defense but my poor protestations of innocence. And we all know how much good that does. No, it is the great, fair-minded public of the wizarding world that is my only defense. If they can demand the resignation of these two villains, then justice will have been done.

"Well?" McGonagall demanded, shoving the newspaper in Snape's face. "What are you going to do about it?"

Snape glanced through the interview, his face and mind closed. "It seems to me," he said, "that since you are the vindictive harridan, and I am only the Death Eater, you should have the honors."

"Don't get cheeky with me, boy. I can still deduct points from Slytherin."

"Not for a teacher, you can't." Snape turned to Flitwick. "She can't, can she?"

"Just because I've never seen it done doesn't mean it can't be," replied Flitwick, burying his face in his breakfast plate and fizzing slightly. Beyond him Sprout was also hiding her expression.

"I think," Snape said determinedly, "that we should file a grievance and have her summoned to respond to a libel suit."

"Since when did you become a legal expert?" McGonagall huffed. "And wouldn't that put our names on the front page?"

"All the better," replied Snape. "How many witches and wizards have you taught in the last, what, twenty-six years? They can't all have hated you. I didn't hate you. Do you realize that once you're identified as the teacher Carmichael is referring to, she may lose support rather than gain it?"

"Well . . ." said McGonagall.

"Let me at least contact Robards. Maybe he can talk to that publishing agent. They have to see reason at some point."

"All right. You go ahead."

FRIDAY, APRIL 22, 1983

The day before the Slytherin-Hufflepuff Quidditch match, Robards returned to Hogwarts. With him was plump little Tristan Platt. Dr. Carmichael was the last in, having followed Snape and McGonagall up the stairs.

"I have here," said Robards, "a summons issued in answer to a petition filed by Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape asking that Valeria Mesalina Carmichael, née Aurifosser, be called to answer for certain slanderous statements publicly made in an instrument of the media known as *The Daily Prophet*. Before I serve this summons, I'd like to know if you, Dr. Carmichael, have anything to say that might stop this action."

"Serve away," said Carmichael.

Platt coughed slightly. "You know, Valeria, that might not be wise."

The temperature in the room dropped by about fifteen degrees. "Are you implying, Tristan, that I am not capable of defending myself in this matter?"

"But, Valeria dear . . . Will you excuse us for a moment?" Mr. Platt asked Dumbledore, and when the headmaster nodded, he led Carmichael to one side and whispered in her ear. Carmichael went livid, muttered something about finding out what they wanted, and left the office.

Platt was apologetic. "I am sorry. She gets terribly single-minded sometimes. I think we can agree, however, that this is best settled amicably, with a minimum of publicity."

"I thought she wanted publicity," said McGonagall. "I thought she was calling on the power of public opinion."

"Dear Valeria believes in the basic goodness of the public, but doesn't always realize that once awakened it isn't easy to control. Things could get out of hand, emotions being what they are, and we don't necessarily want that."

"So she'll retract her words and stop attacking us in the news?"

"Well, Professor McGonagall, it might be hard to accomplish the retracting part, especially since she never mentioned anyone by name. I hope the stop attacking part is easier. I think she can be brought around to that."

"What do you think?" McGonagall asked Snape.

"It's true, no names were mentioned. I doubt that it's occurred to anyone yet that she was even talking about you. The description didn't fit. If it's never mentioned again, it'll die away and little harm done."

"Very well." McGonagall turned back to Platt. "We'll be content if she never refers to it again."

"Thank you, dear lady, gracious gentleman! You won't regret this generosity." And then Platt was gone, too, leaving the others puzzled.

"I wonder what they know that we don't," said Robards, "that makes him so anxious to avoid a libel suit."

The next day was the last Saturday in April, and the Quidditch match between Slytherin and Hufflepuff. Snape sat with the Slytherin Quidditch team at breakfast that morning and discussed overall strategy. Or rather, he listened while they discussed, adding only an occasional comment.

"It's Gryffindor in the best position," said Lionel, the Seeker. "They scored enough against Hufflepuff in their last game that even if they score nothing before catching the Snitch, we'll need 40 Quaffle points before the Snitch just to tie them. And Hufflepuff needs a hundred Quaffle points for a tie."

"Which means," said the seventh-year Chaser Rhonda, "that Ravenclaw has to beat Gryffindor. Ravenclaw is weakest in points and can't hope to beat either us or Hufflepuff. But they can come in second with a simple Snitch victory. So if we or Hufflepuff score high, Gryffindor will be looking for Quaffle points while Ravenclaw will be Snitch hunting. But if we both score low, Gryffindor will be Snitch hunting, too."

"So it's a Quaffle game, and pray Ravenclaw finds the Snitch in May."

Hufflepuff had the same strategy, and the Quidditch game quickly became a battle around the hoops. Both teams excelled at defense, and the score stayed low. After an hour of play, Slytherin had thirty and Hufflepuff forty.

It was at that point that the Gryffindor stands began to heckle the Hufflepuff players.

"What's the matter, Badger-boys? Scared of the Snitch?"

"Hufflepuff, not fast enough! Hufflepuff, not fast enough!"

"Snitch! Snitch! Snitch!"

Flitwick, sitting between Snape and McGonagall, looked at Gryffindor's head of house. "What are they doing that for?"

Snape leaned over, his voice raised against the noise. "If either Slytherin or Hufflepuff gets the Snitch now, Gryffindor won't need to score before it goes for the Snitch. They could win outright in minutes. But if we score one more goal and then win, Gryffindor will have to play the Quaffle to get first place. They want Hufflepuff to be content with second place and catch the Snitch before we score again."

But it seemed that neither Hufflepuff nor Slytherin was to be controlled by Gryffindor. Both teams kept doggedly to their game plan, and the score

stood 60 for Hufflepuff when Slytherin scored its fifth goal and began to hunt the Snitch.

No longer willing to chance it, Hufflepuff placed its hopes in Ravenclaw and went Snitch hunting, too. The gods favored Hufflepuff, and after furious feints by both Seekers, Hufflepuff claimed the Snitch and won. Slytherin would have no Quidditch Cup that year.

Slytherin faced defeat again in the media competition on the following Monday. *The Daily Prophet* ran another interview.

Reporter: But Dr. Carmichael, you were so strong last week. You came out a fighter.

Dr. Carmichael: Even the strongest of us have our limits. I'm facing the full weight of Hogwarts and the Ministry. I can't fight anymore.

Reporter: How can you let this happen?

Dr. Carmichael: They're hitting me from several sides at once. First, since You-Know-Who targeted me for death, I haven't been able to do as much research and writing. So now they're threatening my publisher with exorbitant legal fees in a civil suit whose primary purpose is to drain my funds. Moreover, they're trying to blacken my character by taking a misunderstanding with my seventh year Transfiguration teacher and expanding it into a character issue. Then there's the other one, who everyone knows used to work for You-Know-Who, but they won't protect me from him. I'm so beleaguered, I don't know where to turn anymore.

Reporter: Is there anything our readers can do?

Dr. Carmichael: Yes, though I hesitate to say it for fear of reprisals.

Reporter: Please, Dr. Carmichael, confide in your supporters.

Dr. Carmichael: If they could just let Headmaster Dumbledore and the Ministry know that I'm not alone, that if something happens to me, it will be noticed in the wizarding world, and that evil deeds will not go unpunished. Then I think I could find the strength to go on.

McGonagall slapped the paper in front of Snape. "Look at that!" she snapped.

"Do I have to? I'm eating. You know if you destroy my appetite now, I'm lost for the rest of the day."

"Even if you don't, others will. Albus has gotten three owls already this morning. If parents start calling for resignations again, we'll have to take it to court."

"I notice," Snape said, glancing at the interview, "that she still hasn't mentioned any names."

"I presume that will be her defense, that we can't actually prove that she was talking about us."

"And she has an eye to public opinion." Snape looked at the paper more carefully. "She hasn't said that the Transfiguration teacher and the harridan are the same person. Maybe she felt that not everyone would be on her side if they knew it was you she was complaining about."

"Well," McGonagall said, "there is some comfort in that."

Snape seldom even saw Dr. Carmichael at the school anymore, since she commuted daily to London and no longer took meals with the rest of the staff. He continued to monitor the progress of his house in Dark Arts, but everything there seemed to be going well.

Dumbledore came to Snape's office Wednesday afternoon. He was carrying a large packet of letters. "Most of them assume it is you," he told Snape. "They are more reluctant to name Professor McGonagall. Do you intend to respond to her attack?"

"I wish she would just let it drop. The Ministry knows no one tried to poison her, even if she won't believe it. Everyone else will forget about it in a few weeks. But if it goes to court, it'll be all over Britain for months."

It didn't stop. Dr. Carmichael arranged a series of talks about her books, and the subject of her near-escapes was brought up during the first two by her audiences. The incidents made it into articles in *The Daily Prophet*. On Monday, May 16, Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape filed a request for an injunction against Valeria Carmichael and submitted papers to start a civil suit.

The first hearing on the injunction was set for the following Monday, May 23. Dumbledore accompanied Snape and McGonagall to the Ministry, where Judge Bones had taken the case. Both Robards and Moody were in the courtroom, and a few minutes later McGonagall was joined by a tall man with gray eyes and dark brown hair, probably in his late thirties.

The introduction was whispered and brief. "Severus, I'd like you to meet my son, Marcellus." The two men shook hands, and then waited quietly.

Dr. Carmichael's entrance was more showy. She was preceded by a photographer, accompanied by her agent, who looked decidedly uncomfortable, and followed by two reporters.

Robards stopped them before the little procession had gotten halfway into the court. "You shouldn't have the press here. This is just a hearing to review the facts of the case."

"There!" Carmichael announce to the reporters. "They don't want you to know the facts!"

Robards sighed. "We'll let the judge decide." He sent word to Judge Bones that all were assembled.

Judge Bones went first to the bench, then bade them all be seated. She glanced around, then crooked a finger at the clerk. "There are people here unconnected with the case," she said.

"Yes, your Honor. The Defendant brought them."

The judge looked through her papers. "Valeria Carmichael, step forward." Carmichael approached the bench. "For what purpose, Dr. Carmichael, have you brought representatives of the media to this hearing?"

"I understand the action has to do with remarks I made in *The Daily Prophet*. This lady and gentleman are from that paper, and are here as witnesses for me."

"I see. And the photographer?"

"To take pictures."

"The photographer will wait outside the courtroom. And you will take no pictures without obtaining prior consent. I see any pictures of this proceeding, and you go to jail for contempt."

"Yes, your Honor," said the photographer, and left.

"Now, Gawain," the judge continued, "do you speak for the plaintiff, the defendant, or the court?"

"For the court, your Honor."

"This is for an injunction of cease and desist, and so far no damages are involved. What is the material in question?"

"Four interviews in *The Daily Prophet*," Robards laid the papers in front of the judge, "and statements made at two book-reading events."

Judge Bones scanned the evidence. "No names are mentioned. Why do you think the public will connect the statements to you?"

McGonagall answered first. "She speaks of a female teacher who started at Hogwarts while she was a student. That can only be me. She confirms it later by mentioning a problem with her seventh-year professor in Transfiguration. That again can only be me."

"Thank you. Professor Snape?"

Snape didn't look at Carmichael. "She talks of a male professor who's known to have links to You-Know-Who. I'm the first male professor to be hired in fifteen years, and there have been previous questions about my connections to the Death Eaters. There is no other professor that it could be."

Handing a paper to Robards, the judge said, "There has been a previous complaint about poisoning and attempted murder. What were the results of the investigation?"

"Your Honor, no trace of poison was found either in the glass, the bottle that supplied its contents, any other bottle or glass, or in the expelled body fluids."

"That's because it was an undetectable poison," interrupted Carmichael.

The judge peered over her glasses at Carmichael. "Who is our foremost authority on undetectable poisons?" she asked.

"I am."

"Where did you study these poisons?"

"Mostly in the jungles of South America . . . Brazil, Venezuela."

"Can you identify for the court a poison that causes these symptoms?"

"No, but . . ."

"Professor Snape, have you ever been outside Britain?"

"No, your Honor."

"How do you acquire poisonous material for your classes?"

"I order it through school channels."

"Has an inventory been made of your supplies?"

"Yes, your Honor."

"Alastor Moody," the judge smiled at the auror, "was Professor Snape anywhere, during the time before the alleged attacks, where he might have purchased suspect materials?"

"No, your Honor," Moody was forced to admit.

"Has anything else surfaced in your investigation?" Judge Bones asked Robards.

"The defendant's symptoms match certain symptoms experienced by muggles who have a condition called an allergy to certain types of food. We have asked the defendant to cooperate in tests to determine whether or not she is suffering from such an allergy. She has refused."

"Why would you refuse?" the judge asked Carmichael.

"I don't have an allergy," Carmichael replied.

"How do you know?"

"I would know if I had an allergy."

"What is this allegedly an allergy to?"

"Oysters, your Honor," Robards responded.

"Dr. Carmichael, how many times in your life have you eaten oysters?"

Carmichael hesitated. "Twice," she said at last.

"Were each of these times also a time when you claim to have been poisoned?"

"Yes, your Honor."

"Have you ever been poisoned on a day when you haven't eaten oysters or eaten oysters on a day when you haven't been poisoned?"

Carmichael jumped on the question. "Yes!" she exclaimed. "When You-Know-Who tried to poison me the first times."

From behind Carmichael came what sounded like a small moan. It seemed to come from Mr. Tristan Platt. The judge turned gently to the self-effacing little man. "Mr. Platt," she said, "are you the agent mentioned by Dr. Carmichael in her books who helped save her from the attacks by Lord Voldemort?"

"Yes, your Honor."

"Mr. Platt. You are aware, of course, that testimony in front of a judge is under compulsion of perjury?"

"Yes, your Honor." Behind Mr. Platt, Carmichael had grown suddenly pale.

"Please describe Dr. Carmichael's symptoms after she was poisoned by Lord Voldemort."

There was a long period of silence.

"Mr. Platt, do you understand my instructions?"

"Be quiet!" snapped Carmichael to Platt. Then she turned to the judge. "My agent isn't here as a witness. I just asked him to come for moral support."

"He nevertheless appears to have been the witness of something," the judge replied, "and I shall decide whether or not it is relevant. Now, Mr. Platt, will you describe the symptoms?"

"I can't," Platt replied.

"Why not? Didn't you see them?"

"Uh, no. I . . . uh . . . didn't."

"Who did?"

Carmichael hissed, Platt sighed, and Judge Bones drummed her fingers on her desk. "I am waiting, Mr. Platt. We do have one or two nice cells where you would have leisure time to consider your answer if you feel under too much pressure here and now."

"You wouldn't!" Carmichael exclaimed. "You couldn't!"

"I would, and I could, and you will be silent. Mr. Platt, who witnessed the symptoms?"

Platt glanced woefully at Carmichael, but his choices were few. "No one did," he answered. "There were no symptoms. The poisoning by You-Know-Who never took place. It was a publicity stunt to cover her move to America and was made because of slumping book sales."

"You're sacked as of this moment!" Carmichael shrieked, but no one was paying attention to her anymore.

The two reporters looked at each other, and one rose and headed for the door. "Where are you going, Madame?" Judge Bones said, and the reporter stopped.

"I need to send an owl," she answered.

"No you don't, not about business that's before my court." The reporter sat down again, and the judge turned her attention back to Carmichael. "Dr. Carmichael, you have alleged that someone has been trying to poison you, and you have accused Professor Snape in this attempt both formally to the Ministry of Magic and by implication to the media, claiming as his motive that he was trying to fulfill Lord Voldemort's sentence of death against you, thus leading the public to the supposition that he was at some time a Death Eater. We now find that the designs against your life were nonexistent, that Voldemort never marked you for death. How could Professor Snape be trying to carry out an order that was never given?"

"He was really acting out of a spirit of revenge, since I had rebuffed his romantic advances. I didn't want to embarrass him by telling everyone that he was turned down by someone of my experience."

Judge Bones peered at Carmichael over her glasses. "You felt that being pilloried as a former Death Eater was somehow preferable to being ridiculed for being attracted to older women? Do you have a shred of evidence that Professor Snape was ever a Death Eater?"

Carmichael glanced back at Moody, but Moody was very subtly shaking his head. Looking back at the judge, Carmichael replied, "No, your Honor."

"And what of your allegations against Professor McGonagall?"

"She has resented me for years because her son and I fell in love, and he was ready to leave Hogwarts and his family for my sake."

The judge's gaze swept the front bench. "It would appear, Mr. McGonagall, that your testimony has suddenly become pertinent." Marcellus rose, and as he did Carmichael gasped. She had clearly not recognized him after the passage of twenty years.

"What do you need from me, your Honor?" Marcellus asked.

"Simple narrative would suffice, I think."

"I was already in my first year at Hogwarts when my mother was hired at the end of the autumn term to take over the Transfiguration classes. Almost at once, Mrs. Carmichael — she was Miss Aurifosser then — began to single me out for treats, help with my assignments, general attention. I thought this was great, and she told me it was because I was so smart, good-looking, and personable. The only time I ever heard anything unpleasant from her was at the end of the year, in June, when she seemed angry and told me my mother was an ingrate. I didn't find out the truth until more than six years later."

"Under what circumstances did you discover this 'truth'?"

"In my seventh year, after I'd turned eighteen in fact, I encountered Mrs. Carmichael in Hogsmeade. One thing led to another, and we became involved. So involved that I left Hogwarts to be with her all the time. Our relationship turned sour not long after that, and in the course of the breakup she threw several things in my face. One of them was that I was an obnoxious little brat and the only reason she'd befriended me was to get the NEWT exam questions from my mother. When mother refused, she decided to get even by ruining my chances the same way hers had been ruined."

"How much of this do you know from your own experience, Professor McGonagall?"

"This is outrageous!" Carmichael shrieked.

"And you will be silent or I shall call a guard."

"Well," said McGonagall, "she did ask me for the questions, and I reported it to the examiners. They investigated and disqualified her."

"What have you to say in this matter?" Judge Bones asked Carmichael.

"They're lying! They're both lying!"

Snape diffidently raised his hand.

"Yes, Professor Snape?"

"Wouldn't it be in the school archives?" Snape asked innocently. When the judge nodded, he added, "I wouldn't want to speak for Professor McGonagall, but I for one would be willing to drop the petition for an injunction." McGonagall stared at him, then shrugged and agreed.

"You're a fast learner," said the judge. "The case is dropped," she announced, "and you are all free to go. Since there is no longer a case before this court, no restrictions can be imposed."

The two reporters exchanged glances again, and raced for the door.

It hit *The Daily Prophet* headlines the next day — 'Author Hoodwinks Public!'

"Look at this," McGonagall said, tossing the paper in front of Snape at breakfast. "I guarantee it will improve your appetite."

Snape skimmed down the page. It was primarily an account of the publishing agent's admission that the You-Know-Who poisoning claim was false, together with commentary about the impact of this on Carmichael's more recent allegations. Of particular interest was the section that spoke of Carmichael's 'less than admirable school career' and her confession to the judge that she had no solid evidence about any former Death Eaters at Hogwarts.

"Well," Snape said, "that certainly seems to cover everything." McGonagall was right. His appetite did improve.

The rest of the day was remarkably pleasant. All of Snape's students were well-behaved, even studious, and the Slytherin students positively glowed. Many of them congratulated him throughout the day, and copies of *The Prophet* were being read quite prominently at the Slytherin table during lunch and dinner.

Dr. Carmichael did not return to Hogwarts. Luckily, the term and the year were nearly over—she had covered her entire curriculum and was reviewing in all her classes. The students appeared very well prepared for their exams.

"In fact," Dumbledore confided to Snape and McGonagall, "were it not for the little personal problems that surfaced, she was quite the best Dark Arts professor we have had in many years. In that respect I am sorry to see her go."

"I'm not," said Snape, and McGonagall sided with him.

FRIDAY, MAY 27, 1983

On Friday, the last Friday in May, there was another interview in *The Daily Prophet*. Carmichael was still fighting.

Reporter: How do you explain that your own publishing agent stated in court that the so-called attempts by You-Know-Who to kill you were fabrications?

Carmichael: They were not fabrications. My life was in danger before we released the story about the poison. Mr. Platt, who is no longer my agent, never denied that. He merely commented on the poisoning story that we used as a cover to conceal the true information we had about other attempts. And there are Death Eaters running around free today who know this to be true.

Reporter: You implied that a teacher at Hogwarts was one of these Death Eaters, and yet you said in court that you had no evidence to support that.

Carmichael: My information came from the Ministry itself, from the aurors. But they've been instructed not to back me up.

Reporter: Why might that be, since the aurors more than anyone want to incarcerate as many of 'his' former servants as possible?

Carmichael: Because the Ministry wants to discredit me. They are out to get me, too.

Reporter: To the extent of allowing Death Eaters to go free just to embarrass you? Come now, Dr. Carmichael. Isn't that a little far-fetched? Isn't it more likely that you have a common muggle condition called an allergy...

Carmichael: There! You're working for them! You're part of the plot to discredit me! Which master do you serve? The dark one, or the Ministry?

Reporter: It seems, Dr. Carmichael, that you have a habit of throwing these accusations at anyone who contradicts you. Your readers might start to think that your earlier accusations are just as baseless as your present ones.

"Just as baseless," said McGonagall, allowing Snape to read over her shoulder. "That has a good sound to it."

"A most excellent sound. Now maybe all of this will go away."

"Don't hold your breath, Severus. Nothing ever completely goes away."

McGonagall's words came true at the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw the next day. Once again the visitor stands were packed, Weasleys prominent in the crowd. In fact, there were more people than in November, and it was not just the good weather.

The outcome of this match affected all the houses. If Gryffindor won, Hufflepuff would be second, Slytherin third, and Ravenclaw once again on the bottom. If Gryffindor scored before Ravenclaw won, it would be Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, and Slytherin. If Ravenclaw caught the Snitch before Gryffindor scored, Gryffindor would be last.

It was not often that all three of the other houses were united against Gryffindor, and the mood in the stands and on the pitch was raucous, to say the least. Even reporters from *The Prophet* were there, though as it turned out, they were more interested in McGonagall and Snape than in the game.

"Excuse me," a reporter said as Snape crossed the field on his way to the teachers' stands. "Could I trouble you with a few questions?"

At a loss for what to do or say, Snape took the coward's way out and postponed the encounter. "I'm sorry, I have to be on the other side in two minutes."

"Perhaps after the game?"

"Perhaps."

In the teachers' stand there was another awkward moment, for while it was a given that McGonagall and Flitwick would sit farthest apart, it was not clear who would sit next to McGonagall, all three of the others being in the embarrassing situation of hoping her house would lose.

"I think I'm strongest for Flitwick," said Sprout, "seeing that if he wins the game, I win the Cup."

So Snape sat next to McGonagall. That having been decided, he mentioned the reporter. "I haven't a clue what to say to him," he admitted.

"Simple," McGonagall snorted. "Tell him it's about time that horrid woman got what she deserves. And you no longer trust *The Daily Prophet* for believing her in the first place."

"I don't know," Sprout interjected. "You don't want to make enemies, you know. If you're nasty to the newspaper, they'll be looking for another chance to strike at you. If you're nice and pleasant, they'll leave you alone."

"I doubt that," said McGonagall.

"Did I mention boring?" added Sprout. "If you're boring, a newspaper always leaves you alone."

"You do make a valid point," Snape said. "How do I manage being both polite and boring?"

Flitwick laughed. "Usually the two go together anyway. Just be polite and let boring take care of itself."

Don't make enemies. It was an old lesson, one of the first his mother had taught him, but Snape had somehow always managed to annoy someone. *It's just that I always seem to say or do the wrong thing.* In any case, he had the whole Quidditch game to think about it. *Assuming they don't catch the Snitch in the first minute, that is.*

They didn't catch the Snitch in the first minute, or the first five minutes, or the first fifteen minutes. By then Ravenclaw's strategy was clear. Gryffindor wanted to score twice before Snitch hunting, so if Ravenclaw could keep the Quaffle away from the hoops, they could delay a Gryffindor bid for the prize. Since no amount of scoring could help Ravenclaw, they didn't even worry about it, dedicating all their players except the Seeker and one Beater to the task of keeping the Quaffle out of Gryffindor hands and protecting their own hoops. If Ravenclaw never scored, Gryffindor would never be given the Quaffle.

It turned into a running comedy for everyone except McGonagall and the Gryffindor stands, both students and visitors. For the first time, Ravenclaw revealed a stunning series of lateral passes that they'd been practicing in secret.

Every time a Gryffindor Chaser came close to seizing the Quaffle, it was gone. The red and gold stands were chanting ‘Fly high, Gryffindor!’ but the answering chant from the other houses was ‘Fly blind, Gryffindor!’ Tempers were getting short in one quarter of the field.

Snape had a good half hour to think of what to say to the reporter that was polite and dull. Then the Snitch appeared, and Ravenclaw went into action. Two Ravenclaw Chasers stayed just outside their scoring area to keep the Quaffle busy and deflect scoring attempts by Gryffindor while the third Chaser and the second Beater moved in to distract Gryffindor’s Seeker. Two minutes later, Ravenclaw had the Snitch.

Hufflepuff went wild at their first undisputed Cup in years. Ravenclaw exploded at the first time in two decades that they were one of the top two. Slytherin was just glad they weren’t last. The only house that nursed unmitigated disappointment was proud Gryffindor. Vows of vengeance the next year were already circulating in their stands.

“Professor Snape!” the reporter called, falling in next to Snape as he left the field. “What do you think about the recent developments in the Carmichael business?”

“We’re sorry she’s leaving us. She was an excellent Dark Arts teacher.”

“But what about her poisoning charges?”

“I sympathize with her. It must be frightening to be suddenly so ill for no apparent reason.”

“What is your opinion of the boycott of her books that some readers are threatening?”

“I think it’s unwise. She is still one of the foremost authorities on the Dark Arts in the wizarding world today. I have read her books; they are excellent. Now, if you will excuse me.”

“Thank you, Professor Snape,” the reporter sighed, and went off in search of more promising game.

Then, as if without warning, the exams were on them. One day everyone was studying and reviewing, and the next the examiners, first for the OWLs and then for the NEWTs, had taken over the Great Hall, while the lower years were diligently writing foot after foot of parchment in their classrooms.

No more was heard from Dr. Carmichael, at least not during that term, and as June itself reached its peak and began sliding towards its end, the students started packing to return home for the summer. Snape visited the common room to say goodbye to the seventh years.

“Don’t mind me,” he said as the students in the common room rose at his

entrance. "Just keep on talking," Snape crossed over to the fireplace where the two Chasers, Lionel and David, were mourning the loss of Rhonda. Settling into a chair near them, he asked Rhonda, "Have you anointed a successor yet?"

She laughed. "Sergey would be furious if I did. He takes his job seriously."

"Of course I do, my dear," chimed in Sergey from a nearby conversation. "How else are we going to clobber Gryffindor next year?"

"This time next year," Rhonda said dramatically, "everyone in the wizarding world will be wearing a Rhonda Cordonnier designed robe."

"Who's Rhonda Cordonnier?" David asked.

"May I hazard a guess that it's French for Shoemaker," said Snape.

"Naturally," said Rhonda. "Who'd pay top galleon for a robe designed by someone named Shoemaker? Cordonnier just sounds better."

"It must be nice knowing what you're going to do after you leave here," sighed David. "I haven't worked it out yet."

Lionel swatted him. "You've only just finished fourth year. Nobody knows in fourth year. Me now, I know. I've finally worked it out and started making contacts. Well, my father has anyway. I'm planning on working for Golden Cauldron. They need travelers."

"What's that?" David asked.

"They provide exotic potions ingredients, mostly to the apothecaries..."

"And to Hogwarts," Snape added.

"Right, a lot to Hogwarts. They need people to travel to places like Papua New Guinea or Suriname to inspect shipments and keep in touch with suppliers. It should be fun. All I have to do is get good marks in Herbology and Potions on my NEWTs."

After a few minutes, Snape left the common room, having said something to each of the departing seventh years. The experience on the whole left him terribly depressed.

They all know where they're going and what they're going to be doing. Their parents have contacts with wizard companies, and they've planned their studies to match. At the end of my seventh year, I didn't know that Golden Cauldron even existed. All I knew was that I was going to join the Dark Lord. I don't even remember making the decision. Even if Dad and Mum were still alive and there were no Dark Lord, I probably wouldn't have been looking further than coal mines and factories. And now that I know about other possibilities, I'm forbidden to try for them.

Dumbledore sent for him, and Snape climbed the long staircases up to the seventh floor. He was greeted with a warm smile and a goblet of mead.

"I just wanted to tell you," Dumbledore said, "that the examiners were very impressed with your students' performances on the OWLs and NEWTs. A high number of Outstandings and Exceeds Expectations. Nothing lower than an Acceptable on the NEWTs. That's two years in a row that the scores have been impressive. Congratulations."

"Thank you, sir," said Snape, his heart not quite in the words.

"You do not sound pleased. Here I am telling you that you are an excellent teacher with a good future here at Hogwarts, and you act as if I was about to sack you."

"It's nothing, sir. I've just come from the common room, and the seventh years are talking about the jobs they have lined up, and . . . I suppose we just have to play the cards we're dealt, but sometimes . . ."

"I understand. Our lives are shaped by accidents of birth and by events outside our control. Some are born rich, others poor, some into a time of openness and freedom, others into a time of fettered choices." Dumbledore placed a hand on Snape's shoulder. Snape looked away, not meeting Dumbledore's eyes. "It is not good to be bitter, Severus. I know that happiness here at Hogwarts may be asking too much, but do you not think you might be content?"

"I'll try, Headmaster," Snape said, and returned to his rooms.

SATURDAY, JUNE 25, 1983 (THE FULL MOON)

The students entered and left the Great Hall for breakfast that morning like migrating flocks of different species of birds, swooping through in tightly huddled groups to rest and feed, and totally ignoring the other flocks. Within each group they laughed, hugged, exchanged small tokens of friendship and even promised to write. There was almost no intergroup contact, for this was the last day they would be together until the next September, and there were both priorities and proprieties to observe.

The oldest students apparated home. Some parents arrived to apparate side-by-side with their children. Snape joined the other teachers in escorting the rest to the thestral carriages, after which they became the responsibility of Hagrid and the Hogsmeade station attendants. Snape watched them down the hill, then went to his own rooms to pack.

There wasn't much. There was never much. Snape generally told himself that it was because there wasn't any room, but he had occasional lucid moments when he opened those mental doors usually closed even to himself and acknowledged that he was afraid of spending the money.

Books were permitted, for they fed the mind. The theater was permitted for the same reason, and dinner of course was part of the theater experience. Beyond that and food when he was at home, it was a long time since Snape had bought anything for himself. Certainly nothing like clothing, household items, or things to personalize his rooms.

That was something else to think kindly of Dr. Carmichael for. She hadn't pinched pennies, but had graciously picked up the tab when Snape confessed his relative poverty. And since December he'd bought nothing at all, for he hadn't left Hogwarts.

It occurred to Snape that with his pay deposited in Gringotts, and his long term muggle account earning interest, he might be substantially better off financially than he'd been in August. It was a sudden, unexpected, pleasant feeling.

It was in this vulnerable frame of mind that he uncovered the lararium that had remained unnoticed since the investigative team had pushed it into the nook by the fireplace during their search in November. It was in this vulnerable frame of mind that he came face to face with the fact that he had remembered neither his parents' deaths nor Lily's more recent death all that year.

Holding the picture of his mum and dad at Blackpool in one hand, and the framed note from Lily in the other, Snape sank into the chair behind his desk. *What a disgustingly self-indulgent person I am! Here are the three most influential people in my life, and I couldn't spare a moment for their memories? And that was before the first 'attack' on Halloween. Even before the trouble, I stopped thinking about them. What a toad! What an absolute toad!*

There was nothing he could do. It was like remembering that you had an appointment five hours after you'd missed it. You might be able to apologize and pave the way for the future, but you could never go back and remove the original damage. Three of the most important persons in his life, and Snape had forgotten them, not just for a day, but for months.

You are such a basket case, Severus. It's not bad enough you have a blighted past and a nonexistent future, you have to mess up the bit in between, too.

At lunch the teachers wished each other a pleasant holiday. McGonagall especially cornered Snape and thanked him for the little discoveries that had

finally exploded Carmichael's case against them. "It was only a matter of deciding which lady I would prefer to spend time with over the next few years," said Snape. "After that it was easy." McGonagall's mouth got all prim and pursed as she swatted him with her wand, but both of them understood that it was only because there was nothing else she could say.

After lunch, Snape got his Gladstone bag with his muggle clothes—he left the wizard robes in the wardrobe for the next school year—and a small bundle of books that included the Shakespeare he'd bought the year before, and apparated to the moors of the Pendle district in eastern Lancashire. He had five weeks of freedom, and he needed to make the most of it.

The first person Snape met after arriving home, stashing his things, and going out for a walk and some fresh air was, of course, Mrs. Hanson.

"Russ, child! Are you back for the summer, then?"

"I am, Mrs. Hanson, and glad to be here. How have you been these several weeks?"

"Love ya, dearie, what with the arthritis and the back and the knees, not to say, mind you, that it might not all be the same problem, I've been a bit under the weather, and one of them colds to keep me company, too. But I ought not complain. The alternative is worse, if you get my meaning. How is your friend, that Mr. Robards I think it was?"

"He is well, and I'll tell him you inquired. You've no idea, in fact, how pleased I am to see you, for your information helped us solve a most baffling medical mystery. I was going to pop round and tell you, but since we're here, may I invite you to tea at Mrs. Lewes's shop? It's a most interesting story."

"A medical mystery? Do tell! I am all agog, Russ Snape, all agog. And you will tell me all the particulars?" Together the two went to Mrs. Lewes's for tea.

C H A P T E R T H I R T Y - T W O

S U S P E N D E D S E N T E N C E

MONDAY, AUGUST 1, 1983 (1 DAY BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER)

Packing his Gladstone bag to return to Hogwarts on the first of August was becoming a routine action for Professor Severus Snape. This was now the start of his third year teaching and, despite his continued feeling of being trapped in the job, he was beginning to think of it as at least ‘normal.’ He’d said his goodbyes to Mrs. Hanson, the crowd at the pub, and the clerks at the stores he patronized so now, as he stood prepared to disapparate from the area yard behind his little house in the little town in the Pendle district of Lancashire, there was no reason to delay.

Professor Snape did not disapparate. Instead he left his Gladstone bag in the area yard and went back into his house and fixed another cup of tea.

I don’t want to go to Hogwarts. I hate Hogwarts. I hate teaching. Why don’t I just take off for Mallorca? Bariloche? So what if I don’t know how to ski? I can learn. Or Acapulco? Ditto swimming. Anything but Hogwarts.

In the end, it was not what he would face at Hogwarts, but what he would face if he didn’t go to Hogwarts, that decided the question. Draining the last cup of tea in his own home for the next four and a half months, Professor Snape returned to the area yard and disapparated.

“Bit late, aren’t you?” The familiar gruff voice spoke practically into Snape’s ear.

“It’s still summer,” Snape replied. “We’re not punching a clock yet.”

“Me,” said Alastor Moody, “I wouldn’t want to punch a clock at the best of times. Besides injuring your hand, it’s got to do damage to the clock. That could be a whole new reason for going to Azkaban, you know. Damage to ministerial timepieces.”

“Did you have another reason for accosting me on a public street?”

“No.” Moody grinned a rather predatory grin. “Just a vested interest in whether or not you follow your orders. I’m still waiting to welcome you to a cell in Azkaban. Even if it takes until a certain judge retires, I’ll still be waiting. There’s a debt yet to be paid.”

And with that, Moody disappeared.

Routine, Snape thought bitterly. It’s all becoming routine. Even Moody. Maybe getting hauled into the Ministry of Magic for interrogation will become routine, too. He thought about that on the way up the hill to the castle, and was forced to admit to himself that he hadn’t been hauled into the Ministry of Magic the previous year. He’d gone there of his own volition — once to try to help Professor McGonagall, and once because he was asking the court for an injunction. Both voluntary. And the questioning at Hogwarts had not been some form of blatant harassment, but actually required by the circumstances. *Maybe I won’t be bothered by the Ministry this year. That would be nice.*

Another part of his routine greeted Snape in the dungeons — potions ingredients and requisition forms. The first year it had been a challenge. Now it was routine. Next year it would be boring. He thought of the classes. They wouldn’t be boring, they would be infuriating. Starting the first of September, he would have three and a half months of unrelenting irritation. It was too much to bear.

Locking his rooms, Snape left the dungeons and headed for Dumbledore’s office.

“I want a change of job,” Snape announced without preamble as soon as he was admitted.

“Good morning, Severus,” said Dumbledore mildly. “I trust you had a pleasant summer break. I myself went snorkeling in the Bahamas. A most refreshing and invigorating holiday.”

“I stayed home,” said Snape. “It was all right. I want a change of job.”

“But you are admirably qualified to teach Potions. To what other job would you bring so much knowledge and expertise?”

Snape had the answer all ready. “Defense Against the Dark Arts. I’ve been studying it since I was four. I got Outstandings on my OWL and my NEWT, I’ve worked under the darkest of dark wizards of our time, and I know all about defending myself from just about anything. And not from books, either. I could teach the course blindfolded.”

“That would be amusing, but I would hesitate to make it part of the job description. I do, however, get the feeling that there is some other major but unmentioned consideration. I have an inkling of what it might be, if you

would be so kind as to confirm my hunch.” Dumbledore peered at Snape over the top of his glasses, a twinkle in his eyes.

Snape sighed. “Dark Arts doesn’t mix the houses. I’d never again have to teach Slytherin and Gryffindor together except at NEWT level. My life would be so much more pleasant.”

“I see,” said Dumbledore. “Have a seat, Severus. Tea perhaps?”

Snape sat in the chair in front of Dumbledore’s desk and accepted a cup of tea. *At least he’s willing to talk about it and not just turn me down flat.*

“Now, Severus,” Dumbledore said calmly. “What is your philosophy about the Dark Arts?”

“Philosophy? Why do I need a philosophy? You never asked if I had a philosophy about Potions.” Snape sipped his tea, but was already not liking the turn of the conversation.

“Even you must admit that the Dark Arts are in rather a different league from Potions. In order to teach defense against them, you must teach how to recognize them. So what, in your opinion, are the Dark Arts?”

“Everything and nothing. Constantly changing, What we call Light one moment can be Dark the next and vice versa. Shifting and mutating like a kaleidoscope.”

“So in other words, you would teach Defense Against Everything? I can see where this could become an interesting class.”

“Sir, I know that you and I disagree on this, but anything used for evil purposes, even something as seemingly innocent as a Lumos spell, becomes at that moment Dark Magic. And any normally Dark thing, used for a good purpose, becomes at that moment Light. It’s a matter of recognizing the purpose rather than the thing.”

“We shall postpone for the moment any discussion on your assumptions about me and focus on the practical aspects of your comments. Can you expand on your opinion? How can Dark creatures become Light?”

“One of the Darkest there is, is a dementor. But dementors are serving the wizarding world as guards at Azkaban. Would you accuse the Ministry of practicing the Dark Arts?”

“Point well taken. And the Unforgivable Curses? Can you envision any situation where the Killing Curse or the Cruciatus Curse might be used for good?”

“Headmaster,” said Snape with a rueful half-smile, “I can envision a number of such scenarios. And I remind you that the aurors were given permis-

sion to use exactly those spells to combat the Dark Lord. Again, would you accuse the Ministry . . .”

“No, Severus, I would not. Certainly not under the circumstances, though I must point out that not all of the aurors took advantage of that permission. Now, why do you believe that I do not agree with you?”

Snape paused to weigh his words carefully. “Because, sir, there were students in this school who used Dark Magic on a regular, almost daily basis, and not only were they not punished for it, they were allowed to assert to the rest of the school without contradiction that they hated the Dark Arts and anyone who practiced them, despite the fact that they themselves were the worst practitioners.”

“Ah, Severus,” Dumbledore replied with a sigh, “we cannot censor everything a student says. More to the point, did you ever hear a teacher support that statement?”

After thinking for a moment, Snape said, “No, sir.”

“And they were punished. We just did not think it necessary to inform you, a student in another house, every time James Potter and Sirius Black were placed on detention. The student who was never punished for his hexes, curses, and jinxes was you.”

“Sir?”

“Were you ever placed on detention for anything you did?”

“No, sir, but . . .”

“Do you think we never noticed? Do you think that every time you were brought before me and insisted that you, Potter, and Black were having a perfectly amicable conversation that I believed you?”

Snape blushed at this, realized it, and cursed his own lack of emotional control. “Actually, sir, that’s exactly what I believed.”

“Why ever did you believe that?”

“Because you never punished me. I assumed you never punished them.”

“My dear Severus. Filch has boxes and boxes of files with detailed descriptions of every detention and its reason since the school started to give detentions instead of corporal punishment. James and Sirius figure prominently, as do Aaron, Evan, and Aloysius, and to a lesser extent Remus, Peter, and several lesser lights of all the houses. Your name is not on those cards either as perpetrator or as victim.”

“Why not?”

“Because you alone never initiated an exchange. You alone acted only in retaliation—in self defense as it were. And with the sole exception of a

certain incident involving a werewolf, you alone never appealed to authority to get anyone else in trouble.”

“I don’t think it was wise to do that,” Snape said quietly. “Leave me alone, I mean. I always got the feeling that I had to look out for myself because no one else would.”

“And who first gave you that idea?”

“My mother, I suppose. But it was reinforced the first day at Hogwarts.”

“I am intrigued. How so?”

“Day to day discipline is handled by the prefects. The prefects are supervised by the Head Boy and Head Girl. They’re always Gryffindors, so Gryffindor house rules the other houses. We were warned about that on the first day by our prefects.”

“I see. I must confess I had not looked at it in quite that way. There is nothing at this moment that I can do, as the new Head Boy and Girl have already been named — and yes, they are from Gryffindor house — but I shall keep it in mind for next year. Now, as for your request, there are three reasons why I cannot grant it. The first is that I need you in the Potions position. Our students’ performance has improved immensely in the two years that you have been here, and I do not wish to lose that. Secondly, I have already found and hired a Dark Arts professor. Third, I do not think that I can defend to the Ministry of Magic the placing of a known Death Eater in the Dark Arts slot. It would raise too many fears, and quiet none.”

“So the answer is no.”

“That is correct, Severus. The answer is no. Did you honestly expect any other?”

“Not really, sir,” said Snape. He rose and left the office, placing the cup of tea unfinished on the desk behind him.

It will never end, he thought on his way back down the long staircases to his rooms in the dungeons. You can live out your life in harmless work, you can even try to make amends through sacrifice and service, and all they’ll ever remember is the mistake you made when you were eighteen. You’re supposed to be able to atone for your sins. Potter never atoned for his, but they’ll forgive him anything because he died. I bet if I died for them, they still wouldn’t forgive me. The world is like Slughorn. If you’re rich, good-looking and pureblood, you can do anything you want...

August slipped into comfortable routine. Snape ordered, received, and unpacked his stores. He played cribbage with Flitwick, planned a kitchen herb garden with Sprout, discussed Quidditch with Kettleburn, and sparred

lightly with McGonagall. Hagrid clucked over his meals, and the new Dark Arts instructor benefited from advice that Snape would apparently never be allowed to use himself in a classroom.

On Thursday, September first, as the moon began its slide to new, the train arrived with its cargo of old-new students, and after a day and a weekend of orientation and unpacking, the school year began. Snape had almost forgotten what an incredible collection of dunderheads he was doomed to teach.

“Clockwise, Ridgebit! Clockwise! Don’t pretend you’ve never seen the face of a clock before. Or if that’s too complicated, try right, down, left, up. Ah, I see left and right are mysteries as well. Are you sure there’s no troll blood in the family tree?”

“Could I trouble you, Chitcock, to look at the top of the page? Do you see where it says ‘Herbal Infusion?’ Now I distinctly recall having seen you in this same seat last year and the year before, and I know that we covered the difference between herbs and toad bile. Kindly explain why you took it upon yourself to make the substitution.”

“You dare drop that vial of Bundimun secretion on the floor, Lufkin, and you’ll be cleaning it up with your tongue!”

With the first day of classes, Snape was exhausted every evening. If anyone had asked him to bet on his chances of surviving the term, much less the year, he’d have wagered every penny and knut he possessed on an early demise.

It was with the desperation of an already drowning man that Snape contemplated the evening of Thursday, the eighth of September, the day after the new moon, and Snape’s first official evening off. His last class ended at four o’clock, and he determined to leave immediately. He had no desire whatsoever to spend dinner supervising students.

Dumbledore agreed without demure, so shortly after four o’clock, his rooms secured for the evening, Professor Snape walked down the hill from the castle in the full light of a September afternoon to apparate to the Leaky Cauldron. It was an eminently suitable starting point, being on Charing Cross Road and in the heart of London’s theater district. He was hoping to buy books, have dinner, and take in a play or movie.

What Snape saw upon walking into a busy London street was a news vendor. What he saw in the headlines made him purchase a paper and slip at once into the Leaky Cauldron to read it over a glass of mead. He barely noticed Alastor Moody sliding into the chair opposite until Moody asked, “What are you reading that for?”

For answer, Snape showed him the front page, the article about a Korean passenger plane being shot down by Soviet military aircraft a week before.

“So?” Moody asked, clearly puzzled. “A muggle airplane goes down. It’s happened before.”

“Not like this,” Snape answered. “The American president and the Soviet premier are rattling swords and calling each other inhuman and brutal. If this blows up — and it could, tempers are high — the wizarding world would be in just as much danger as the muggle world. We have nothing as big as they have. We’re ants.”

Moody stared at Snape for a moment. “You’re serious,” he said. “You really think this could be dangerous.”

“All you need is one glitch on one tracking computer at a time like this, and the whole world goes up in smoke.”

“What’s a glitch?” said Moody. “And what’s a tracking computer?”

“A glitch is a mistake, an unexpected problem. A computer is a machine that muggles use to do high-speed, complex calculations. Why are you following me? Why don’t you just leave me alone?”

“A missing eye gives you a long memory. Give me one good reason why I should leave you alone.”

Snape looked at his hands, inspiration dawning. “Last year you helped get me off a poisoning charge because you had to testify that I hadn’t gone anywhere near any poisons on my days off. Your following me kept me out of Azkaban.”

Moody leaned back in his chair and roared with laughter, then lowered his voice. “So you’re trying to lose your alibi! First you tell me the world’s coming to an end anyway, so what’s the point, and then you tell me I can get you into Azkaban faster if I stop tailing you.”

“Something like that,” said Snape.

Draining the glass he’d brought over with him, Moody rose and patted Snape roughly on the shoulder. “I didn’t think you could do it, but you came up with a reason I can’t fault. You realize this now leaves me free to concoct charges that you don’t have an alibi for?”

“I’ll take my chances,” Snape replied calmly.

Moody left, and Snape went out into muggle London to buy a book, enjoy a meal, and watch a movie. As the weeks, and later the years went by, it was a routine that he found impossible to break. A new book, dinner, and

a movie or a play, always alone, always too drained by a week of frustrating contact with a couple of hundred teenagers to want anything more than emotional isolation. On the plus side of things, he learned a lot.

Hogwarts, too, was an unchanging routine. Cribbage with Flitwick, the herb garden with Sprout, discussing muggles with Dawson and astronomy with Sinistra, conspiring with Kettleburn and exchanging barbs with McGonagall . . . There were times when it was immensely comforting, like having a big family, and then there were times . . .

“ . . . and I was so eager to show him how much I’d learned . . . ” Dawson was gushing after dinner in late January . . .

“That she took the second curve too wide, hung up her skis, fell over sideways, and slid halfway down the slope on her nose, which is why it looks that way now.”

The staff room was suddenly quiet as the teachers turned to glare at Snape. “That was my story,” Dawson said accusingly in the stillness. “You should have let me finish it.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” Snape replied, his voice dripping sarcasm. “It’s just that you’ve told it so often I was certain you wanted us to get it by heart. I merely wished to let you know you’d succeeded.”

“Severus!” McGonagall snapped, but Snape was already on his feet, his untouched glass of wine forgotten on the table beside him.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said icily, “I believe it’s time to go watch the spiders spin webs in the dungeons. At least down there they do it differently each time. It provides spice to life, the variety.”

“You know,” Dawson said, her arms folded across her chest, “if you’d stop pinching pennies and go out and do something in your life, maybe you’d be able to tell us some of your own stories instead of living vicariously off of others. If I’d locked myself in a dungeon I’d have been an octogenarian at the age of twenty-four, too.”

Snape didn’t reply. He turned on his heel and swept out of the staff room heading for Dumbledore’s office. Behind him the others heaved a collective sigh of relief.

“He’s the only one who never left the school during the whole Christmas break,” Flitwick told Dawson. “I don’t think he’s ever been anywhere.”

Up in Dumbledore’s office, Snape was pacing like a caged tiger. “I want to leave. I want to get out of Britain. I want to at least try to be a normal human being, if even for once in my life!”

Dumbledore sighed. “You know that’s impossible.”

"Why does it have to be impossible?" Snape's voice was rising, angry, building to an explosion. "I'm supposed to stay under your authority, not chained in a kennel! Keep me under your authority—just send me somewhere!"

"The terms of your parole are rather strict. You are to remain where the Ministry of Magic has jurisdiction. You are not allowed to leave Britain. That is in addition to the requirement to be under my authority."

"For how long?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"For how long? For the rest of my life? Even after I die? Is that why Professor Binns is still here?"

"May I ask, Severus, what brought this on?"

Snape turned to stare into the fireplace. It seemed silly now that he had to put it into words. "Professor Dawson has been talking about skiing in the Alps for the past month. Do you realize how frustrating it is to have to listen to everyone talking about their holidays when you're not permitted to go on one of your own. Even you do it. Snorkeling in the Bahamas." Snape mimicked Dumbledore, not hiding the note of bitterness. "And how was your summer break, Severus? Did you enjoy comparing laundry powder prices with the ladies in the market? Such a scintillating life you lead."

Dumbledore steeped his fingers, peering over the tips. "There are places in Britain where you could go, are there not? The Lake District is beautiful any time of year."

"Where my every move would be watched by some auror or other."

"Has Alastor been following you again? He is supposed to stop that."

"Just one time. As long as I stick to my London routine, he's content to leave me alone. But if I go somewhere else, I'm pretty sure he'll check on me."

"And there is no . . . eh . . . other person in your life?"

"Right," said Snape. "Who am I supposed to be dating now, Sinistra? Or maybe I met someone at one of those fancy balls I'm always being invited to at the Ministry." He paused for a few seconds. "It isn't that I need someone, at least I don't think I do. What I need is a change. I need to go somewhere, do something, not be caged all the time. I need something besides Hogwarts."

"And I suggested the Lake District."

"Headmaster," Snape said suddenly. "What would the Ministry do if I left Britain and went to, say, Canada? Or New Zealand?"

"I should very much like to discourage you from making any such plans. You still have promises to keep, you know."

"What promises?"

"To protect a certain young gentleman as he grows and matures."

"Gentleman. I like that. So we're going to hire the half-blood working class stiff out for domestic service to nursemaid the rich pureblood's 'gentleman' son. I think I will run away to sea."

"He's Lily's son, too, Severus. Please do not forget that."

"Right. Which means he'll hate me already. Tuney will have seen to that."

"Tuney?"

"Lily's sister Petunia. 'Ew, Lily, he's that Snape boy from Spinner's End. You don't want to dirty yourself talking to trash like that . . .' Because I was poor, and from the wrong side of the river. She might even have become reconciled to the magic as long as it didn't include me."

Dumbledore sighed. "I had not realized there was bad blood between you and Petunia."

"Would it have made a difference?" Snape watched the flickering fire, trying to keep the images of Lily out of his head.

"No. What makes a difference is that the boy, Lily's boy, is still in danger, and you have promised to stay here, to help me, and to protect him when the time comes. I shall hold you to that promise, and I shall hold any attempt on your part to leave — be it to New Zealand or to Azkaban — as a violation of that promise."

It was Snape's turn to sigh. "It's been well over two years, sir. Why are you so sure that he's coming back?"

"There was no body," Dumbledore said quietly. "It was as if he'd vaporized. And then there is the testimony of the Lestranges. You yourself admitted to the strength of that."

"You're right. That was disturbing. But it's been more than two years and no sign of him. The evidence grows stronger every week that dear Bella and company were wrong. Don't you think?"

"But then there is the matter of the curse." Before Snape could respond, Dumbledore asked, "Do you remember your Dark Arts instructor, Severus?"

Puzzled, Snape thought for a moment. "Instructor, Headmaster? There were several. A new one every year as I recall."

"Yes. The winter before you started, he came here himself and requested the Dark Arts position. I turned him down, of course. Things had not yet

gotten bad, but there were enough rumors. The position has been cursed ever since. No professor stays longer than a year.”

“Surely now that he’s gone . . .” It was Snape’s turn to peer at Dumbledore. “The last two years don’t count,” he blurted out. “Scrimgeour was only here because of him, and maybe a little because of me, and he left because the Dark Lord had been defeated. He’s Ministry. He never intended to stay.”

The way Dumbledore raised his eyebrows was, Snape knew, intended to be infuriating, so he plowed forward. “And Carmichael. It was temporary from the first moment. She was divorcing her husband and never meant to stay here longer than the year. And this new one. Isn’t she supposed to depart next June?”

“Which means?”

“It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. You only hire people for a year, and then claim the position is cursed because they only stay for a year. Excuse me. Case not yet proven.”

“How often did you see him?”

“A few times,” said Snape, surprised at the question.

“What did he look like?”

“Slate tiles.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I was just a potions maker, not inner echelon at all . . . well, not ’til I got this job.” Snape self-consciously rubbed his left arm. “If I got called in, I had to kneel in the chamber, and then he would enter. We didn’t look at him, not unless he wanted to read us and then we only saw the eyes. They were red. No, we looked at the floor. Which was paved with slate tiles. When we witnessed punishments, he wore a mask . . .”

“You never saw him?”

“Well, just glimpses. He . . . he looked like a snake with red eyes, but that may have been a mask.”

“Did you know he attended school here at Hogwarts?”

Snape stared at Dumbledore. The surprise combined with a lack of personal threat meant that for once he was, relatively speaking, open. Dumbledore turned away after a moment, as if unwilling to push his advantage. There was a pause, and then Snape said, “I can’t imagine him ever being . . . young enough to be a student.”

“Not only young enough, but exceptionally handsome. A very personable young man when he wanted to be. And yet on that winter day there was

almost no trace of that handsome young man left. He had been practicing some very dark magic indeed, and it had taken its toll.”

“What kind of dark magic, Headmaster?” Snape’s voice dropped to a whisper.

Dumbledore shrugged. “I do not know,” he said, and he was not whispering. “All I know is that it had diminished him in some way. That, an old man’s hunch, and the lack of a *corpus delicti*, if you will pardon the pun, are in and of themselves grounds for suspicion. When you add to that the testimony of the Lestranges, it is practically an ironclad case. Moriarty is out there somewhere, and at sometime in the future, I am certain he will come back. When he does, it is logical to assume he will still be after Lily’s son. You, Severus, have promises to keep, and miles to go . . .”

“ . . . before I sleep,” Snape finished. “Miles to go before I sleep. Do you think that’s what she meant? That I would tire, and want to stop, but that I had to keep my promises?”

“If you think she was the one speaking to you. But if not, then it was your own brain speaking to you. How much sleep will you get if even your own brain is concerned about the promises?”

There was nothing to refute the line of argument. Snape thanked Dumbledore and returned to his own rooms to ponder the nature of self-imposed obligation. He ended up deciding that he would prefer not to disappoint Lily.

And then, of course, there was Quidditch and the House Cup. From the moment he became head of Slytherin, Snape had formed an understanding with his Quidditch team. It was principally a matter of letting them do what they did best — play Quidditch. The Slytherin team opened up for Snape the mysteries of the game, which turned out to be mathematical as well as physical. It did no good, for example, to catch the Snitch early on in the last game against Hufflepuff if Gryffindor was ahead by a hundred points in cumulative scoring.

The backbone of a Quidditch team were its Keeper and Beaters. Far more than the hotshot Seeker and Chasers, they controlled the pace of the game and its strategy. They also understood more how each game fit into the seasonal pattern, and they were the ones who struggled to keep the glory-hunters, the Seekers, in line. Slytherin lost more than one game to a brain-dead Seeker who couldn’t cope with the fact that catching the Snitch was not always the best thing to do.

Snape developed his best relationships with the Beaters. Steady and reliable, they always placed the welfare of the team ahead of their own. Two of

Snape's favorites were the Beaters of his second and third year: Sergey Duval and Josh Van Zandt. Not children of Death Eaters, they nevertheless took it upon themselves to back Snape up in a series of small confrontations both in Hogwarts and in Hogsmeade, and were instrumental in seeing that the Death Eater children of Slytherin were protected from reprisals. They saw Slytherin as a team in much the same way they saw the Quidditch team, and did their job as Beaters in both places.

Together, in the 1983 to 1984 season, Sergey and Josh led Slytherin to its first Quidditch Cup and House Cup in decades. McGonagall was more miffed than at her loss to Hufflepuff the year before, Kettleburn was delighted, and Snape was fired with a pride of house he'd never known as a student. The sad part was that it was Sergey's last year at Hogwarts, and Josh left the year following. That year, with Josh breaking in a new Beater, Lorelei Deverill, Gryffindor came from behind to once again won both Cups.

In September 1985, Gryffindor unleashed its secret weapon on an unsuspecting Hogwarts — a short, stocky, freckled second year student with flaming red hair named Charlie Weasley. Built like a Beater, Charlie was quickly revealed as possibly the greatest natural-born Seeker Hogwarts, perhaps the world, had ever seen. Blessed with a Beater's understanding of strategy, a Keeper's appreciation for defense, and a Chaser's determination to keep fighting, Charlie also had the speed and vision of a hawk, and never once came up empty after he'd spotted and targeted a Snitch. Even at the age of twelve, it was understood that he would play for England.

Gryffindor swept all its Quidditch games that year, but it was also the year that the Slytherin Beater team of Lorelei Deverill and Sancho Folkenstone was formed. And it was Sancho, watching Slytherin beaten into the dust by the Weasley hammer, that utterly changed Slytherin's attitude toward the Cups.

"Why do we have to assume that winning the House Cup is tied to winning the Quidditch Cup?" Sancho asked in the common room, having been in a state of shock for three days after the pummeling he received at Gryffindor's hands. "We're a good house, an intelligent house, a hardworking house. We can rack up points all over the place. We don't have to depend on winning at Quidditch!"

The Slytherin juggernaut was born that day. When Pamela Pucey balked at tutoring William Higgs in Charms, Sancho yelled at her, "Don't you want to win the House Cup?" and the sentence became a rallying cry for the whole house. Slacking students were encouraged to succeed by the admo-

dition ‘Don’t you want to win the House Cup?’ and rule-breakers were reminded that what they did affected the welfare of everyone. Slytherin’s spirit of competition was on fire. Snape didn’t have to do anything but watch as the emeralds in his house’s hourglass rose higher and higher.

In June 1986, Gryffindor was the proud possessor of the Quidditch Cup, but the Great Hall was decorated in green and silver for the Farewell Feast. Green and silver would be the June color of the hall for many years to come.

That was when Snape played a card that McGonagall would never forgive him for. He discovered that Charlie Weasley was interested in dragons, introduced him to Hagrid, and suggested he take Care of Magical Creatures in his third year. Charlie abandoned Quidditch for Welsh Greens and never looked back. Kettleburn was thrilled, as were Flitwick and Sprout for quite different reasons, but it was a whole year before Snape stopped watching his back when McGonagall was around.

From then on, the Quidditch Cup was up for grabs between Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff. Sometimes one house won it, sometimes another. The only constant was that it never again went to Gryffindor during the eighties. Snape put it down to the fact that Gryffindor was now a prisoner of the ‘Charlie Weasley complex.’ Instead of relying on overall teamwork, they kept looking for that one shining star, that one miraculous player, who would single-handedly snatch victory for them. For years, they didn’t find one.

The passage of time alters all things. As the innocent pastimes of Quidditch and inter-house competition gained in importance, so the memory of the bad times receded. Death Eater children graduated, the Dark Lord did not return, and by the second half of the eighties, it seemed no one remembered that Snape had ever been accused of being a Death Eater. Except for Quidditch, life had become a deadly, stultifying routine.

In August 1988, the Hogwarts staff was joined by two new teachers—Charity Burbage in Muggle Studies, and Quirinus Quirrell in Defense Against the Dark Arts.

C H A P T E R T H I R T Y - T H R E E

QUIRINUS QUIRRELL

MONDAY, AUGUST 1, 1988 (THREE DAYS AFTER THE FULL MOON)

The greeting that fine August morning was a bit different than usual.

"You'd better get hopping up that hill quick-like. You're being supplanted."

Snape didn't even turn around, not the slightest bit surprised by the gruff voice. "Am I to understand that you're expecting me to be taking off for parts unknown in the very near future?"

"Unknown to you, maybe. Not to me. Not to a few dozen dementors. But I didn't mean in your job."

That was intriguing. "If I'm not being replaced in my job, Moody, how can I be supplanted?"

"You're being supplanted in preferential status. You're not the baby any more."

"A younger teacher!" The wry expression might have been what, on Snape's face, would pass for a smile, or it might have been merely a grimace of sarcasm. "You have no idea how ecstatically happy you've made me with that news. Now they can patronize someone else for a change."

"You wait a couple of days. You're going to miss the attention."

"About as much as I'll miss you for the rest of the school year."

The two men parted, Moody back to the Ministry and Snape up the hill. Despite his studied lack of interest while in Moody's presence, Snape was curious to see what this younger teacher looked like. He assumed it was in the Dark Arts position, and he was thinking of scathing things to say about it to Dumbledore.

It turned out, as Snape joined the assembling teachers for a late breakfast and the first staff meeting of the year, that there were two new teachers rather than one. The first was a woman, probably in her early thirties and therefore

a few years older than the twenty-eight-year-old Snape. She was introduced to the staff as Charity Burbage, who would be taking over Sapiencia Dawson's job in Muggle Studies.

The second newcomer was a very young-looking man, though Snape suspected he was in his mid-twenties. He was pale and mousy looking, and his name was Quirinus Quirrell.

"Well," said Flitwick proudly, "I know you're not teaching Care of Magical Creatures because Max is still here, so I assume it's Defense Against the Dark Arts." He looked around the table. "Quirinus took an Outstanding in his NEWTs in both subjects, you know, not to mention Charms." He smiled at Quirrell. "I thought you'd gotten a job at the Ministry. Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Quirrell said politely, and Snape was reminded of how he, too, had spoken to the others when he was first hired, as if he were still a student. "But after a while I thought I'd prefer something less strenuous. I fear I'm too much of an academic for creature wrestling."

"What sort of creatures were you wrestling?" Snape asked blandly.

"Trolls."

It was unfortunate that Snape had chosen that moment to take a bite of sausage. When he could breathe again, he apologized. "I'm not usually that inept with my food."

"That's all right," Quirrell replied. "A lot of people have had that reaction. Apparently it's an unusual combination."

"Do you remember Quirinus from school, Severus?" asked McGonagall. "He was about three years behind you as I recall, and in Ravenclaw."

"Not really," Snape admitted. "Slytherin tended to stick to its own."

"I recall you," said Quirrell. "Not that I knew you personally, of course. I was in fourth year when you were approached about the possibility of tutoring Sigfried Thurifer. He was a year ahead of me. We all remember your reply."

"Oh really," said Flitwick. "And what was that? I don't think I ever heard of a Ravenclaw going to a Slytherin for tutoring."

"It was in Potions," Quirrell explained. "Nobody could touch Snape in Potions, and Sigfried wanted the best."

"What was Severus's reply?" McGonagall asked.

Snape stepped hastily in. "He didn't need tutoring," he said quickly. "He just needed to reorder his priorities and use his resources more efficiently. I sent him back to Ravenclaw."

Across the table, Snape's eyes met Quirrell's. Quirrell was clearly sizing him up as well.

There was no way to escape Quirrell after the meeting because Dumbledore, predictably, asked Snape to show Quirrell around and get him settled into the Dark Arts position.

"You resent my being here, don't you," Quirrell said as the two ascended to the first floor Dark Arts classroom.

"Not at all," Snape replied. "I find it highly amusing when a brand new colleague tries to put me on detention. What were you going to tell them, anyway?"

"I didn't have anything planned," Quirrell admitted. "I was more interested in what you'd do. You got out of it nicely. They always said you had a quick brain."

Snape waited until they were inside the classroom, away from all possibility of McGonagall coming across them on her way to her own office, and then spun on Quirrell. "You didn't have anything planned, but you did your best to embarrass me anyway. You're going to explain, and you're going to do it now."

Quirrell didn't back down, even though he was an inch or two shorter than Snape. "I wanted you to know that I was ready for you. You're not going to push me around. The others may not know you were the kind to string people up by their heels for no reason, but I do. You won't take me by surprise."

"No reason? Thurifer played innocent, then? Why didn't he go to Flitwick if he was so innocent?"

"He was afraid of you. I'm not, though," Quirrell thought for a moment. "What was he doing if it wasn't just asking for tutoring?"

"He was taking money from a couple of Gryffindors to lead me into a trap. I trusted him and went, too. I was lucky someone was watching my back that day. We figured hanging Thurifer upside down in a girls' lavatory was a lot nicer than what they planned on doing to me."

Quirrell tilted his head to one side. "Taking money for stabbing someone in the back does sound like something Sigfried might do," he admitted. "Still, you must agree I had some cause for antagonism."

"No," said Snape, "I don't. And if you always make it a habit to walk blindly into things you only half understand, you're going to get yourself into serious trouble one of these days." That being said, Snape looked around

the office. It was full of boxes and crates, all opened but none unpacked. The boxes were full of books. "What did you do? Raid a library?"

"Yes," Quirrell replied. "My own. These were just the ones I thought would be useful here. For the class, of course."

Snape picked up a couple of the books. *One was Seven Steps to the Mountain of Darkness*, and the other *When Light Fails in the Depths of the Mind*. Both were books of the darkest philosophy. A glance at the other boxes showed Snape they were full of tomes on dark creatures, dark objects, and dark spells. "You believe in a thorough grounding in your subject," he commented.

"How can you instruct others how to fight it if you don't understand it yourself?"

I understand it, Snape thought. *I lived with it for three years, and I don't see one book here that talks about the lust for power that sends people down the dark path. There may be ivory-tower types who are fascinated by the Dark Arts just because they're there, but the dangerous ones are after power, and the Dark Arts are just a means to an end.*

"You certainly have a good theoretical background," he said to Quirrell, and headed for the door.

"Were you supposed to give me some kind of orientation?" Quirrell asked.

"Do you know what you're supposed to teach?" Snape asked.

"Yes, of course. I took these classes for seven years."

"Do you know where your supplies are?"

"Yes."

"Then you already know everything I could possibly tell you." Snape nodded once in farewell and walked out the door.

At first he headed for the great marble staircase down to the entrance hall and thence to his own office, but after a moment's hesitation, Snape changed his mind and went up instead. Up to Dumbledore's office.

"Why did you hire him?" Snape demanded the moment he was inside.

"Good afternoon, Severus. I trust you are well. I see we are about to have our usual annual discussion." Dumbledore waved Snape into one of the chairs and went to pour a glass of mead.

The conversation between Snape and Dumbledore went quickly, mostly because they'd had the same conversation at the beginning of the previous five years.

"And in this case," Dumbledore pointed out, "he is exceptionally well qualified. He is a brilliant scholar, very well-grounded in his subject on a

basic level, and with a depth of knowledge that few much older people ever achieve. I might venture that he could teach you something about the Dark Arts.”

Snape opened his mouth, then closed it again. He couldn’t refute Dumbledore’s statement since he had no information on the extent of Quirrell’s studies. The only thing he could offer was a technicality. “But he’s not supposed to teach the Dark Arts, he’s supposed to teach Defense against them. What practical experience does he have?”

It was not a strong argument since the school would never engage teaching aids such as real ghouls and vampires, so the course was of necessity mostly academic anyway. Snape returned to the lower levels of Hogwarts defeated.

Quirrell soon began to grate on Snape’s nerves in more ways than one. The first was that Quirrell did, in fact, know more about the Dark Arts than Snape did. Snape’s familiarity with the subject was on a highly practical level regarding the magic, with the actual creation and use of spells, with real combat against them in controlled but nonetheless physical situations, with poisons and their antidotes, but his knowledge of dark creatures and enchanted objects was book learning and more limited.

Quirrell, on the other hand, had amazingly detailed knowledge of all aspects of Dark Magic — spells, creatures, objects, poisons — the only thing he was short of was the physical experience. Snape quickly became wary of even bringing up the topic of Dark Arts in any casual situation, since Quirrell would begin to expound based on the vast range of his studies, and it would soon become apparent to anyone listening that Snape was out of his league. Snape started spending more time in the library.

To be honest, Snape was certain he could best Quirrell in a duel, but dueling on school grounds was frowned on, and it certainly wasn’t part of the curriculum.

Another source of irritation, though Snape would have been incensed if anyone else mentioned it, was that Snape had gotten used to the position of being the youngest teacher in the school. It meant he was asked to do things that required greater speed or agility, but it also meant a certain amount of leeway was given him in terms of behavior, and a certain amount of coddling. Now Quirrell was usurping Snape’s place, and the specter of jealousy raised its ugly head.

And then there was the matter of Quirrell having been a lower level stu-

dent aware of Snape and his activities as a fellow student — things the other professors could never know.

“How did you manage to stay free?” Quirrell asked one evening at dinner, shortly before Halloween. Snape and Quirrell sat next to each other at the staff table, and it was impossible to completely avoid conversation, though Snape tried.

“Free? Free from what?”

“Come now. You were hand in glove with the Blacks, the Lestranges, Avery, Mulciber, Rosier, Wilkes . . . The reports of deaths, roundups by the Ministry, and convictions read like a class reunion for your friends in Slytherin house. How did you manage to slip out of the noose?”

“What makes you think there was a noose to slip out of?”

“Let me see,” Quirrell cupped his right elbow in his left hand and laid his right index finger on his jaw in a parody of thought. “When I left Hogwarts, I got an internship in the Ministry — Department of Magical Creatures. Then I worked my way up the career ladder for a few years before I applied for this job. You graduated in what? Seventy-eight?”

“Is this leading to a point?”

“I was just wondering what you did during those three years before you joined the teaching staff at Hogwarts. No one seems to know.”

“Is that an admission that you’ve been nosing around trying to find information on me?”

“No. Not at all. It’s come up once or twice in chats, nothing specific. I was just curious.”

“Tutoring and potion brewing. All for private clients. Satisfied?”

“I suppose I shall have to be. I was hoping for something more colorful and exciting.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

On Halloween Snape kept his annual day of quiet reflection to remember Lily. He never mentioned it to anyone, and yet he had the feeling that Quirrell noticed even this. All in all, Quirrell was becoming an insufferable busybody.

It was shortly before the Christmas break that Charity Burbage did what Snape had been expecting her to do ever since August. She settled herself into the seat next to him one snowy day in December. “We haven’t really had a chance to get to know each other,” she said.

“Barclay’s,” Snape replied, “and yes I do have a bank card.”

Professor Burbage was not put out in the slightest. "Would you mind if I, if I touched it?"

Relieved that she was at least direct about it, Snape reached into a pocket in his robes and drew out an honest-to-goodness muggle wallet. Burbage went into ecstasies. Snape was ready to stand up and leave the Great Hall right there, but restrained himself, pulled the little plastic card out, and handed it to her. She examined every detail with great eagerness.

"How does it work?" she asked, adding a few seconds later, "If you don't mind my taking up your valuable time."

"Not at all. Do you see this dark stripe on the back? It's a magnetic strip that can be read by some kind of computer. I can insert the card into a computer terminal in a wall, enter a secret code, the computer checks whether or not I have money in my account, and if I do, it will give me some of that money, deducting the sum from my account. Instant cash, twenty-four hours a day. The whole process takes less than two minutes. Much nicer than a nasty rough ride in a nasty old cart through dark underground passages."

Burbage studied the card with greater respect. "What's the secret code?" she asked.

"A secret," Snape replied, retrieving his card and replacing it in his wallet.

She blushed crimson, a rather attractive color on her otherwise plain features. "That was rude of me," she said. "Do you think I might ever watch you use it?"

"You'd have to visit London with me. There aren't any bank teller machines in Hogsmeade."

"They say you . . . frequent restaurants. And go to . . . movies."

"From time to time. Plays and bookstores, too. If you joined me one evening, you could probably claim the whole excursion as work-related and get overtime for it."

"What's overtime?" Burbage asked, then giggled at the expression on his face. "Seriously though, I may take you up on the trip to London some time."

Christmas with its trees and snow came and went. Snape finally managed to take Professor Burbage to London in March 1989 to see not only how a bank teller machine worked, but also to explore the intricacies of cash registers, elevators, and the peculiar etiquette of black taxicabs.

"But the fare was only five pounds twenty, and you gave him . . ."

"It's called a tip. It's expected that you pay a certain percentage above the fare . . ."

"But why don't they just raise the fares?"

"It's supposed to ensure better service if it's voluntary. In America, I hear, it's fifteen percent for waiters in restaurants, while in certain eastern European countries you tip with cigarettes."

"You can't be serious!"

"Marlboros in Hungary, and Kents in Romania."

"Now I know you're joking. Not even muggles would do that!"

Burbage was enchanted by the movie. It dealt with a young muggle man who felt himself cheated of an inheritance only to find that the money had gone to a brother he never knew he had, a brother with a curious mental deficiency. After kidnapping this brother to claim the inheritance, the young man found himself growing fond of the strange, handicapped sibling, finally realizing the brother's needs were greater than his own.

"That was so touching," Burbage exclaimed as they left the theater. "Do muggles really have ailments like that?"

"Yeah," said Snape, imitating Raymond Babbit. "Yeah." Burbage giggled, but Snape had just noticed on one of the posters the name of the actor who played Raymond — the same one who had played Tootsie so many years before. The wonder of the acting profession filled him again. *Merlin, I wish I could do that, he thought.*

Then it was June, and Snape was once again in Dumbledore's office. "He's staying isn't he? This one is staying, and it proves the curse you've been fobbing me off with is a fraud!"

"Well, no, not exactly," Dumbledore replied. "He has asked for a year's leave to do field research. Even if he does return, it will not be two consecutive years, and it will therefore prove nothing."

It was just like the old charlatan to clutch at a technicality as evidence of what Snape had now long regarded as an unsubstantiated hypothesis. What did they have to show that the Dark Lord was not utterly destroyed? The Dark Lord's appearance? Even Dumbledore admitted that he did not know what kind of Dark Magic would have caused that transformation. The fanatic actions of Bella Lestrange and a few friends? It was the sort of thing that Bella would do. The continued sensitivity of the dark mark on his arm? It could be inherent in the mark itself and unrelated to the presence or absence of the man. The only other thing was the pattern in the tenure of the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, and Snape had long ago pointed out that it was a pattern artificially extended by Dumbledore's selection of teachers he knew were temporary.

"They all decide to leave at the end of one year for some reason or other."

Snape was continually insisting. "Not one opts to stay on. Now it might be proof of something if one of them was intending to come back for a second year and mysteriously came down with dragon pox, or was crushed by a crowd at a late-August performance of the Weird Sisters. Then I might agree that there was something in the idea. But maybe the problem lies with the Headmaster. Maybe you just hire unstable people."

Now, with Quirrell, the matter was about to come to a head. They were about to discover once for all if there was a curse. Quirrell would go on his year of field research, would return for a second, nonconsecutive year, and then would want to stay for a third. That would be the moment of truth! Even before the students boarded the train to London at the end of June, Snape was obsessing on the whole idea of Quirinus Quirrell.

Then, over the summer, it finally hit Snape how diabolical Dumbledore was. There would be no proof of the nonexistence of the curse until Quirrell started his third year. Only then could Snape go to Dumbledore and say, "See how wrong you've been!" but by then Quirrell would be so firmly ensconced in the position that Dumbledore would have no excuse to dismiss him. He would stay on, the permanent Dark Arts instructor. In the moment of victory, Snape would face total defeat.

Snape was really beginning to hate Quirinus Quirrell, and the man wasn't even going to be there for Snape to lash out at. He was going to be in Africa, or South America, or Eastern Europe. Snape would have hoped that Quirrell would have an unfortunate encounter with a dragon in Romania, except that that would prove that Dumbledore was right about the curse.

It was thus in this mood of sublime discontent that Severus Snape returned to Hogwarts in August 1989. The presence of Alastor Moody was of no more significance than a gnat that Snape could swat aside. The ordering of supplies was routine. The new Dark Arts professor was an intentional stopgap, and Snape, more than ever before, was dreading the resumption of his teaching duties and the classes from hell.

Then, on the morning of the first Friday in September, Snape found out what hell was really like.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 1989 (THE FIRST QUARTER)

It did not register at once on that day when Snape walked into the classroom to meet the brand new first years from Gryffindor house. Everything seemed perfectly normal. There was that little trick of vision that had Snape

wondering for a moment if he should ask Madam Pomfrey to check his eyesight, that sudden impression that maybe he was seeing double. He glanced down the list of students. The Slytherins were already known to him. It was only McGonagall's sweet charges who were new. There was no sense of foreboding as he went down the list, not even when he got to —

“Jordan, Lee.”

“Here, sir.”

The name at the bottom seemed at first to have been copied twice, but it was in fact —

“Weasley, Fred.”

“Here, sir.”

“Weasley, George.”

“Here, sir.”

There was no mistaking them. It had been no trick of vision or seeing double. There before him were two Weasleys as like each other as peas in a pod, if anything so flamingly red could ever be compared to a pea.

Even then, Professor Snape continued blithely with his lesson. He was unconcerned, unwary, totally and serenely unprepared for what was about to be unleashed on an unsuspecting world. After all, he'd already taught Weasley children. Bill was steady and dependable. Charlie was fiery, but focused. Percy was studious, polite, and a joy to teach.

Fred and George were going to be just like their older brothers, of that Professor Snape was absolutely certain.

Nothing happened during that first lesson to disabuse Snape of this pleasant dream. The Friday morning Potions class was usually a little hectic, sometimes even tense, because it was the only class the first-year Slytherins had with the first-year Gryffindors, and the Potions class was the first time the two groups met together since the Sorting. There was always posturing, the trading of rude gestures, and *sub rosa* insulting between the boys, and frequently between the girls as well. Snape's big job was to keep them focused on the task and away from each other.

The first lesson went reasonably well. Only one Gryffindor sprayed wart remover at a Slytherin counterpart, and only three out of twenty potions were utterly useless. At lunch, when McGonagall asked Snape how the morning had gone, he told her it was one of the better classes of first years, and that he hoped for a fairly uneventful year. She raised her eyebrows, but otherwise said nothing.

The following Friday, Snape realized that he had no trouble telling Fred

and George apart. True that in form and feature they were identical, and that their studied uniformity of hair, gait, and expression operated to keep them confused in the eyes of their fellow man, but there was an indefinable difference in the sparkle in the eyes of each that Snape caught at once. It took him half the class to realize he was reading them, and the rest of the class to decide that he wasn't going to tell them about it. It isn't every day that the ordinary mortal has the advantage of identical twins, and Snape wasn't about to give it up. He did use the right names, and Fred and George were clearly impressed.

On the third Friday, the skunk made his appearance. As Snape opened the door of the classroom for the morning double Potions lesson, his olfactory senses were assaulted by something that seemed no more nor no less than a combination of garlic, rotten eggs, and burning tires. The students held their noses and fled to the entrance hall. Snape, being in a position to have to deal with the problem, entered the room.

There was no mistaking the plump black and white-striped animal's intent. It hissed, it stamped, it turned its back and lifted its hindquarters — and Snape was out of the classroom and on the other side of a good, thick door in a shot. He dismissed his class. He needed backup.

"It's a what?" Max Kettleburn was practically rolling on the floor with mad laughter.

"A skunk," replied Snape with as much dignity as he could muster.

"That's a North American animal!"

"It is, nevertheless, in the Potions classroom. What are you going to do about it?"

"Why me?" Kettleburn chuckled, then burst out laughing again.

"You're the Care of Magical Creatures instructor."

"Severus," Kettleburn howled with glee, "a skunk isn't a magical creature!"

Then there was Hagrid.

"Well, I don't know as that's my business, seein's it's not a native creature. More of an import, like. Shouldn't you be checking with the Ministry? Control and Regulation."

But Control and Regulation was also for magical creatures, not garden variety skunks. Snape detected very little sympathy among the officials that he contacted. By this time the afternoon classes had been canceled as well.

"Tomato juice," was Professor Burbage's contribution. "The muggle literature I've researched says that bathing in tomato juice will help take away the smell if you, eh, get sprayed."

"Thank you ever so much for that contribution," Snape told her. "It happens to be an eventuality I'm trying to avoid."

By this time the skunk had been in the Potions classroom for more than four hours. Its presence was evident in the passage outside the room, and was beginning to permeate the upper areas of the dungeons. Slytherin students heading for the common room and the dormitories held their noses, but the time was fast approaching when even that would not be enough.

Snape went to Dumbledore for help.

"Well clearly," Dumbledore said, "someone must go in and immobilize the skunk. Then we can transport it . . . to the proper authorities."

"Will you go in, sir?"

"It is not my classroom."

Many gallons of tomato juice were brought in to the teachers' bathroom. The students were arbitrarily restricted to their common rooms and dorms. The teachers assembled at a respectful and safe distance. Snape managed to restrain and engage the horrid beast, giving it to Hagrid in a sealed cage. Snape then hurried up to the teachers' bath to immerse himself in tomato juice. He clothed himself in new robes after that, having burned the old ones.

They had to fumigate the teachers' bathroom.

The next day, Saturday, brought the revelation that the perpetrator's of Friday's dastardly deed were possessed with neither the sophistication nor the sense of self-preservation necessary for a life of successful crime. At breakfast, a significant number of Gryffindors, mostly boys, sported little glowing badges that read "Slytherin Stinks." A very brief application of Professor McGonagall's well-honed interrogatory skills uncovered the guilty, and Fred and George Weasley found themselves doing a string of detentions in the dungeons with the result that by the weekend before Halloween, the Potions classroom and the stairway down to within one level of the Slytherin common room were spotlessly clean.

During the enforced servitude of the Weasley boys, Snape learned a couple of things about them from bits and pieces of conversation they made no attempt to hide, almost as if it never occurred to them that he might overhear. The first, more disturbing thing was that they harbored a deep, almost passionate sense that Slytherin house was their enemy. Not any individual Slytherin, but Slytherin as a cosmic entity, an overarching concept.

There was, if Snape went hunting through the compartments of his mind looking for it, a vivid recollection of a Quidditch game, and of Molly Weasley's fanatic partisanship not only for Gryffindor but against Slytherin. Snape suspected then that Fred and George may have been named for their uncles, Fabian and Gideon Prewett. They would have been about two years old when the Prewett brothers died. Fred and George would have grown up on stories about the dark times, and the role Slytherin house played in the Dark Lord's rise to power.

The second thing was that, anti-Slytherin prejudice aside, there were scarcely any boys at Hogwarts who were as open, cheerful, and optimistic as the Weasley twins. The world was a game, a challenge of their wits and creativity, and they expended a great deal of intellectual energy looking for ways to exercise their talents. But through all the whispers and eleven-year-old giggles, Snape caught no hint of malice. Even the crusade against Slytherin was more of upholding family pride than actual personal dislike.

Fred and George Weasley were as unlike James Potter and Sirius Black as any pair of pranksters could be, and for that Snape was immensely grateful. He went so far as to quiz them about their deed on the last day of their detention.

"By the way, Weasleys, where did you get the skunk? It isn't the sort of creature one keeps in the family as a pet."

George glanced at Fred, and two stifled giggles turned into a pair of snorts. "Do you know about *The Quibbler*, sir?" George asked.

"I am acquainted with the name. I do not read it."

"Well, old man Lovegood lives near us, and he thinks skunks are related to jarveys. So he brought a couple in to breed. He expected them to keep the gnomes out of his garden. They did. They kept everyone else out of his garden, too. Now he's sending them all back, so we borrowed one."

"I see. A pretty prank, but if you ever do anything like that to me again, I shall nail your shoes to your feet with your own toenails. Do you understand?"

It may have been the wrong thing to say, for the eyes of both boys lit up like Christmas trees.

"Would you, professor?" gasped Fred.

"Could you, professor?" whispered George.

"Will you teach us how?" both boys chorused.

Now Snape had the measure of the twins and knew exactly where he stood. "If you never bother me again," he said sternly, "I'll consider it."

“Yes, sir!” The boys were out the door and up into the Great Hall like two bolts of lightning, for Saturday lunch had just been served, and food was a major motivating force in their lives.

The following Saturday was November 4, and the first Quidditch match of the season — Slytherin against Gryffindor. Snape kept a close eye on the Weasley twins during the whole match, but other than wear their “Slytherin Stinks” badges, they did nothing. Nothing that affected the game at any rate. Snape had his doubts about the sudden fit of sneezing that affected the Ravenclaw student who was the commentator, but there was nothing he could prove.

Fred and George Weasley confined their pranks to Gryffindor house except for one or two excursions against students of the other houses, and Snape lapsed back into his normal patterns of life. By Christmas break, he’d almost forgotten the skunk incident. All the Weasleys, Charlie, Percy, Fred, and George, went home for the holidays, and Hogwarts was at peace.

There must have been something about the Weasley home that fired Weasley children in unique ways. Bill had always arrived back from his breaks with renewed determination, Charlie with increased fire, and Percy more dedicated than before. It was no different with Fred and George, who seemed to have imbibed nothing of a practical nature from their brief sojourn at the family hearth.

“Smell? No, I don’t detect any . . .” Snape began in response to Sprout’s outraged question as they met in the entrance hall one Friday morning in early February on their way to breakfast. Then it hit him. It was either some unfortunate soul suffering from a gruesome gastrointestinal disorder, or it was a stink bomb.

“Oh, that is foul,” said Snape, backing away from the entrance to Hufflepuff house. “And here I thought your house was always so neat and tidy.”

“This had better not be Slytherin!” Sprout hissed at him.

“Hardly,” Snape assured her. “Slytherin tends to be up close and personal. If it was a student who was targeted, I’d worry, but not the whole house.” He considered the question for a moment. “You remember my September house guest, don’t you?”

Sprout nodded.

“Well, aren’t you playing Gryffindor tomorrow? I don’t think they’d be dumb enough to sport ‘Hufflepuff Stinks’ badges, but you never know with Gryffindor.”

Together the heads of Slytherin and Hufflepuff approached the head of Gryffindor house.

“What makes you think it’s the Weasley boys?” McGonagall chided them. “It could have been anyone.”

“I’ve been here eight and a half years,” Snape said, “and Pomona longer, and we’ve never had a stink bomb set off in the entrance hall or dungeons before. Now, suddenly, we have it twice. It points to a newcomer, and that points to the first years. Not only that, Hufflepuff gets attacked the day before their Quidditch match with Gryffindor. Coincidence piles on coincidence.”

“I still believe you’re jumping too quickly to con...” — McGonagall paused — “... clusions.” She was looking over Snape’s shoulder.

Snape turned. Sure enough, ‘Hufflepuff Stinks’ badges flashed on Gryffindor robes. McGonagall rose majestically, sailed across the Hall, seized Fred and George each by an ear, and hustled them both up to her office. That evening the twins began a month of detentions scrubbing down the corridor outside the kitchens, and were barred from viewing the next day’s Quidditch game, neither of which seemed to depress the two in the slightest.

It was an easy thing to accost the pair as they started up the marble staircase to their dorms in Gryffindor tower. Crossing his arms on his chest, Snape regarded them with something like a sneer. “Rank amateurs,” he said. “You don’t deserve my toenail hex. Imagine pulling the same trick twice.”

“No,” Fred insisted, “it wasn’t the same. Last time it was a skunk. This time...”

“It was directed against a group and it involved a stench. It was the same trick. Face it. All that children your age can think of is falling down, bad smells, and embarrassing noises. Pathetic.”

“We can do better next time,” George pleaded. “Give us another chance.”

“All right.” Snape had intended to concede if they asked. “But something creative this time. And don’t hurt anybody.” He watched coldly as the two promised results then scampered upstairs. He was rather hoping they would come up with something good, because he had plans.

It was a matter of priorities. Snape wanted Quirrell to come back to his job to counter the curse theory, but he didn’t want Quirrell to establish tenure in the position. A young professor entrenched in the Dark Arts position was more of a threat to Snape’s own dreams than battling Dumbledore over the curse year after year. At least in the latter situation, Snape could keep up his hopes from year to year. But if Quirrell could hold on, Snape’s dream of getting out of Potions was doomed for decades to come.

If they could live up to their potential, Fred and George were the best weapon Snape was ever likely to find. It was just a matter of proper prior planning.

All that spring, the Hogwarts students were subjected to a series of bizarre occurrences. Several Ravenclaw students developed severe cases of warts, a condition finally traced to a particular stone in the wall of their tower staircase. Almost immediately afterwards, some Gryffindor students contracted a painless purple rash that was discovered to come from brushing the railing on their own tower's stairs. Snape commented rather publicly that it looked like a pattern, and the hexes stopped. It took three weeks for the next one to come, but it was a beauty.

One March morning at mail call, a nearly imperceptible shimmer in the air over the Great Hall caused every single mail owl to lose control of its bowels and defecate onto the tables at practically the same time. Students were leaping up everywhere, and Snape was pleased to note that Fred and George were also splattered by the incontinent owls. It was a sure way to deflect suspicion from themselves.

As the end of the year approached, Fred and George confronted Snape. "What about the toenail hex, Professor," said Fred. "You promised."

"You have not demonstrated yourselves to be worthy," Snape replied. "You'll have to wait until next year — if you've improved."

"I don't think there is a toenail hex," George told his brother. "He's been conning us."

It was a challenge not to be ignored, especially since Snape had been casting nonverbal spells since he was a child. George had already turned and was walking away when he stopped, a triumphant smile spreading across his face as he stared at his feet. "You gotta teach me that one, Professor. You just have to."

"Come back with something creative in September, and we'll talk," Snape said. The boys agreed.

That summer flew by in a burst of creative energy such as Snape had not felt since the days when he battled Black and Potter. He pulled out his old Advanced Potions book and reviewed all the curses he'd invented all those years ago, then began the long, careful process of refining and tailoring them to fit one specific target. In the process, he came up with several new ones as well. A major priority was the reworking of the toenail hex, since Snape didn't feel he should give the Weasley twins the full-powered one. He didn't trust them to use it with any discretion.

There were moments, odd reflective times, usually just before falling asleep, when Snape realized that what he was doing was childish and petty. Worse, if Dumbledore ever found out that one of his teachers was planning a hex campaign against another, he might withdraw his protection and give Moody what he wanted. But at this moment, Snape didn't really care. The only thing that had kept him sane over the last nine years was the hope that Dumbledore would finally relent, take him out of the Potions position, and give him Dark Arts. Now that hope was about to be dashed, and it was Quirrell's fault. Nasty, stuck-up, snide, opinionated Quirrell.

For years Snape had felt as if he were going to explode from pure frustration. This year he had the satisfying feeling that it was finally going to happen.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 1, 1990 (THREE DAYS AFTER THE FIRST QUARTER)

"There he is, the second-youngest teacher at Hogwarts! Looks like Albus plans on keeping this one."

"Good morning, Mr. Moody. No invitation to Azkaban today? Don't tell me there are no vacancies this year." Snape managed to meet Moody's normal eye, but still couldn't bring himself to look into the spinning blue one.

"I can be patient. My sources tell me this Dark Arts teacher gets under your skin like a case of hives. I'm just going to sit back and watch you square off against each other. If Albus gets tired of you, I may get my wish after all. Enjoy your year."

How does he know about me and Quirrell? Snape thought as he walked up the hill to the castle. *Is Quirrell here already? Did he say something to Moody?*

Quirrell was indeed already there, seated at the table in the center of the Great Hall where the teachers usually met for breakfast on the first day. Snape walked quietly up behind him and said, "How was your sabbatical?" To Snape's surprise, Quirrell jumped at the sound of his voice, as if startled. "Sorry," Snape said. "Didn't mean to surprise you like that." *If I make a point of being nice to him now, no one will suspect me when the fun starts.*

"You d . . . didn't surprise me. I was just concentrating on something else."

"So, how was your sabbatical? Did you manage to get everything done that you wanted to?"

"Most of it. It was . . . Have you ever done field work before?"

It was an odd question, especially coming from Quirrell who'd claimed to have worked with trolls for the Ministry. "Yes," Snape replied cautiously. "after a fashion. But only in Britain. I've never had the chance to go abroad. Why?"

"Just wondering. I was in A . . . Albania last month. Before that in the mountains in Transylvania. Brasov, Castle Bran. V . . . ampires, you know." Quirrell stopped.

By this time the rest of the teachers had gathered, and Snape joined the other heads of house. Dumbledore welcomed them all, and they began eating and discussing summer vacations and the routine of starting school again. No one particularly remarked on Quirrell's presence except that Flitwick commented that it was nice to start the year with all familiar faces for once. Quirrell, deep in a discussion with Sprout about mandrakes, barely noticed.

"By the way, Severus," Quirrell said as they rose from breakfast, "I brought back a few souvenirs. Would you like to see them?"

Snape was surprised, but agreed, and followed Quirrell up to the Dark Arts office on the second floor. There were some crates on one side of the room, but the thing that caught Snape's attention at once was a small cage on Quirrell's desk. It contained a snake, grayish brown with a thick, dark, zigzag marking along the length of its back. It was about twenty inches long.

The snake raised its head as the two men walked in, and seemed to be watching them.

Snape examined the snake in its cage as Quirrell rummaged through his crates. Quirrell seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time, but since Snape found the snake fascinating, he didn't really mind. The little reptile was quite active, rolling in liquid coils and darting its tongue. It made no attempt to strike at the sides of the cage, contenting itself with moving its head up and down as it regarded the man.

"Ursini's Viper, isn't it?" Snape asked. "They're native to that part of Europe."

Quirrell lifted his head from a crate, a crate from which he had yet to extract a single item. "Yes, intelligent little thing. Poisonous, too, so don't touch."

"Hemotoxin," Snape retorted, just for the pleasure of showing Quirrell he wasn't totally ignorant about snakes. "Rarely fatal, though there have been cases . . . What are you looking for?"

"Here," Quirrell gasped, pulling several wrapped objects that proved on unwrapping to be gris-gris bags from Haiti, voodoo dolls from New Orleans,

Santeria drums from Cuba, and minkisi from the Congo. It looked for all the world like the collection of Snape's great-grandfather Wensley. "Do you know what these are?"

"I have my own," Snape said. "I've had them since I was a child. What are these?"

"This," said Quirrell, holding up a twelve-inch fang, "is the tooth of a Kulshedra. It starts as a Bolla, a great snake, then after twelve years undergoes a metamorphosis into a dragon with nine tongues. I brought some of the tongue for you — dried and pickled — for the potions store." He fished in the crate and brought out six jars, three of each kind of preserved tongue.

"Why, thank you," said Snape, suddenly ashamed of his own meanness regarding Quirrell, for the tongue was rare and expensive. "I hope you didn't spend..."

"N... not to worry. Since it's technically for school stores, I'll submit a voucher to Dumbledore." He took a little box and opened it, holding up a fine golden chain with a bit of cloth pendant in the middle. "There's a sickle inside that I soaked in the blood vomited by a Shtriga. It protects you from Shtrigas permanently."

Another crate held African magical items, mostly fetishes, including a very beautiful monkey paw, and claws from various beasts of prey.

Snape took several of the articles over to one of the windows to study them more carefully in better light. He looked up to find Quirrell staring at him intently. "What?" Snape asked.

"I still find it hard to imagine that someone so close to the Blacks, and the Lestranges, and all those others was never interested in joining You-Know-Who. Especially one with your knowledge of the Dark Arts."

"We've had this discussion before. I have never been accused..."

"That's not true. I graduated the June before You-Know-Who fell. I remember there was a lot in *The Prophet* about rounding up Death Eaters, and I know I saw your name."

"That was only because several of the students in my house had parents who were being arrested, and I defended the students. Naturally *The Prophet* would jump to the wrong conclusions. You never saw any Ministry confirmation of the charge, did you?"

"No... How long have you been here, anyway?"

"I was hired at the beginning of the autumn term in 1981, and if I hadn't been squeaky clean, Dumbledore would never have taken me on."

Quirrell protested, "But how could you have continued when so many

people you'd known, been friends with, were being hunted, arrested, imprisoned?"

It was beyond belief. It was as if the man knew he'd been a Death Eater, even though that information was still considered secret by the Department of Magical Law. Snape was furious, and now thoroughly convinced that any action he took against Quirrell was more than justified.

"Why," Snape demanded, "would the arrest of someone I'd gone to school with years before, someone I no longer had any connection with, induce me to abandon my position at Hogwarts? The illogic of the action aside, you have a pretty poor opinion of my sense of duty if you think I would run just because former colleagues of mine were being arrested. Excuse me, Quirrell. I have work to do in my own office."

Snape left. Halfway to the stairs he clenched his fists in anger and was rewarded with a stab of pain. Looking at his hands, he saw he was still carrying one of the claw fetishes. Returning to the Dark Arts office, Snape put his hand on the knob, but paused as he heard Quirrell inside, talking to himself.

"Yes, yes, he stayed. Stayed while everyone was being rounded up and sent to Azkaban. But does that really mean he was on the right side? Does it really mean I can trust him?"

Snape kept the fetish and went down to his office. More than ever he was convinced that he had to get rid of Quirrell. Not just for himself, but for the school. The man was a looney tune.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1990 (THE DAY AFTER THE FULL MOON)

August turned out to be a much bigger trial than Snape could have imagined because Quirrell was always watching him. And there was nothing Snape could do about it. Action had to wait until the students returned. With three hundred people in the castle, and with spells coming at times when it couldn't possibly be the Weasley twins, and at other times when it couldn't possibly be Snape, Quirrell would crack. Snape knew Quirrell would crack, and then he'd be sacked and the Dark Arts job would be up for grabs again.

Snape made no contact with the Weasley twins until after the first second-year Slytherin-Gryffindor Potions lesson on the first Thursday morning of September. He signaled to them to wait until the rest had gone to lunch. When there was no one else in the dungeon corridors, he led them down a passage and into an empty storeroom.

"All right," Snape said when the door was closed and an illumination spell lit, "what've you come up with?"

George ticked things off on his fingers. "We've got dungbombs, and firecrackers, and..."

"I don't believe this!" Snape cried to the ceiling, then rounded on the boys. "I ask you for creativity, and you bring me Zonko's and Gambol and Japes. I might just as well ask Percy. He at least can follow instructions."

The sudden fire this brought to the twins' behavior was noted and logged for future reference.

"No, sir! No! We can do it!"

"Loads better than that prat Percy can!"

"Just give us a chance, sir!"

"Fine. Another chance. What do you have in the way of locomotor impediment spells?"

"Loco who, sir?" George looked at Fred, who shrugged.

"Things that get in the way of movement. Tripping spells are among them, but they're too crude. Things that make you feel you've accidentally hit your elbow against a door jamb, or got the hem of your robe caught on a twig. Or as if there was a flagstone sticking up a quarter of an inch right in front of your toe. Things that'll make the victim feel awkward and ungainly, and maybe not immediately suspect it was a spell at all."

The twins were speechless, as if a whole new and marvelous world had just opened in front of them. "You're wicked, sir," Fred breathed, and George nodded agreement.

"Who do you want us to use these spells against, sir?" George asked.

"Professor Quirrell," Snape replied.

"Yes!" Fred exulted, his fists pumping air. "Charlie said it! He said you fancied Quirrell's job! He said you'd be better at it, too!"

"I thank Charlie for his sterling support. Do not, however, breathe a word of this to him. There are other body parts I can affect besides toenails. Now, about these impeding spells..."

He showed the twins several, and then the Weasleys went first to lunch with Snape three minutes behind. There was nothing remotely unusual in their aggregate behavior except that Fred and George seemed more interested than usual in the teachers' table, where Snape was now approaching Quirrell.

Quirrell was reading a book and eating soup. Snape said a perfunctory, "Good afternoon," as he sat in the chair on Quirrell's right and reached for a piece of bread. Quirrell murmured, "Noon," without taking his nose from

his book, misjudged his distance, hit the side of the soup bowl with his spoon, and sent soup flowing across the table. Neither the book nor his robes were soiled in any way.

“Drat!” Quirrell exclaimed, rising quickly and grabbing a table napkin to stem the tide of soup. “Cleanup please,” he called, and the house-elves below cleared the mess away. Quirrell brushed the front of his robes with the napkin and turned to Snape, who was regarding him with some concern. “Sorry about that Severus. Terribly clumsy of me.”

“Not at all,” Snape replied as the two calmly continued their meal. It was another minute before Snape glanced at the Gryffindor table, but there was no mistaking the admiration that gleamed from two identical pairs of eyes.

From that moment, Quirrell became a klutz. He caught his sleeve on chair arms and stepped on the hem of his robes going up the marble staircase. He hit his shoulder against the oaken front doors, snagged his books on the corners of desks, and fumbled with his quills, pointer, and wand. Sometimes it happened when Fred and George were in their common room or the library. Sometimes it happened when Snape was in Dumbledore’s office or in conference with McGonagall. No one person could ever be said to have been present on each occasion, and indeed, Quirrell seemed not to suspect that it was spell induced.

That was the part Snape found hard to explain. Quirrell was nervous, more nervous than could be accounted for by the pranks, and he even seemed to feel that the awkwardness was caused by his nerves rather than the other way around.

The absolute truth of the matter was that Quirrell was getting downright twitchy, which only made him more irritating. He began rubbing his hands in an odd, twisting motion, and the slight hesitation in his speech that Snape noticed at the beginning of the school year was developing into a pronounced stammer. Snape had no direct personal experience of what was happening in Quirrell’s classes, but the Slytherin students said he alternated between one moment telling them how wonderful and fascinating the Dark Arts were, and the next moment jumping, starting, and emitting strange squeaking sounds at the slightest noise.

It was Michael Bole, the latest in the line of Slytherin Beaters, who gave Snape the news that after Halloween Quirrell had started bringing the viper to class and placing its cage so that the snake could see what was going on.

“He fair talks to that blooming reptile, sir, like it was his mum or something,” Bole was obviously disappointed in his Dark Arts teacher. Not that

Bole wasn't disappointed in most of his teachers, Bole being far from academically inclined.

"What does he say to it?" Snape asked, intrigued.

"Weird stuff. Little things like 'yes, yes, of course' or 'it's harder than you think.' Then sometimes it's like he's talking about a person — 'he's suspicious whenever I bring it up,' and once he said, 'I don't think you can count on him anymore.' It was like he was planning something with that blooming snake."

"Thank you, Bole," said Snape and went straight to Dumbledore.

The interview went about as well as could be expected, which meant that from Snape's point of view it didn't go well at all.

"I understand your concerns, Severus, but the fact remains that Professor Quirrell is a highly qualified Dark Arts teacher. Both his OWL and his NEWT candidates did very well in his first year with us, and I expect them to do equally well or better this coming June. I do not think that the acquisition of a nervous tic or two is grounds for dismissing a teacher. You do know what would have happened if I had taken every complaint about a teacher's behavior seriously, don't you?" And Dumbledore peered at Snape over the rim of his glasses.

McGonagall was more on Snape's side. "I don't know where that boy went last year, or what he did, but he's gotten as jumpy as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. It makes me twitch just watching him. Could you brew him something to make him calm down, Severus? Immobilize him, maybe?"

"Do you think it's affecting his ability to handle his classes?" Snape suggested, wondering if he could influence Dumbledore via McGonagall.

"I know it's affecting my digestion," McGonagall replied. "I marvel you can stand to sit next to him at dinner. Your appetite was never good at the best of times."

Shortly before the Christmas break, Quirrell brought the viper to dinner, setting the cage on the table in front of him.

"Whatever is that thing doing here?" Snape asked, not only irritated, but somehow no longer hungry with the cold reptile eyes regarding him unblinkingly.

"I j... just wanted to g... give it a change of sc... scenery," said Quirrell. "It seems more a... ctive and in... telligent than your average sn... ake."

Hagrid passed by them and noticed the newcomer. "That's Ursini's ain't it?" he said, stopping to watching the coiling and uncoiling viper. "Pretty little thing." He laid a huge hand on Snape's shoulder. "Now you don't go

letting this fellow put ya off yer feed, Professor. Ain't no snake 'd ever take away my appetite, 'n if you let it get t' ya, lad, I'll come down this end 'n feed ya meself."

Others came to look as well, and to exchange the normal pleasantries and conversation. Pomfrey asked about restocking the clinic, Kettleburn wanted to know about the Slytherin Seeker and whether an injury in November's game would affect the one in January, McGonagall had a question about an order of supplies for the spring term, and even Dumbledore came over to look at the snake, which flicked its tongue and hissed at him.

Then it was Christmas, and most of the staff and students went home, including Quirrell. When they returned in January, the snake was gone. When Snape asked about it, Quirrell merely shrugged. "It was getting t . . . iresome. I s . . . old it."

Snape did notice, however, that Quirrell had developed a sudden interest in the Forbidden Forest, and could be seen at least twice a day, and sometimes more frequently, hovering about the fringes of the trees, or actually disappearing into the forest's shade for a half hour at a time. He had by now acquired a tic in the muscle next to his left eye that made it difficult to look at him for longer than thirty seconds at a time.

The Weasley twins were given permission to step up their campaign, and everywhere Quirrell went, things had a tendency to fall, or break, or slam. Quirrell's repertoire of little squeals and shrieks whenever this happened was quite amusing. Dumbledore still refused to consider a change of staff until after the results of the OWLs and NEWTs showed what kind of job Quirrell was doing with the students.

The key, Snape had learned during his days as an infiltrating spy, was to have your cover story ready in advance. It was thus that when Hagrid caught him sneaking into the Forbidden Forest on Quirrell's trail around mid February, Snape knew exactly what to tell him.

"Snowbells."

"Come again?"

"Alpine snowbells. They're beginning to stick their little heads out of the snow about now, and its the perfect time to gather and dry them for Frostbite Salve."

"Ain't never heard of 'em around here."

"Alpine snowbells and evergreen lichen. An unbeatable frostbite combination."

"Lichen ain't evergreen. Not in winter, anyways."

"Of course, it isn't the fungus I'm after. It's the cyanobacteria. That can only be isolated under laboratory conditions. But then, you know that."

Hagrid was one of those rare people whose attitude toward science was that if he didn't understand it, it must be true. He didn't argue the point. Instead he redirected it. "If ya got a minute, come inside and have a cuppa. I want t' ask ya about Quirrell."

It was impossible to tell if that boded good or ill, but as at that moment Snape couldn't think of a good reason why not, he accompanied Hagrid to the cabin. "What about Quirrell?" he asked once they were inside.

"He's fidgety. Ya got somewhat t' do with that?"

"Why ever would you think . . ." Snape started to protest, when Hagrid cut him off.

"First I got to ask meself what the head o' Slytherin house's got t' do with a pair o' redheaded rascals who'd curl up 'n die before they'd put on a green 'n silver badge, 'n then what the same two rascals was doing stalking the Dark Arts professor up t' the fourth floor, 'n then when Professor Trelawney was coming down, what coulda made her cards jump outta her hands 'n hit Professor Quirrell in the side of the head, when I seen exactly the same kinda trick performed in the entrance hall 'gainst Sirius Black by a scapegrace Slytherin some seven years ago."

Snape stared, opened his mouth, closed it again, narrowed his eyes, and said, "And the miracle is you got that all out without taking a breath. Are you accusing me of something?"

"You know," Hagrid said quietly, though there was no mistaking his ire, "you ain't the first runt I ever mollycoddled, 'n you ain't going t' be the last, 'n in between I get t' know a lot of the students. He weren't a bad lot, Quirrell, 'n I ain't going t' see him bullied just 'cause you ain't satisfied with the job you got."

Snape drew himself up in offended dignity. "You presume, Hagrid. I am offended." He turned and left, marching with straight back and squared shoulders up the hill to the castle.

Once there, however, Snape sought out the Weasley twins. "Excellent news," he told them. "Your mission has been accomplished. All we have to do now is sit back and watch the target deteriorate on his own. It's much more subtle that way."

The boys didn't want to give up, having, it seemed, enjoyed the escapade thoroughly. Snape had to resort to threats of grievously embarrassing curses to induce them to concur. That, and he gave them the promised toenail hex.

The fortunate part was that Snape turned out to be right. Quirrell was by now so jumpy and jittery that he became accident prone and a danger to be around. Hagrid accused Snape, Snape protested his innocence, Hagrid maintained surveillance, and eventually Hagrid was forced to admit that neither Snape nor the Weasleys were hexing Quirrell. Hagrid even apologized for his earlier suspicions.

In mid June, with exams over and the year coming to an end, Dumbledore called Snape into his office.

"I wanted to tell you first, Severus. Better straight from me than on the rumor mill."

Snape could guess. "The OWL and NEWT results were excellent and you've engaged Quirrell for next year."

"You always did have a quick mind."

"You know," Snape said bitterly, "this means I was right all along. If there ever was a curse, it's gone. The Dark Lord isn't coming back."

"I prefer to watch for a while longer," Dumbledore responded, "though even I must admit it is a reassuring piece of evidence. I did also wish to remind you to prepare yourself over the summer break."

"What for?"

"It is 1991. Eleven years. Next September, if all goes well, begins the wizard education of Lily's son Harry."

Snape stared at Dumbledore, pain forming behind his eyes. "What's that to me? One more Gryffindor brat among so many others."

"You promised to help me protect him."

"That was when it looked like he might need protection. Look around you, Headmaster. The Dark Lord hasn't been seen or heard from in nearly ten years. His followers are incarcerated or trying their best to forget they ever knew him. Every shred of evidence we had that he wasn't truly gone is being proven false. Bella didn't know anything, she was just crazy. The mark is nothing more than a brand designed to respond to certain syllables. If there ever was a curse on the Dark Arts position, it's gone. What is there to protect Potter Junior from?"

"Humor me. Pretend I might be right, and be ready to jump in if it turns out I am."

Snape paused, thought, and then said, "I'm willing to do that as long as you remember your promise."

"And that was?" Dumbledore cocked his head to one side.

"Never tell him. Never tell anyone. It's bad enough being reduced to nursemaiding James Potter's son, but to have it noised abroad..."

"I shall renew my vow, Severus. I shall never..."

"Thank you, sir," Snape said, and turned, suddenly overwhelmed by images he'd thought forgotten, and strode from the office.

"... reveal the best of you." Dumbledore finished, watching the disappearing back as it fled down the spiral staircase. The look in his eyes was one of tenderness and concern, though he had to be careful never to show it to Snape, who would have been mortified even knowing it existed.

Lancashire was not the haven it had once been. Freed from school and once again in his own home, in his own bed, Snape dreamt of emerald green eyes. Waking, he saw nothing but reminders. There was the bridge that separated business town from laboring town, the mill whence his father had brought back venom reserved for managerial scum like Lily's father, the local where Tobias Snape had proven himself, and by extension his family, no more than common lowlife. Worse, there was the tree on the opposite bank of the river from the mill where he and Lily had met so often in those now-magical years before they went to Hogwarts.

Life was a lesson in might have been, a long trail of 'if-onlies.' *If only Mercury hadn't been retrograde, if only she'd been sorted into Slytherin, if only I hadn't fought back, if only Potter'd been content with the girls he had, if only there hadn't been an Invisibility Cloak... if only the Dark Lord had realized that the prophecy referred to... the other one, the auror's child.*

Restless, Snape walked past the house that had once been Lily's almost every time he left his own. He haunted the school yard, empty for the summer. He sat under the tree trying to remember every scrap of conversation...

And then, mercifully, he met Mrs. Hanson in the market, Mrs. Hanson who'd been visiting her sister in Manchester. He chatted about rheumatism and arthritis and the best way to cook asparagus. He carried packages, and offered his arm across the bridge, and remembered Dr. Who and the Avengers. He went to tea and learned all over again why the Conservative Party was the worst thing that had ever happened to Britain.

Thanks to Mrs. Hanson, Snape was feeling his usual self — not normal, but usual — as July trickled its way through the great glass of time. When July merged with August, Snape had even forgotten to remember its import in the cosmic scheme of things. He only remembered it was time to return again to Hogwarts.

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