

A DIFFERENCE IN THE FAMILY

THE SNAPE CHRONICLES

RANNAO

Find the original text at:

<http://www.fanfiction.net/s/7937889>

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

CONTENTS

THIRTY-FOUR

Enter Harry Potter — 1

THIRTY-FIVE

A Hidden Menace — 22

THIRTY-SIX

The Menace Revealed — 44

THIRTY-SEVEN

Gilderoy the Great — 61

THIRTY-EIGHT

The Heir of Slytherin — 80

THIRTY-NINE

Riddles Resolved — 107

FORTY

Facing Fears — 132

FORTY-ONE

A Conspiracy of Marauders — 158

FORTY-TWO

Treading Water — 178

FORTY-THREE

Struck from Behind — 200

FORTY-FOUR

Not What Meets the Eye — 219

FORTY-FIVE

The Tasks Begin — 252

FORTY-SIX

Masks and Unmaskings — 280

C H A P T E R T H I R T Y - F O U R

ENTER HARRY POTTER

TUESDAY, JULY 30, 1991

Severus Snape looked around the sitting room in his small house in Spinner's End, reviewing his mental checklist. Windows closed. Fire out in the grate. Everything breakable packed away in the workroom. Spells to protect the house and shield the cul-de-sac from notice by muggles all in place and strengthened. He'd probably not have a chance to return until the next June, and it wouldn't do to leave the gas on. Not that there'd been any gas since 1974, but the principle was the same.

Stepping out into the area yard behind the kitchen, Snape locked the last door. He carried a battered old Gladstone bag with just a few personal things, since everything he would need for the coming school year was already at Hogwarts. *Rotten luck that Dumbledore's calling us back two days early, just as that new potion was coming together. No help for it.*

Snape concentrated on Hogsmeade. The incoming teachers usually picked spots on the outskirts of town to apparate to, it being considered bad form to materialize into one of the local citizens. Destined, determined, and deliberate, Snape disappeared and reemerged in Hogsmeade, so used to the action that he no longer noticed the discomfort.

Almost immediately, a large man with a misshapen face and a mane of long gray hair stepped out from a doorway to accost him. Accustomed to these encounters, Snape glanced away to avoid the other's constantly shifting eye.

"Good morning, Professor," the man said, with sinister good humor. "Still teaching, I see."

"Good morning, Moody," Snape replied. "Arrest anyone yet today?"

"Was kind of hoping it would be you. Disappointed again. You be sure to tell me if you ever decide to retire. The guest room's been ready for some time."

"You will excuse me. I have a meeting."

As Snape walked away, he heard behind him the 'pop' of Alastor Moody returning to London. *How did he know we were starting two days early?*

"Severus! Do wait a moment."

Snape turned and paused to allow the older witch to catch up to him. "Good morning, Minerva. I see the clans are gathering."

"Was that Mad-Eye Moody? What would he want here?"

"He takes off a half an hour from his busy schedule every August to wish me a pleasant school year."

"He's not still after you? After all these years?"

"The phrase 'Statute of Limitations' does not exist in an auror's vocabulary. If I didn't know better, I'd think Professor Dumbledore put him up to it, just to avoid the trouble of hiring another Potions teacher."

Professor McGonagall suppressed a grin. "Did Professor Dumbledore tell you why he's summoned us? I've been working on registering all the new first years, and suddenly I find we have a meeting."

"I fear I'm not so deep in the Headmaster's confidence."

They stopped at the gate while the caretaker released the shielding spells to admit them, then wished him a polite but restrained, "Good morning, Filch," as they entered.

"Good morning, Professors. Getting an early start this year, eh? Others are already up there waiting on ye."

Snape and McGonagall climbed the hill to the castle and entered the enormous entrance hall. Professor Dumbledore was there to welcome them.

"Wonderful. Wonderful. We are all here, I see. I have taken the liberty of preparing a brunch for all of us in the Great Hall. Much more comfortable than my office, and just as private with no other staff or students here. Come, come."

They were seven, Professor Dumbledore, groundskeeper Hagrid, Professor Quirrell, the Dark Arts teacher, and the four heads of Houses, Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, and himself. Snape acknowledged them all with his usual reserve, his coldest greeting being for Quirrell. *The curse really must be broken if he's back in his old job. First Dark Arts teacher in two decades to last two consecutive years. Wish he hadn't gotten so twitchy, though.*

Makes my skin crawl. Snape chose to overlook the fact that he himself was in part responsible for the twitchiness.

They sat around the center table on the dais. Dumbledore clapped his hands, and the table was loaded with food. On a whim, Snape helped himself to eggs Benedict and coffee. Then Dumbledore coughed and spoke in the resulting silence.

"We have an auspicious year ahead of us, ladies and gentlemen. First, it will be the first year of a young man we have been awaiting for some time, Master Harry Potter. Second, I have asked you here early because I have received a request from a very old and very dear friend of mine, Nicholas Flamel, and I need your assistance. Nicholas Flamel is an old friend in more than one sense of the word. He is now about 660 years old. I think most of you have heard of the secret of his longevity."

"The Philosopher's Stone," interjected McGonagall, and the others nodded.

"Yes, well. Those of you who have been on the staff longer," here Dumbledore nodded towards Flitwick, McGonagall, and Hagrid, "will know exactly what I am asking, but the newer and younger staff will need some background.

"Nicholas does not keep the Philosopher's Stone about his person. In fact, it is locked in a vault in Gringotts Bank and is only brought out when Nicholas needs to brew more of the Elixir of Life for himself and his wife Perenelle. Sometime during the coming year, they will have need of the Elixir, but Nicholas is not certain when. He has asked me to get the Stone out of the vault and safeguard it at Hogwarts.

"Now safeguarding the Stone is a serious business, and I am asking each of you to contribute something of your own talent to the task. Where one device might be foiled, seven would be almost invincible. Each of you should choose something at which you excel, but which might be difficult for someone else to circumvent."

"Professor," said Snape, trying to hide the exasperation in his voice, "why not simply leave the Stone in the vault until Flamel needs it, then bring it out for the Elixir, and immediately put it back?"

"Ah, I fear that Nicholas has become less than precise as he grows older. He has been known to doze off for up to twenty minutes in the middle of an otherwise scintillating conversation, and recently he has begun confusing me with his great-uncle Pierre who, I regret to say, died at the battle of Crecy. I told him that I could not require my staff to spend their valuable time

concocting ways to guard the Stone while at the same time conducting classes and grading assignments. I said it must be done before the students arrive, or it will not be done. He concurred.

"Later today we shall go to the underground area where the Stone is to be housed, and you shall each see the section I shall ask you to defend. Are we agreed?"

They all nodded assent.

"Good. Since we are all here, why not kill two birds with one stone — no pun intended, I assure you, Minerva — and continue with our regular staff meeting? Minerva?"

Professor McGonagall shifted uneasily. "I have been registering all the students as the confirmations come in, and we seem to have a perfectly normal class of first years. Except . . . well except that we have as yet no response from Harry Potter, and the deadline is tomorrow. I have sent hundreds of owls, with no luck. I am not certain what to do."

That does seem odd. Snape thought. *On the other hand, this is Lily's son, and maybe he would rather pursue another career. I for one would not blame him.*

Dumbledore seemed to have other ideas. "His muggle relatives are notoriously opposed to his training as a wizard. Hagrid, I should like you to visit them tomorrow and make sure that all is in order. Now, as to the class schedules . . ."

They sorted out classes, evening patrols, Quidditch practices, use of the teachers' staff room, and the supervisory duties for Hogsmeade excursions. Professor Sprout requested that barrier tape be put around a new planting area that had just been set out with seedlings. Professor Flitwick wanted the temperature on the third floor adjusted, as he had recently begun feeling the chill more than usual.

Finally, Dumbledore turned to Snape. "And what is the forecast in the muggle world? Are we looking at any pending catastrophes?"

"On the contrary, things are looking good. The early spring war in the Middle East caused much less disruption than we feared. South Africa has repealed its apartheid laws, the Warsaw Pact dissolved earlier this month ('Where do they get these outlandish names?' McGonagall stage whispered), the Russians have their first freely elected president, and even as we speak the American President is in Moscow to sign a treaty tomorrow limiting long-range weapons. I would say it's quite optimistic." Snape was the only part-muggle at the meeting, and had a better grasp of these matters than the others.

“Excellent!” responded Dumbledore. “Shall we adjourn now and go look at the chamber where the Philosopher’s Stone will be housed?”

The entrance to the chamber was on the third floor, not far from the Trophy Room, but its trap door led to a several story drop that had to be negotiated with serious levitation spells. In what was a truly gratifying display of his trust in Snape’s abilities, Dumbledore gave the Potions master the task of guarding the last antechamber. “I want something that no wizard, even one able to get through all the other tasks, would be able to accomplish. Think long and hard, Severus. Yours could be the deciding barrier.”

Back in his own office in the dungeons, near enough to the entrance to Slytherin house to be able to oversee its activities during the school year, Snape pondered his assignment. *Something no wizard would be able to accomplish. That should be easy. Simple logic.* Rather than waste his talents on too much magic, Snape began to design a logic problem worthy of his muggle grandmother, Gra. He started with seven bottles: three with poison, two with nettle wine, one to go through purple fire, and one to go through black flame. Then he began to write the logic problem.

An hour into refining the problem, Snape decided he needed to rest his eyes. He walked out onto the lawn and stretched his back and shoulder muscles in the warm afternoon sun. Down the hill from the castle, Quirrell was leaving Hagrid’s hut, and Snape wondered why the Dark Arts teacher was talking to the groundskeeper.

The sun glinted off the water of the lake where he and Lily had skipped stones, a memory softened by distance for many years now. *How will I react when I see her son? Does he take after his mother? Or his father? Her talent for potions, or his for mayhem?*

Two other boys were arriving in a month. One was Narcissa’s son. Snape had held baby Draco on his naming day. Little scrunched up nose and tiny fingernails. *Don’t be an idiot; he’s eleven. He’d better still be a source of happiness to his mother.*

And then there was the auror’s child, the one Snape would have sold to the Dark Lord without remorse, except that Lily and her son were chosen instead. *What will it be like to actually see Neville Longbottom?* Not a pleasant thought at all.

The afternoon sun brought too many memories, few of them good. The only way out of a difficult emotional situation was to turn it off. Snape shut out and locked down the problem areas of his mind the way he would close a closet door. Time enough to deal with the three boys when they arrived.

It would have been so much easier, though, if they weren't all coming to Hogwarts at the same time.

It's going to be a terrible year...

"What'cha thinking about, lad... Sorry, Professor Snape."

Snape turned from his contemplation of the lake. "Old times. Old faces. How was your summer, Hagrid?"

"Short, truth be told. All this Flamel business, and this Potter business."

"What've you to do with the Potter boy?"

"I got t' go down an' find out why he ain't answered his letters. Professor McGonagall says they've taken off for the coast, and Quirrell says there's a storm coming in. I'm like t' take his advice an' hunker down 'til it's past, then go get him tomorrow afternoon an' take him t' London for his things on Thursday. Thursday'll be when I go t' Gringotts, too."

"Quirrell suggested that?"

"He did. 'T ain't good traipsing hither and yon in a storm."

It was a sound idea, but suddenly Snape resented the fact that Quirrell was offering unsolicited advice about anything. *Twitchy little busybody*. "You could go down tonight."

"What good'd that do?"

"Well, if you were there tonight, then you could leave with the boy for London as soon as the storm let up. You wouldn't have to wait for Thursday. You might have it all done tomorrow. I agree about not taking the boy out in a storm, but when has a storm ever bothered you?"

"That's the truth of it, lad! I'll be off tonight an' greet him on the stroke of his birthday, I will! Maybe even take him a birthday cake, though it won't be much next t' what his family'll do t' celebrate. That's a good idea, that is."

"Do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Don't mention it to Quirrell. It'd bend his nose out of shape if he thought I was going behind his back."

"I got ya, Professor. What he don't know..." Hagrid went up to the castle to find a birthday cake for Harry Potter.

Snape watched him go. *This year is going to be one of the low points of my life. Here I am feeling superior because I got Hagrid to not listen to Quirrell when Quirrell is probably right. How petty can one get?*

Snape went back to his logic problem. Setting up the classroom could wait, especially if Hagrid was coming back early with the Stone. Supper in

the Great Hall was pleasant, since the teachers had all known each other for several years and knew what not to talk about.

"Prospects for Quidditch, Minerva? I didn't want to place a bet until I'd spoken to you."

"I fear this year may be another washout, Severus. Our last Seeker was a seventh year, so we don't even have a full team. You can't put just anyone in. I may bet on Slytherin this year. Seems the only certain money there is."

"Have you considered Wood for a Seeker? He's a superb Keeper, but he might make a passable Seeker. It'd be easier to find a new Keeper."

"T is an idea. I shall suggest it to Wood in any case."

Around eight o'clock Dumbledore mentioned charades, and immediately everyone had something else to do. Hagrid rose and stretched. "I'll be off now, I'm thinking, Professors. Early start an' all. You all be ready for me when I get back." He lumbered out of the Hall, winking slyly at Snape on the way.

"Where's he . . . going so soon?" muttered Quirrell, standing at Snape's elbow.

"Probably to bed. I believe he wants an early start tomorrow morning." *And you won't even know he's gone until he's back, Mr. Nosey Parker. Down, Severus. Down.*

"Severus, would you fancy a game of cards?"

Snape looked down at Professor Flitwick. "I should like that very much, Filius," and the two retired to Snape's dungeon office for a few games of cribbage.

The next morning the teachers met for brunch rather than breakfast. The month before school started was always more relaxed than any other time of the year, and this time the seven of them were in ahead of the other teachers as well. The rest of the Hogwarts staff would be arriving the next day, when things would settle into a more normal routine. At brunch, however, they were only five.

"Where's Quirrell?" asked Snape as he settled into his seat.

"Saw him heading into Hogsmeade earlier. Don't know why. Didn't ask." Sprout reached for another piece of toast.

"I was looking at your new plantings yesterday, Pomona. You didn't by chance put in some new orris or mugwort, did you? We're getting a bit low."

"Mugwort, yes. Good you mentioned the orris. I'll put some in this week."

Snape left the table as soon as he finished eating. Creating a logic problem took time. It had to be exactly the right amount of information in just the

right form or it wouldn't work. He needed to concentrate on it for a couple of hours. *If I finish today, I can start August like a normal school year, without rushing any of the preparations.*

Hagrid was back early that evening and spent the first hour closeted with Dumbledore. Snape didn't see him until they gathered for supper.

"An' he didn't even know he was a wizard! They told him his parents died in a car crash. A car crash! I'd like to thump that Dursley! He seems a nice lad, though. Quiet an' unassuming. Kinda shy, but that could be 'cause everything was so new. Got quite a reception at the Leaky Cauldron, he did. Well, you'd know about that, Professor Quirrell."

The others all looked at Quirrell, who seemed embarrassed. "We... got started so early. I... needed to... pick up some things. A... book on werewolves, and... some wolfsbane for the... third years."

"Thought the book was on vampires," muttered Hagrid into his soup.

Snape glanced from Hagrid to Quirrell. *Now what was that about? Quirrell was in London? If it was just a book and some herbs, why didn't he ask Hagrid to pick it up for him? Right. Because I told Hagrid to leave early. Well, I hope Quirrell enjoyed London.*

They all went to bed early, and the next day the rest of the staff began apparating in.

The first to arrive were Madam Pince, Madam Pomfrey, and Professor Kettleburn, assuming one did not count Professor Binns. Of course, no one ever really counted Professor Binns, as he never left the History of Magic classroom anymore. Snape thought about him briefly as he passed the Professor's first floor room on his way to McGonagall's office. *Pity he stopped coming to the Great Hall for meals during my fourth year. It used to be quite entertaining watching him try to eat. How can a ghost not know he's dead? Then again the general consensus always was that he died long before he died. Imagine me coming back to teach Potions as a ghost. Now that would scare the little demons.*

He stuck his head around McGonagall's door. "Library's open. I'm going up now. If you have your list, I can take it for you. I know you're busy. And Dumbledore wants us all on the third floor at ten-thirty. Are you ready?"

"Oh yes, I had it finished yesterday. I've done this before, remember? It's just you youngsters who have to make up something new. Here, I have that list somewhere. And thank you. These registrations will send me to Bedlam."

The precautions for defending the Philosopher's Stone were ingenious. As each of the team members installed his or hers, Snape evaluated his own

chances of getting through the tasks. His task and Sprout's were easy for him, but he knew he would have trouble with Hagrid's, maybe even with Quirrell's. No one knew what Dumbledore put in, and McGonagall's and Flitwick's were impossible. *For me at least. I can follow a chess game, but play one? A good one? And though I've reached the point where I can sit on a broom without looking like a fool, the key challenge is out of my league.*

"What'cha think of Fluffy, Professor?"

"Hagrid, you have a talent for the incongruous when it comes to names."

"Ya think so? I thought it sorta fit."

By the end of the day, the entire staff had arrived. Madam Hooch was the only one to fly in. Professors Sinistra, Vector, Futhark, and Burbage appeared into Hogsmeade during the afternoon.

Professor Trelawney came last and made a dramatic entrance at the beginning of supper, flinging herself through the doors of the Great Hall, the back of her right hand held to her forehead, shawls clutched around her shoulders, proclaiming, "The portents . . . the portents . . . We shall see dire things at Hogwarts before the end."

"So good of you to arrive in time for supper this year, Sibyll," said Dumbledore in a calm, matter-of-fact voice. "Do join us. The asparagus soup is quite good tonight."

Trelawney ignored a seat next to Snape and rather pointedly sat by Professor Futhark. "Mark my words, we are in for difficult times. I see death in the omens. Death."

Sprout leaned toward Snape. "We ever get a start-of-year dinner where she doesn't see death, I'll faint. Has she ever been right?"

Snape didn't like that question at all. "At least once, I believe," he whispered back. He didn't elaborate.

Dumbledore rose and proposed a toast. "To the coming school year," he said. "May it be pleasant and profitable."

"To the school year," chorused his staff, and all stood and raised their glasses to the coming year.

All Snape's work was done at the desk in his office, not in his own adjoining room. For the most part the bedroom was sparse and austere. Being in the dungeon and therefore without windows except for narrow slits near the ceiling, it was dark and cool all the time. It contained a bed, a night table, a narrow wardrobe, a comfortable chair for reading, a lamp, and two bookcases for private reading material. Here Snape kept his math and science books and a rotating selection of the mysteries that he'd inherited when Gra died. Right

now he was rereading Edgar Allan Poe. Or would be if he did not have so much other work.

Every jar, every tin, every package in the Potions room had to be inspected. Some ingredients were old and had lost their potency. Two boxes of powdered amanita were water damaged and would have to be burned. An entire case of newt's eyes came in with faulty sealing and needed to be shipped back. Luckily they would not be used for two months. Shelves had to be dusted, desks and chairs checked for necessary repairs, and in general the entire classroom and office area put in order.

Other duties kept him busy as well. As head of Slytherin house, he had to inspect the common room and all the dormitories to be sure they were fit for the students before the beginning of school. This was particularly important for Slytherin since the house extended under the lake, and was notoriously susceptible to damp and leaks.

Snape also checked out the brooms and other equipment for the house Quidditch team. Although he'd never been interested in Quidditch as a student, as head of the house one of his tasks was to promote a spirit of belonging and friendly competition. Slytherin had done so well under his direction that for the last several years both the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup frequently remained in Slytherin possession. In fact, Slytherin was close to setting a record for consecutive winning of the House Cup. Snape considered it quite an achievement for someone who during all his own school years had been something of a misfit.

As the beginning of the term got closer, Snape found it harder to block out his forebodings about the incoming students. His greatest concern was Neville Longbottom. This boy, the pureblood son of an auror, was the subject of the prophecy that Snape had given to the Dark Lord. It was the Longbottom baby that was the real danger, the Longbottom baby the Dark Lord should have hunted down. If it had not been for a great error of judgment on the part of the Dark Lord in pursuing the wrong child, Lily would still be alive. Snape had high expectations about Neville Longbottom. A boy of great natural ability and potential who would prove that Lily's tragedy was the result of a mistake made by . . . someone else.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1991

It was a relatively clear sunny day, and the last day of calm for ten months. The teachers ate lunch around a table for the last time until the Christmas

break, since from the coming evening forward they would be on the dais where they could watch the students. They shared problems, swapped stories, and tried to relax. That was not easy to do with close to three hundred students only a few hours away.

At last, as the sun sank in the hills to the west, the teachers wished each other luck and went to change into their school robes, to be in the Great Hall when the horde arrived. They had assembled, and Dumbledore had just finished his usual pep talk, when the train whistle sounded at the Hogsmeade station.

“Places, everyone,” said Dumbledore. “It is show time.”

Within the hour, the thestral carriages were disgorging students, who entered the Great Hall in a mass of black robes trimmed with the colors of their different houses. Anticipation always ran high for the sorting, and many of the students had younger siblings that they hoped, or dreaded, to have sorted into their own houses. It was also widely known that Harry Potter had been on the train, and many of the students were already craning their necks for the first glimpse of the first years as they entered the Hall.

Then the doors swung open, and Deputy Headmistress McGonagall entered, the first years strung out in solemn parade behind her.

Snape searched the faces of the children. James Potter would have been at the front of the line, claiming the spot as if by right, yet none of the first eleven-year-olds bore any resemblance to either James or Lily. Then, behind a taller sandy-haired boy, there he most unmistakably was, beyond a doubt the son of James — same stature, same thin face, same hair. And yet not the same. A trick of memory made the nose seem shorter, the features a tiny bit softer — or was it Lily coming through? Snape shook his head. Difficult to tell.

Nor was Lucius Malfoy’s son hard to detect. Same hair, same eyes, same posture. Here, too, Snape saw, or hoped he saw, a toning down of Lucius’s hard lines, something of Narcissa in the boy’s face. With Draco were two boys who were also immediately recognizable, two heavyset boys that hadn’t before entered Snape’s mind. But these were clearly the sons of Crabbe and Goyle. It was unsettling to think that they were still close enough after all the troubles that their sons should be friends.

Snape had no idea what the Longbottom boy looked like and was forced to wait for his name in the sorting.

The first years lined up below the dais, backs to the teachers, facing their future classmates. The Potter boy was looking at the ceiling until a girl next

to him said something, then he focused on the ceremony. The stool and the Sorting Hat were brought out, and the Sorting Hat sang its song — basically the same drivel it sang each year — and then the sorting began. Slytherin's first student was a girl named Millicent Bulstrode. The Crabbe boy and the Goyle boy were also Snape's.

The ceremony seemed to crawl as McGonagall read through the list of forty names. Some of the students were sorted quickly; others took time. Snape recalled his own sorting, and how it belied the Hat's claim that there was nothing in a head it couldn't see. The horrid thing had actually asked if there was a student there. Understandable considering the occlumency, but embarrassing nonetheless.

"Longbottom, Neville," read McGonagall, and Snape was suddenly focused. A shortish, round-faced boy stepped forward, and immediately tripped and fell down. Giggles in the Hall were hushed, and the boy put on the Hat. Time crawled. Then the Hat cried, "Gryffindor!" and the boy ran off with it still on his head. *THIS is the child of prophecy meant to destroy the Dark Lord? There must, must be another Neville Longbottom.*

There was no other Neville Longbottom. Draco Malfoy followed Crabbe and Goyle into Slytherin as expected. And then the Potter boy's name was called. Naturally it was Gryffindor, though the Gryffindor table acted as if the issue were in doubt. *What else could it be, since both James and Lily were Gryffindors?*

The very last student, Blaise Zabini, was a Slytherin, and then the feast began. Food appeared on the tables, the ghosts came out to join the celebration, and all the students started to talk. The decibel level in the Hall rose to a painful point. Snape was sitting next to Quirrell and had to endure his twitching and stuttering with at least a semblance of good grace.

It happened very suddenly. The Potter boy looked up, and the movement attracted Snape's attention. He was suddenly surprised by emerald-green eyes, Lily's eyes, staring into his own, and then the boy flinched. He turned away and touched his forehead. Snape, too, turned away.

He touched the mark, as if in pain. That isn't logical. The mark was made by the Dark Lord. I bear a mark made by the Dark Lord. It only hurt if the Dark Lord called or someone said his name, but he's been dead for ten years. How could the mark hurt? Quirrell babbled on, but Snape could do no more than pretend to hear.

The feast ended, and the new prefects escorted their charges to their respective houses. Snape sought out Dumbledore.

"He was in pain. As I am standing here, I swear to you, that mark on his forehead hurt him."

"I do not doubt you. But what does it mean? Has your Dark Lord returned? I do not think so. Not yet at least. What in the Hall might have caused this? Is it possible that his mark spoke to your mark, and that is all there is to it?"

Snape thought for a moment. "He looked at me, and I at him. In that moment he clutched his head as if it hurt. But I felt nothing. If mark speaks to mark, wouldn't I have been in pain, too?"

"I do not know. It is something we must bear in mind. Severus, this incident troubles me, and I am pleased beyond measure that you have brought it to my attention. Now we must wait, for we do not know what it means. I shall speak privately to his other teachers. If you or any of them notice a recurrence of this reaction of his, we will know that it is a serious matter. Do not fail to keep me informed."

"No, Headmaster, I shall not."

"Then we must both go to bed. I do not know about you, but I am very weary."

Professor Snape didn't sleep well that night. The few times he managed to doze off, he dreamed of the Sorting, of the Longbottom boy falling down and scurrying to Gryffindor with the Hat on his head. When he got out of bed early Monday morning, Snape already had a headache.

It was a couple of hours until breakfast. There was no point thinking about the problem with no new information to add to the equation, so Snape closed off the section of his mind that was fixating on Longbottom and reviewed the coming day. There were no classes yet, as the students needed to settle in and the heads of houses had to meet and interview their new charges. Tuesday was orientation, and formal instruction began Wednesday.

Today dealt mostly with Slytherin house, and of course he had to meet with the Quidditch team.

By seven o'clock, the Great Hall was filling with students and staff. The new first years stood out because they couldn't find their way, so Snape cornered his two Quidditch Beaters, Bole and Derrick, and set them in the corridor to be sure everyone in Slytherin made it to breakfast. The two were threatened with immediate dismissal from the team if any, even one, new student got lost. Luckily the passage from Slytherin to the Hall was simple to negotiate, as neither Bole nor Derrick was overwhelmingly bright.

Before sitting down in his place at the far end of the high table, Snape

exchanged a word with McGonagall. "It wouldn't be a bother if I dropped by your office to check a couple of files this morning, would it?"

"No, no. Not at all. Right after breakfast is best as I have to greet the students, but that isn't until eight-thirty."

In McGonagall's office, Snape pulled out three thin files on three new students, two of them legitimately Slytherins to disguise the fact that he was checking on Longbottom, who was one of McGonagall's. "This will take just a moment, if you please, Minerva. I don't need to borrow them."

McGonagall stood by the door and waited, then locked up after Snape replaced the files. She went upstairs to Gryffindor Tower, while he went downstairs to his office in the dungeon. He didn't like what he'd found.

Neville Longbottom was two points off being a complete squib. His first even remotely magical act, maybe his only magical act, was bouncing after a fall from a window at the age of eight. He had not ever, not one minute, been a threat to the Dark Lord. And so there was no mistake. The prophecy had been about Harry Potter, and from the moment the Dark Lord heard that prophecy, Lily was doomed.

There was a tentative knock at the office door. "Come," Snape called automatically, and Terence Higgs, a seventh-year prefect, entered.

"Sir, it's almost a quarter to nine and you . . . are you all right, sir?"

"Yes, thank you, Higgs. I'll be there in a moment." The boy left and Snape closed off the whole Longbottom question from his conscious mind and went to talk to Slytherin house.

It was a set speech. The seventh years knew it by heart. That was, in fact, the point, since no one could claim ignorance of the rules. Snape welcomed the students to Slytherin, spoke briefly of Salazar Slytherin, the founder of the house, and of famous former members.

"Slytherin house is currently the highest placed of the four houses of Hogwarts, and we expect you to keep it there. As of this year, there is not a student here who has any memory of the House cup going to any house but Slytherin. Since 1985 we have held the Quidditch Cup four times, and since 1986 the House Cup without rival, and I intend it to stay that way.

"Most of you have little control over the Quidditch Cup, but you must support our team members by being at the games and cheering them on. They are the showcase of our house spirit. Gentlemen, step forward. The team captain is Flint, and the other two Chasers are Pucey and Montague, our Beaters are Bole and Derrick, Keeper Bletchley, and Seeker Higgs. Thank you, gentlemen. For our new members, Montague last year was a first year

like yourselves, and every one of you has the chance to try out for the team. Higgs is now in his seventh year, and next year we shall need a new Seeker, so there is a chance for greatness for at least one of you.

“The House Cup, on the other hand, is all of our concern. We make or lose points every day, and each of you is responsible both for yourselves and for your housemates. Good study habits and academic performance earn points. Laziness and misbehavior lose them. And do not be fooled—I shall be the first to subtract points from my own house if any of you break the rules. So there will be no hazing or teasing, no fights, no practical jokes, and this includes against the other houses as well as within our own . . .”

As he talked, Snape was aware that the students, the first years especially, regarded him with some awe. Many of them came from families that had supported the Dark Lord in his days of power, and Snape knew that from the first night at Hogwarts every student learned that he had been a Death Eater. He didn’t mind, since it was also understood that students from the other houses would never be told.

Besides, it scared the little monsters and helped keep them in line.

The new students were interviewed alphabetically, starting with Millicent Bulstrode. This day of interviews was something of an ordeal for Snape because it required actually looking at the students. Directly in the eyes. They seemed to expect it as a sign of interest and sincerity. That meant that Snape had to keep his mind locked down and closed the whole time, a conditioning of his childhood that he’d never been able to overcome. There had, in fact, been only two people in his life that he could talk to fully and frankly, with open, direct eyes and mind—his mother and Lily. Both were dead now.

It was after lunch before Snape got to Draco Malfoy.

“Come in, Master Malfoy. Sit down. I hope your parents are well.” *There is something of Narcissa around the mouth and nose. It softens Lucius’s patrician features.*

“They’re fine, sir. They send you their best wishes for the coming year.”

“Very kind of them. Well, Draco, are you looking forward to life at Hogwarts?”

“Oh yes, sir. Especially since, well Father mentioned . . . If I showed promise, that is . . .” The boy seemed suddenly embarrassed, as if he’d trespassed where he wasn’t supposed to go.

“What exactly are you trying to say?”

“Father said that if you approved of my studies, and if I showed talent, you could teach me extra things, special things.”

"Indeed. He's not communicated that to me. What kinds of things?"

"Like how to invent my own spells, and how to take care of myself in a fight. Sir."

"The first takes a tremendous amount of extra study. The second requires long practice. Are you sure you could handle it?"

"Yes, sir. I could, sir. Father wishes you could have taught him. When he was younger, I mean."

"Very flattering, I'm sure. Well, Draco, let's see how you do with your regular studies before we go adding more work. Do well in first term, and after Christmas break we may discuss this again."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

After he finished with the first years, Snape met with the Quidditch team. Not that he had much to say in the way of play or practice. That was Flint's job. The crux of the matter was that Quidditch victories were a primary reason why Slytherin kept winning the House Cup. It was in everyone's interest that the Quidditch players were taken care of.

"So far as I know, Flint, Gryffindor have not yet found another Seeker. How would it affect us if they made Wood the Seeker?"

"We could handle that, Professor. He'd be competent, but not great. It might even help us to get him away from defending the goal. Another Keeper probably wouldn't be as good."

"I'm pleased to hear that, as I suggested it to Professor McGonagall in August."

Flint grinned. "Blimey, Professor, we may teach you Quidditch yet!"

Fortunately, Snape didn't have any particular duties regarding orientation. The first years were shown around the whole school and grounds. It was hoped that after the tour the number of lost and strayed could be reduced to about ten percent for the rest of the first week. After that, lateness and truancy were automatically considered to be intentional.

Wednesday and Thursday were fairly normal. Potions was a double class, taking a two-hour period each week rather than two one-hours. This was because of the laboratory work, which always needed more time for setup, brewing, and cleanup. The first years had their Potions later in the week, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff on Thursday afternoon, Gryffindor and Slytherin on Friday morning.

The first Friday session was not one that Snape was looking forward to. All three boys would be there, Longbottom, Potter, and Malfoy. Snape hated personal or emotional situations. They were physically and mentally very

draining. Combining that with the chore of keeping twenty as yet unknown eleven-year-olds under control and on task was Snape's newest image of a private and individual hell.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1991

Breakfast was stressful. Snape didn't like sitting next to Quirrell under the best of circumstances, but today in particular he was trying to focus and control his thoughts. Quirrell was not helping. For some reason he wanted to talk about Romanian vampires. It was driving Snape crazy, not least because Quirrell seemed not to know anything about a subject he'd always been quite competent in.

"Fourteen-seventy-six. He was killed in battle in 1476. His head was cut off and sent to the Sultan. Headless corpses do not become vampires. That whole story is tripe." *If I dump on him enough, will he leave me alone?*

"... But he was the... most famous of them... all. I've... seen his... grave." And amazingly Quirrell twitched four times during this short speech.

"And it's not in a castle in Transylvania, is it? It's at Snagov monastery near Bucharest."

All the while, Snape was watching the Gryffindor table without watching the Gryffindor table. *Focus, Severus, focus. You have to face this lot in an hour.*

Then, suddenly, the idea came to him. *I can test the boy. I can find out if he's James's son or Lily's. James would just fool around. Lily would come prepared.*

Snape strode into his first year Potions class determined to treat it, with minor exceptions, like any other first year Potions class. He started out by taking roll. When he came to the name Potter, Snape focused and took a deep breath. "Ah, yes. Our new celebrity." He began to shut down at that point, to close off and lock out the parts of himself he didn't want seen. At the end of the roll, Snape looked up at the class. It was another set speech.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making..." They were listening. Listening with total silence and apparent respect. It was time to test Lily's boy. "...if you are not as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach. Potter! What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

It was not a hard question. Hagrid had gotten Potter his books on July thirty-first, and he'd had a month to study them. The answer to the question was in the first chapter, yet the boy could not respond.

"I don't know, sir," said Potter.

Snape recoiled, unwilling to accept the answer. "Tut, tut — fame clearly isn't everything." Not for Lily, at least. "Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

"I don't know, sir." An answer Lily would never give, but the boy'd said it twice.

"Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Potter?"

Suddenly he was looking the Potter boy directly in the eyes. Emerald green eyes. Her eyes. And suddenly Snape wanted to respond, to open, to unlock all the locked doors because that was what he always did for the emerald green eyes.

But it wasn't her; it was James. James looking at him through her eyes.

Mechanically, Snape continued, "What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

The boy sneered, and said, "I don't know. I think Hermione does, though. Why don't you try her?"

Someone snickered, and Snape noticed the girl, standing with her hand raised as if she wanted to touch the ceiling. "Sit down," he snapped. "For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood . . ." and he proceeded to give the answers to all his questions. The first years just sat there, like lumps on logs. "Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

The flurry of sudden activity meant he was in charge of the class again. Snape turned back to the smug, insolent student. "And a point will be taken from Gryffindor House for your cheek, Potter."

The class had still over an hour and a half to go, and it did not improve.

The first Potions assignment was a kind of evaluation to find out who was already competent and who had no experience at all. It was a potion to cure boils, more complex than some of the simple infusions they would be doing later, but that was to give the students with more background something a bit challenging. Since it used mostly natural ingredients such as dried nettles, crushed snake fangs, and porcupine quills, it was not really dangerous, yet required the students to learn and practice certain elementary laboratory safety rules.

"Not those gloves, Bulstrode. They aren't heavy enough to handle quills with. We'll be pulling them out of your hands with tweezers . . . Goggles, Granger, goggles. Never crush snake fangs without goggles unless you want to be blind . . . Well of course you're not getting the proper amount, Goyle. The balance beam on your scale isn't centered . . ."

It was, perhaps, the worst first year class he'd ever taught. No one, no

one had any prior experience with potions at all. And only two showed any aptitude, one of them being the Granger girl, if she would just stop bouncing up and down with her hand in the air. *Gad, she's worse than Quirrell's twitching.* The other, thank goodness, was Draco. Narcissa's son was the one bright spot in the whole day.

"Class, if you want to see the proper consistency of the stewed slugs, you can come and look at Malfoy's. His are perfect."

Suddenly the telltale hiss of a dissolving cauldron had Snape yelling at the class, "Off the floor! Up onto the stools and tables, quick!" Acid green smoke boiled through the back of the room before Snape managed to say the spell that cleared up the mess. One of the cauldrons was a twisted mass of metal. The boy who owned the cauldron, Seamus Finnigan, was in shock. His partner was on the floor, moaning in pain. It was Longbottom. *So you don't have great natural ability and potential, but did you have to be a bumbling fool?*

"Idiot boy!" Snape muttered as he diluted the potion on Longbottom's arms and legs with water. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire? Here, you, Finnigan . . . Take him up to the hospital wing. It's on the first floor." Then he wheeled on Lily, who should have kept an eye on the first years.

"You . . ." *Evans. But it isn't Evans, it's . . .* "— Potter — why didn't you tell him not to add the quills?" The sullen boy just stared at him. *Just like his father. He's not supposed to be like his father. He's supposed to be like his mother.*

At once the demon, Toby's demon, was back with a power that Snape hadn't felt in more than a decade, and he wanted to strike the boy. With an effort he wrestled the demon down, releasing its pressure in words, "Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor."

They finished the potions and cleaned up, the incident making the rest of the students more cautious. When class was over, Snape went up to the hospital to check with Madam Pomfrey that Longbottom was all right. She'd already released him.

"It was just a few boils, Professor. He was more frightened than hurt. You do have some excitement in that class from time to time, I will say."

Instead of going to lunch in the Hall, Snape went back to his office to rest his head on his arms at the desk. *Is it going to be like this all year? Maybe I should ask Moody about that 'guest room.' It can't be this bad.*

The office door opened without an announcing knock. "Thought I'd find

ya here, Professor. Missed ya at lunch. Ya ought not t' be skipping yer meals. I take it the morning weren't one of yer best."

Snape sat up. "Understatement of the year, Hagrid. It was a disaster. The first years have no background at all, the Longbottom boy is a catastrophe waiting to happen, and I have to teach James Potter for the next seven years or go to Azkaban. Azkaban is beginning to look like a pleasure resort."

"Can't be that bad. You'll whip 'em into shape soon enough."

"There isn't a lot to work with. And the Potter boy is going to be trouble."

"I thought he seemed right nice. He's coming by this afternoon for a spot of tea. Would it help if he knew about you an' his mum?"

"Don't. You. Dare!" Snape half rose from his chair as all the bad feelings of the morning surfaced again. "I do not need my personal life to become fodder for school gossip! You tell him NOTHING!"

"Suit yerself. That's not why I came by anyway. I wanted t' thank you for saving my hide an' Dumbledore's hide."

"How did I do that?"

Hagrid showed him a clipping from *The Daily Prophet*. It was about a robbery at Gringotts. "Found this in a paper stuffed behind a chair in the staff room. See that vault number 713? That's where the Stone was. The robbery was July 31. If ya hadn't sent me off early, I'da got there the next day, an' the Stone'd be gone. Thought ya might like t' know."

Hagrid left. Snape pondered the mystery of the Stone and Quirrell's sudden trip to London for a while, then left as well, for he had an afternoon class.

Snape was locking up the Potions classroom when Dumbledore appeared at his elbow. "Ah, Severus, I am glad I caught you. I was wondering if you would sit with me at supper this evening. I rather want to gather your insights on this new business in Russia. The Ministry has a war watch started, but I am not convinced that it is necessary. I hope you do not mind entertaining an old man tonight."

"Not at all, Professor. I'm happy to oblige." *Hagrid must have talked to him. He'll be prepared to discuss aborted military coups and Lithuania, but he really wants to monitor my food intake. Still, it is rather nice that the Headmaster came all the way down to the dungeon because I wasn't at lunch.*

The conversation about Eastern Europe was interesting, and Snape was

*
*

ENTER HARRY POTTER

*
*

able to relax a bit about the Potter/Longbottom problem. In fact, the weekend and most of the following week were quite pleasant, allowing for the fact that the term was just settling in.

C H A P T E R T H I R T Y - F I V E

A HIDDEN MENACE

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 1991

Quirrell was going on about werewolves at breakfast, and Snape was trying to tune him out. *What if I told you I was almost killed by one. Would that shut you up? And didn't you say you were buying a book on werewolves that day you went down to London. Didn't read it, did you? Call yourself a Dark Arts teacher! You even used to be good. What happened?*

Then Severus rose from his seat as Professor McGonagall left the dais in a beeline to the Gryffindor table. Draco was there, along with the Crabbe and Goyle boys, and McGonagall seemed to be breaking up an altercation. *She is so good at noticing things like that. Why don't I notice things like that?* With a perfunctory "Excuse me" to Quirrell, Snape went to meet McGonagall as she returned to her seat.

"Is my house causing you trouble? Did those boys go over there to start something?"

"It's nothing, Severus. The Longbottom boy got a Remembrall from his grandmother. Draco was teasing. It's over."

But it was not over, as McGonagall was gleefully prepared to inform him at supper that evening.

"Move over, Quirrell. I need to discuss a matter with Professor Snape." Quirrell moved, not wishing to cross McGonagall.

"I am ready to place that bet with you now, Severus. Five galleons on Gryffindor to win the Quidditch Cup this year."

"Five galleons? What did you do? Draft someone from Pride of Portree?"

"We have a Seeker. And it's not Wood. It's a new Seeker, a natural."

"I'm impressed. How did you find this prodigy?"

"Do you remember that bit of a tiff this morning over Longbottom's Remembrall? Well, it didn't stop there..."

Draco was called into Snape's office immediately after supper.

"You teased a member of another house this morning over a gift from a relative."

"It was just that Longbottom kid. He's as stupid as they come."

"Which makes the teasing less sporting. You do understand 'sporting' do you not, Malfoy? To make matters worse, you continued the teasing later on during Madam Hooch's Flying class."

"But he wasn't even there. She took him off to hospital."

"Nonetheless, you continued to tease, and threatened to leave his property up a tree. I am deducting ten points from Slytherin for your actions."

"You can't... I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't hurt the dimwit. You're punishing me for nothing."

"You really don't understand. Let me put it in terms you can understand. You picked on someone weaker than yourself, which is not sporting. You brought the negative attention of another Professor on this house, which reflects badly on your housemates. Your continued teasing led to the discovery of a talented Seeker and may result in Gryffindor's winning the Quidditch cup for the first time in seven years. Does all of this seem like nothing to you."

"No, sir."

"I am pleased you are showing some sense. Ten points from Slytherin. And do not do it again."

"No, sir. Yes, sir. I mean..."

"I know what you mean. Now get out of my office."

The next morning at breakfast, six screech owls brought the Potter boy a long, narrow package that could only be a broomstick. Snape leaned forward and looked down the table at McGonagall. The expression on her face was positively gloating. She seemed to sense that he was watching her, for she turned and gave him a 'thumbs up' sign, then rubbed her hands together, chuckling.

It was Friday again, and first year Potions with Slytherin and Gryffindor that morning. Snape left breakfast early to go back to his office and try to center himself for the ordeal. After the problems of the first week, he had no idea what was going to happen.

What happened was a perfectly normal, well-behaved class. Potter's brain was clearly somewhere else, as was his partner's, the Weasley boy. *Probably on the Quidditch field already.* The Granger girl seemed to be snubbing them both, and the Longbottom boy started at every sound, but otherwise caused

no damage. Draco was glowering and resentful, but that could be due to Potter's new broom. Everyone else was subdued and attentive. *What happened?*

The class now started the basic curriculum. "... important that you understand the difference between an infusion and a decoction. Infusions are steeped; decoctions are boiled. Each operation gives a different part of the herb, so you must know what you are looking for. Infusion provides the volatile principles and essences, decoction the extractive and resinous principles. We shall learn later what these are for. Today we practice the techniques."

Homework was to write out the distinctions of tinctures, essences, syrups, fomentations, ointments, and poultices. Despite romantic misconceptions, the main function of Potions was healing. Snape's predecessor, Professor Slughorn, had not been particularly interested in medicines, but Snape made them the cornerstone of his class, a legacy from his witch grandmother.

McGonagall rescued Snape from Quirrell at about a quarter to seven. "Finished eating?" she said brightly. "Good. Quirinus, I'm going to steal Severus from you now. House business. Hope you don't mind." Together they left the hall, and McGonagall steered Snape outside.

"Don't thank me yet, I have ulterior motives," she confessed as they went down the stairs onto the lawn. In front of them, already walking down the hill toward the Quidditch pitch, was Harry Potter. He was carrying his new broomstick.

"I did so want to watch his first practice, but Wood says it will make him nervous. So I'm going to spy on them from up here." McGonagall pulled a small pair of binoculars from her robe. "I'm giving you the chance to assess the opposition."

Snape accepted the binoculars and focused them on the broom shed. Wood was coming out with a case of Quidditch balls and a couple of bats. Potter joined him and they went out of sight on the other side of the stands. A moment later a bludger sailed up from the pitch, then turned to attack.

"How long has Potter been playing Quidditch?"

"Wood says he knows nothing of the game. A novice, but a natural Seeker. There they go."

The two boys were in the air now, and Wood was tossing golf balls for Potter to catch. Snape had to admit the boy was good. Too good. Just like his father.

“So, Professor Snape, I propose a wager of five galleons that says Gryffindor wins the Quidditch Cup this year. Will you take the bet?”

“Minerva, you’re going to lose five galleons.”

September faded into October. The first Hogsmeade excursion was on Saturday, October 26, and nearly all the teachers were required to supervise. Aside from wanting to ensure that a substantial percentage of the Hogwarts student body didn’t run amok during this day of unaccustomed freedom, it was the first Hogsmeade outing for the new third years, among whom were Fred and George Weasley. Just those two warranted the presence of three extra teachers.

It was a pleasant day, even a little warm, and Snape took his post on a bench outside The Three Broomsticks with a hot mug of mulled mead. Here he had an almost straight view down the main street and would see and be able to assist in any incident that arose. Professor Kettleburn came to sit with him and gossip for a while.

“Don’t see how you manage to sit next to Quirrell every day and still stomach your food, Severus. I got a whiff of that turban yesterday, and it near knocked me out. Vampires my eye! There’s something else in there, and he’s using the garlic to mask the smell. Why’d he start wearing that thing?”

“Says it’s a gift from an African Prince, and one gets used to what one must.” Snape never let down his guard in Hogsmeade, and a movement to his right caught his eye. “You set off that dung bomb, Fred Weasley,” he said without turning around, “and I’ll have you hanging by your thumbs in Filch’s office for the next three days.”

“Yes, sir. How’d you know it was me?”

“Lucky guess.”

HALLOWEEN, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1991

Samhain. Halfway between the autumn equinox and the winter solstice. The ancient New Year. It was always a time of great feasting at Hogwarts, and today was no exception. That evening, the Great Hall was decorated with dozens of pumpkin Jacks o’ Lantern, while Dumbledore thought to enliven the festivities with a thousand live bats. Professors Sinistra and Trelawney had places of honor in keeping with the holiday’s traditions of astrology and divination. Mounds of food were served on golden platters.

Eating had already begun, but Quirrell was not yet in his seat. *Odd for him to be late to dinner. Maybe he thinks the bats will attack his turban. Now that*

would be a Halloween to remember! Snape chose his food carefully, not being overly fond of sweets. His attention was suddenly attracted by the doors opening in the back of the Hall.

It was Quirrell, and he was running. Right into the center of the Hall. His turban was at an angle, and he looked terrified. He made it to Dumbledore's table, gasped, "Troll — in the dungeons — thought you ought to know," and collapsed in a dead faint.

Pandemonium broke loose as students jumped from the benches yelling in panic. Dumbledore set off a couple of explosions from his wand that quieted the crowd. "Prefects, lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

Snape jumped from the dais and managed to corner Higgs. "If the troll is in the dungeon area, you can't take them back to our house. The first floor is better, near the hospital wing. A troll won't be able to climb the staircases." Higgs nodded and began to herd Slytherin house toward the stairs.

Turning back to the high table, Snape watched as Pomfrey and Sprout revived Quirrell. *That makes no sense at all. Quirrell's a troll expert. It's one of the few exceptional talents he has. Why would he faint at the thought of a troll?* He joined the crowd of teachers and students, making sure that all were heading toward safety.

Then the pieces fell into place. Quirrell in London the day before Hagrid was supposed to be there. A robbery already planned, but too late. Students all in their dormitories, and every staff member in the school heading for the dungeons to fight a troll. Quirrell was after the Stone.

As quickly as he could without attracting too much attention, Snape followed Hufflepuff house toward their dormitories, then turned into a side corridor. There was a staircase there that led up to the third floor and the room where Fluffy guarded the trap door leading down. He should get there well before Quirrell. Snape took the steps two at a time.

The corridor was empty, and the door locked. Snape slipped into a statue niche to wait. If Quirrell didn't come, well and good. If he did...

Quirrell came a few minutes later. A muttered spell, the door opened, and Quirrell slipped inside. Snape left his niche and followed.

Fluffy was asleep. *Not surprising. It has to be Hogwarts's most boring job.* Quirrell stood in front of the great three-headed dog, clearly pondering what to do next.

"What are you doing here?" Snape asked softly.

Quirrell jumped and shrieked. "I... was... worried about the... Stone. Thought... someone might be... after it."

"I do believe you were right. Interesting coincidence, that."

Quirrell shrieked again, but this time it was because Fluffy was awake and moving. Pushing Snape aside, Quirrell jumped for the door. Snape staggered back, then dove down as Fluffy attacked. Wand out, Snape hit the center snout with a bolt of electricity, then rolled under the first head, nearer to the door. He almost made it. The third head grabbed for his left leg, and the teeth scraped skin and flesh as Snape escaped the room and slammed and locked the door.

Quirrell was in the corridor, watching. Snape opened his mouth to yell at the twitching idiot, when both heard horrible noises coming up the stairs from the first floor. They sped down the stairs and along the corridor, meeting McGonagall just as she came up from the dungeon level.

The last horrible crash had come from the girls' bathroom. McGonagall reached it first, with Snape right behind her and Quirrell in the rear. There, unconscious on the floor, was the troll. Standing over it were Potter and Weasley. Quirrell sat down on one of the toilets and put his hands over his heart.

The troll lay stretched out on the bathroom floor. Snape bent over it to see if it bore any signs of restraint, like the marks of a collar, but there were none. McGonagall was furious and letting the two boys know it. "... Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

Snape glanced quickly at Potter and Weasley. *Yes, why are you here? This is the way I took to go to the third floor. Were you following me? Or were you following Quirrell? Why would you follow either of us?*

Then a girl's voice came from the shadows. "Please, Professor McGonagall — they were looking for me." It was Granger.

The girl told a rather far-fetched story of trying to take on the troll herself, but at least her presence helped explain the boys'. McGonagall sent them off to Gryffindor Tower, then she and Quirrell went to find the other teachers to let them know that the troll was captured. Snape headed for the hospital wing to tell Higgs to bring the Slytherin students down so they could finish the Halloween feast in their dormitories.

By now his leg was stiffening to the point where walking was difficult, so Snape's last stop was his own office. He raised robe and gown to examine Fluffy's tooth marks. Skin and flesh were torn, but for some reason it hadn't bled much. *Good thing, or the others would've noticed.*

After washing and disinfecting the wound, Snape looked through his salves and ointments for something that would heal bites. Nothing seemed to work. *That's what you get for tangling with a magical dog, you blasted twit! I could go to Madam Pomfrey, but she doesn't know about Fluffy. Dumbledore may not want her to know.*

Dumbledore. He had to tell Dumbledore. He had to walk up all those flights of stairs to tell Dumbledore about Quirrell and the troll. Snape stood, and the pain in his leg was like fire. He tried to walk, and all he could do was hobble. *Tomorrow. I'll tell him tomorrow.*

Snape never did have any more dinner that night and frankly, he didn't care.

Early the next morning, Snape went up to see Dumbledore. His leg was better, but still painful. Dumbledore did not appear surprised to see him.

"Quirrell came last night. He seemed to be worried that you were trying to get to the Stone during all the confusion. He thinks I should keep an eye on you."

"I think you should keep an eye on him." Snape explained all his suspicions about London, the robbery, the fact that Quirrell was an expert with trolls, and what had happened in Fluffy's chamber.

Dumbledore was sympathetic about the leg. "I appreciate your discretion regarding Madam Pomfrey. I would rather she did not know. Filch has some medical supplies, splints and bandages and such, if you need them. And he already knows about the dog."

Snape arranged his morning class so that the students would be working on simple preserving of herbs, drying and powdering. Then they had time to work on the reports of their lab work. That way he didn't have to stand or walk around the room. Any student with a question could come to his desk.

As the day progressed, the leg worsened. During the break after lunch, which like breakfast was served in the dormitories because of yesterday's excitement, Snape went looking for Filch. He needed supplies and someone to look at the wounds. He'd have preferred Hagrid, but Hagrid wasn't in the Castle, and Snape couldn't walk all the way down the hill to his hut.

Passing through a courtyard, Snape spotted Potter and his Gryffindor friends acting in a suspicious manner, as if trying to conceal something. "What's that you've got there, Potter?"

It was a library book, out in the cold and damp of the courtyard. Snape

confiscated it and, angry that he was forced to handle little problems like this when he was in pain, deducted five points from Gryffindor.

Filch said he could come by in the evening. By then it was all Snape could do to limp to the staff room. He hadn't eaten since lunch the day before, and his mood was foul. He sat in a straight chair and raised his robes so that Filch could examine the bites.

"That's nasty, that is, Professor. You got it nice and clean, though. I seen a bite like that fester and have to cut the leg off, it ain't took care of. I brought you some bandages. That Hagrid, he plays with some dangerous beasts. You're lucky you got out in one piece."

"Blasted thing," Snape said. "How are you supposed to keep your eyes on all three heads at once?"

There was a small noise, and Snape looked toward the door. A student stood there. "POTTER!"

"I just wondered if I could have my book back."

Snape rose, and pain stabbed from his foot up into his back. "Get out!" he screamed at the boy, "Out!" *How dare you enter here without permission! How dare you spy on me and spread stories of my private life through the whole school!*

"Here, Professor," said Filch. "Try this salve. It always worked wonders for me."

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 1991

Filch's salve actually did work wonders, and the next day the leg was decidedly better. Snape still limped, but sixty percent of the pain was gone. It was Saturday, and the day of the first Quidditch match between Slytherin and Gryffindor. Time to see if McGonagall's confidence was well placed.

Breakfast was once again in the Great Hall, and the moment Snape entered, he was accosted by Hagrid. "Elves say you ain't eating again. I'm sitting next t' ya this morning, and if ya don't eat a fit amount, I'll spoon-feed ya in front of the whole student body."

Snape agreed to the arrangement, since he was famished. Hagrid would have no excuse to spoon-feed anyone. It also forced Quirrell to move down, which could only help Snape's appetite. Already the smell of fried sausages was making his mouth water.

Both teams looked focused and subdued. The Potter boy wasn't eating. *Nervous before his first game. I should send Hagrid to spoon-feed him.* Snape glanced over at McGonagall. She seemed nervous, too.

For some reason passing understanding, Quirrell decided he wanted to watch the game. He followed Snape out and joined him in the Slytherin stands. *Why doesn't he sit with Ravenclaw? I'm sure they'd love to have him.*

The game started normally, the most irritating thing being the announcer, Lee Jordan, who was so blatantly pro-Gryffindor that it was insulting. Snape made a mental note to mention it to McGonagall later. Gryffindor scored first, a foul was called against Flint for stopping Potter from catching the Snitch, then Slytherin scored. Snape had never really liked Quidditch, except for the bludgers and the house competition. Only two things made today interesting — seeing if Potter really was any good, and watching McGonagall try to contain her excitement.

Suddenly something was wrong with Potter's broom. It was lurching and twisting in an unnatural way and gradually moving higher and higher. It looked as if it were trying to buck the boy off, which at the height it'd reached would be dangerous. Snape realized then that his own instincts had taken over, for without thinking, he'd already started murmuring a countercurse.

Whoever was cursing the broom was powerful. Powerful enough to not only jinx a Nimbus 2000, but to withstand his countercurse as well. The broom threw Potter off, but he managed to hold on to the stick. The Gryffindor Beaters were trying to get close enough to help as the broom continued to ascend. Snape struggled against his unknown foe to bring the broom lower and stop its bucking. A fall from that height could be fatal.

Suddenly people were pulling at his arms and pointing beside him. At the same moment Snape felt flames burning the hem of his robe and cried out in pain. His concentration was broken, but when he turned back to the game, Potter's broom was flying normally again. Whoever had been cursing it had stopped.

Potter clambered back onto the broom and went into a nosedive that ended with him on the ground and the snitch in his hands. Gryffindor erupted in cheers, Slytherin stood in silent shock, and Snape shook his head in bewilderment. *What just happened?*

Hagrid and Snape were both in Dumbledore's office after the game.

"It was a curse. Someone was cursing the broom. Someone powerful. I couldn't stop it; it took every bit of concentration to restrain it. Until I caught on fire."

“How did you catch on fire? A fire that stops as soon as you break eye contact? And yet it seems that it broke contact for the other spell caster as well. Another mystery.”

“Begging yer pardon, Professor, but they think you did it.”

“Who thinks I did what?”

“The students. Potter an’ his friends. They saw ya saying the countercurse, and they thought ya was the one cursing. And they know about Fluffy.”

“Potter saw my leg yesterday. He probably suspects Fluffy did that.”

There were no answers, only more questions. Dumbledore dismissed the two with instructions to keep an eye on Potter and his friends. As Snape and Hagrid left the Headmaster’s office, Hagrid turned to Snape.

“What did Fluffy do t’ yer leg? And ya didn’t come t’ me? We’re going right t’ yer office now, lad, or I’ll be on yer tail for the rest of the year.”

The two went to Snape’s office, where Hagrid looked at the leg. “That’s got t’ of hurt. What’cha put on it?”

“Some stuff Filch gave me. It’s on the shelf there. It worked.”

Hagrid sniffed the small dish. “I don’t doubt it. That’d soothe dragon burns — probably what it’s meant for. Who d’ ya think did it?”

“Attacked Potter? I’d suspect Quirrell, except he’s not strong enough.”

“Why him?”

“I think he’s after the Stone. He heard about it on the thirtieth. He tried to be sure you wouldn’t be in London ’til the first, then he went down on the thirty-first and there was a break-in at Gringotts. I think that was Quirrell after the Stone. Then on Halloween he pulled the troll stunt. When have you known Quirrell to be terrified of trolls? I suspected him then and went to the third floor. Quirrell did go in and was trying to decide how to deal with Fluffy. That’s how I got this.”

“Then ya say he’s not strong enough.”

“That was at the Quidditch match. Whoever was trying to hurt Potter was a lot more powerful than Quirrell. Though it would explain more. Did the students tell you how they knew about Fluffy?”

“Nope. Didn’t . . . well, yes I did ask, but they distracted me.”

“On Halloween, both Quirrell and I used the stairs in the back corridor to get to Fluffy’s chamber. The same corridor where Potter and friends found the troll. But what were they doing in that corridor? The girl’s story about wanting to take on the troll is obviously a lie. So, were they following me, or were they following Quirrell? And that’s probably when they saw Fluffy. It would all fit if Quirrell reached the same conclusion and tried to kill Potter

to keep his own secret. But I would never have suspected Quirrell of being that strong.”

It also occurred to Snape, though he didn't mention it to Hagrid, that if Quirrell felt he had cause to kill Potter, then he also would have cause to kill Snape.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 1991 (THE FULL MOON)

The next month and a half was like waiting for a storm to break. Every day Snape sat next to Quirrell at meals as if he suspected nothing, and Quirrell did nothing to justify his suspicions. Every Friday morning he taught Potions to Gryffindor first years, trying to avoid the green eyes, yet Potter was turning out to be almost as much of a dunderhead as Longbottom, and Snape could not simply ignore him. And Longbottom . . . Was there ever anyone as complete and total a failure at everything as Longbottom?

At the end of supper on November 20, Snape glanced back, out the windows of the Great Hall, and saw the full moon rising in the night sky. For the first time in a long time, he felt like going down to the lake to sit on Lily's rock and watch the moon. He wished she were there, so he could tell her how he felt.

I don't like your son, Lily. I'm sorry. He's moody, rude, arrogant, a popularity hound like that husband of yours. You should have seen the gaudy 'Potter for President' sign at the Quidditch game. He even thinks I want to kill him. Why couldn't he inherit Potter's eyes and your personality?

And then there's the Longbottom boy. Do you have any idea how long I've hoped the prophecy was about him? But it wasn't about him. He couldn't hurt anyone but himself. There was no mistake. The prophecy was about your son. I am so sorry. I did that. It's my fault. Entirely my fault.

Then it was midnight, and Snape remembered that he had a six o'clock wake-up, breakfast at seven to supervise the students, and a nine o'clock class. He rose and bid the moon, the moon that blazed bright above him, good-night. As he walked back toward the Castle, he noticed two things. First, a fleeting glimpse of Albus Dumbledore at an upper window, suddenly turning away, and second a dog whining in the woods behind him. *Fang, I swear that's Fang. Hagrid will not bear the end of this.*

And yet he was tired, and so Snape returned to his own quarters and went to bed.

December came, and it began to snow. When the storm was over, all of Hogwarts was covered in a blanket of white. The upper classes were given one more Saturday at Hogsmeade before the Christmas break, and Snape stood at a first floor window watching as Quirrell descended the steps and walked across the top of the hill in the wake of the students he was supervising.

“What do you find so interesting?” McGonagall came over to watch, too.

“Look at Quirrell. Now wait.”

About five snowballs appeared from their right, flying in a V formation. One by one they dive-bombed Quirrell, bouncing off his turban and swooping back up into the air for another attack. McGonagall was making wheezing sounds as she tried to control her laughter.

“You didn’t do that?”

“No. My hexing days are long over, though I could show them a trick or two.”

“Do you know who it is?”

“I do not, Minerva, and good for you that I don’t because if I did I’d have to deduct points from your house.”

“The terrible twins?”

“I’m not saying.”

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 20, 1991

The dungeons were cool even on the hottest days of summer. It was the perfect place to store all the potions ingredients. Now, in the winter, it was nearly as cold in Snape’s living and working area as it was outside.

The last Potions class of the year ended on the last day before the Christmas break. The students were leaving on Sunday, those that were going home. A skeleton staff and a few dozen students would stay. For their sake, the Great Hall was being decorated for the holidays.

Snape closed and locked the Potions classroom after the students were gone and started up the stairs to the warmth of the Great Hall and something hot for lunch. A little group was standing around Hagrid and one of the fir trees. Just as Snape reached the top of the steps, one of the boys jumped at another and grabbed his robes, clearly intending to start a fight.

“Weasley!” Snape shouted, and the boy let go. Snape realized then that the student he’d attacked was Draco.

“He was provoked, Professor Snape,” said Hagrid. “Malfoy was insulting his family.”

Don't get me into a 'he said, he said' situation. Words are one thing; physical violence is another. "Be that as it may, fighting is against Hogwarts rules, Hagrid. Five points from Gryffindor, Weasley, and be grateful it isn't more. Move along, all of you." Snape herded the Slytherin boys into the Great Hall.

Hagrid and the Gryffindor students came in after them and busied themselves setting up the last tree. Then the students left. Hagrid looked upset about something.

Later, Snape brought the subject up again. "Why've you started playing favorites with Gryffindor students? You were pretty quick to jump to that Weasley boy's defense." Snape was sitting next to Hagrid for dinner at the high table because Quirrell was in his quarters nursing a cold.

"Malfoy was just being nasty. He was egging the boy on an' insulting me t' boot. Don't look at me like that, it were just a comment on m' living arrangements, that they're not palatial."

"Malfoy's been taking some flak in Slytherin for helping put Potter on the Gryffindor team. He seems to be having trouble dealing with it. Should I talk to him tomorrow about it, before he goes home, or wait 'til next term?"

"Don't talk t' him at all on my account. I can take it. By January it may've all blown over."

Saturday was hectic, with students packing, students exchanging Christmas presents, students promising to send owls during the break, students mailing cards...

Sunday they left, and Hogwarts was suddenly very quiet.

CHRISTMAS, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 1991

The few days before Christmas were calm and rather enjoyable. With no classes to worry about, all of Snape's supervisory duties involved patrolling empty halls or observing students from a distance. When he wasn't on duty, he caught up on some reading. It was a welcome time to recharge energy. Being around masses of students always left Snape feeling drained.

Christmas morning was icy cold, with the feeble sun glittering on the snow from a cloudless sky. Most of the little group of students and staff stayed in bed until after sunrise, which that far north was not until nearly nine in the morning. The sun would set again around three-thirty in the afternoon. The shortest days in the year. Christmas dinner would be served at noon.

Snape woke several hours before dawn and immediately started fires to take the chill off his bedroom and office. His was one of the few areas where,

because of all the poisons, the house elves were forbidden to come. Snape preferred the added privacy.

There were no presents. Snape didn't exchange Christmas presents with anyone, which spared them and him the torment of trying to find out what someone else wanted. Instead he passed the time reading, and then went to the Great Hall an hour early to supervise the arriving students, that being his duty station for the day.

Quirrell wasn't at dinner. He hadn't been all week. *Still sick, I suppose.* Dumbledore was insisting that everyone break open the wizard crackers in front of them and put on their hats. He already sported a gaudy flowered bonnet. Snape sat on one side of McGonagall and Hagrid on the other. She and Hagrid pulled a wizard cracker, and McGonagall got a jaunty top hat, which she immediately set on her head at a rakish angle. Hagrid got a Dutch ladies cap with starched white wings.

"Now you, Severus," said McGonagall. "You have to have a hat, too."

Snape shook his head. "With my luck it'd be a feathered war bonnet like the Indians in America wear. I'd rather not live with that image."

McGonagall and Hagrid insisted, however, and Snape reluctantly pulled the cracker Hagrid held out to him. To his enormous relief, it was a relatively dignified Turkish fez in green and black.

The feast began. The few occupied tables were loaded with food to feed two armies. Hagrid helped himself to more wine than was good for him and kissed McGonagall on the cheek. Then the little warning bells began ringing in Snape's brain.

Quirrell isn't here. Everyone else in the entire Castle is here but Quirrell. This is exactly like Halloween.

Snape quickly excused himself from the table and left the Hall. Running along the corridor to the back staircase, he again took the steps two at a time and, arriving outside Fluffy's room, found himself face to face with Quirrell.

"Quirinus! What a pleasant surprise. So good to see you up and about. I trust you're feeling better."

"S-Severus. What . . . brings you here?"

"The pricking of my thumbs. But you should really join us downstairs for the feast. It will do you a world of good and speed your healing." Snape took Quirrell by the elbow, turned him around, and steered him back downstairs into the Hall.

Dumbledore looked up as the two entered the Hall but said nothing. Hagrid and McGonagall did not seem pleased at the addition to their company.

Snape resumed his seat and proceeded to enjoy the rest of the Christmas dinner. Quirrell sat sullenly at the end of the table and didn't eat a thing.

The afternoon was most enjoyable. The majority of the students were outside, playing in the snow. Quirrell was at his station keeping an eye on them, and so could not be somewhere else. Snape sought out Filch, who'd slept through the Christmas dinner since he had the night watch and didn't get to bed until nearly sunrise.

"Filch, I'm entirely on day duty during the holidays. Do any of the teachers have a night patrol?"

"No, Professor. There's so few students here they thought it wasn't necessary. Decided to let the teaching staff have a holiday, too. No, it's just Filch in the corridors at night. Me and Mrs. Norris."

"It's a burden for one person. If you ever see anyone — anyone — out in the school at night, let me know. I'll help you get them back where they belong."

"Anyone at all, eh?"

"Well, except Dumbledore, of course. Other than that, anyone at all."

Supper was almost as festive as the earlier feast had been, certainly in the amount and type of food available. Then most of the students went to their various dormitories while the teachers gathered around one of the tables for a more convivial evening of brandy, coffee, whist, chess and, for Snape and Flitwick, cribbage. Quirrell was with them, trying to play chess with Professor Vector and losing ignominiously.

"I understand your quarters are, well, cold, Severus," commented Flitwick between games. "Aren't your students freezing as well?"

"The water in the lake helps maintain a constant temperature."

"But the lake freezes."

"Only on the surface. The water underneath doesn't get as cold."

"Someday you'll have to explain that to me."

Gradually the teachers drifted off to bed, but for a few the evening of cards and chess continued until nearly midnight, when the last wished each other a good night and started off for their various rooms. Flitwick was still concerned about the cold.

"Have you ever tried a warming pan?"

Snape raised his eyebrows. "I can't say that I have. Now you'll have to explain that to me."

"You heat bricks at a fire and place them in a flat metal pan to warm up a bed on a cold night."

“And the bricks radiate heat for a long time. Ingenious idea.”

“I have some heating on my hearth right now. Come on up and take a couple with you. No need to be cold on Christmas night.”

Professor Flitwick’s rooms were on the third floor, and the two were almost at the door of the Charms classroom when Filch came hurrying down the stairs. Seeing Snape, he stopped suddenly.

“Someone’s prowling upstairs,” he snapped.

Snape excused himself to Flitwick and quickly followed Filch up to the fourth floor.

“You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night, and somebody’s been in the library — Restricted Section,” Filch explained.

“The Restricted Section? Well, they can’t be far, we’ll catch them.”

They caught no one, however. Filch led Snape back to the area of the Restricted Section where the prowler had been and showed him the extinguished lamp, still warm, and the book that had alerted him by its screaming.

A screaming book? ‘Spells and Enchantments for Guarding and Protection.’ Quirrell must still be looking for a way past Fluffy. But if Quirrell were here, why is there no lingering smell of garlic?

“Whoever it was, Filch, we seem to have chased them away. Thank you for fetching me. If anything else suspicious happens, let me know. Good night.”

“Good night, Professor.”

It was too late to get warm bricks from Flitwick. Snape made his way back to the dungeon area and his own rooms, considering the events of the night. Someone had been in the Restricted Section looking at dark spells for guarding things. Someone who was not Quirrell. So now there were two unknowns, the prowler in the library and the strong spell caster who’d tried to kill Potter at the Quidditch match. Unless, of course, they were the same person.

Who besides Quirrell would be trying to steal the Philosopher’s Stone?

The meeting with Dumbledore was not satisfactory.

“I assure you, Headmaster, that we’re dealing with more than one person here. Quirrell wants the Stone. I caught him once actually entering the chamber, and a second time approaching it. He had to have had something to do with the troll at Halloween. Quirrell wouldn’t have simply run from a troll, then fainted. But he isn’t strong enough to have continued jinxing Potter’s

broom over my countercurse, and he wasn't the one in the library or we'd have smelled the garlic. Besides, Quirrell can't just disappear like that. There are at least two people, Quirrell and someone else."

"Do you believe that they are working together?" Dumbledore asked patiently.

"I don't know. If Quirrell thought Potter'd seen him, he might have a reason to kill Potter, but then he'd have a bigger reason to get rid of me. And why would Quirrell hide it for three years if he really was stronger than me? He didn't know the Stone would suddenly appear."

"What other person at Hogwarts would you suspect? Who is stronger than you at this type of magic?"

"You are. That's it, just you. At least at this kind of dark magic. It might be one of the students, though. Some of them come from powerful dark families. I haven't seen any that I could suspect of hiding their strength, but that doesn't mean there aren't any."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. "I believe you are more worried about this than you need to be. Some of these incidents may be wholly unconnected to the central problem."

"Is there something you know that you don't want to tell me, sir?"

"I couldn't say."

"I'd like your permission to referee Gryffindor's next Quidditch match. They play Hufflepuff in February."

"Severus, Severus, you do want to be unpopular, do you not?"

"I don't understand, sir."

"Slytherin has been the top house in both Quidditch and the House Cup competition for what, seven years? Now Gryffindor has a chance to catch up and knock you out of first place. Do you honestly think that Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff are not in Gryffindor's corner? Anything to deflate Slytherin. And now you want to referee a Gryffindor game? You know what they will think. Besides, I do not recall that you were ever very, shall we say 'comfortable,' on a broomstick."

"I bought a broom after I finished school. I use it to get around in Lancashire. I'm not great, but I'm adequate. If I was up in the air and mobile, and anyone started tampering with Potter's broom, I would be able to see who it was."

"Let me think about it."

"Thank you, sir."

Later that day Snape was down by the frozen lake, where he picked up a

handful of pebbles and started targeting pinecones. There was a certain violent precision to his attack that would have terrified two-thirds of his Potions classes into imagining how good he might be with pieces of chalk and student heads. Only this time it wasn't student heads he was thinking of.

"Somewhat upset ya, Professor?"

"Are you spying on me again, Hagrid?"

"Spying, sir? Me?"

"Like you and Dumbledore did last month when I came out here to sit for a while. You think I don't notice?"

"Well, ya do get a bit high-strung from time to time, an' we want t' be ready t' head ya off. What's happened today?"

"Dumbledore."

"So ya take it out on the pine trees."

"I could go for birds or rabbits. It'd be more of a challenge."

"Pinecones is fine. What did Dumbledore do?"

"Hoard information. I went to him about this... problem, and he tells me I don't have to worry about part of it, but he won't tell me which part, and he won't tell me why, so what good does it do?"

"Ya might take comfort from that."

"How so?"

"Well, if he's tightlipped about someone else's private affairs, he's likely tightlipped about yours as well."

"You're probably right, Hagrid."

Throwing stones at trees would not solve the underlying problem. Somewhere on the grounds of Hogwarts, in the Castle itself, unknown, unrecognized, was a spell caster stronger in dark magic than he was. A spell caster whose curses required all of his concentration and energy just to mitigate. In all Snape's life, he'd known only two whom he could not best easily, or at least face one on one as an equal. One was Dumbledore. The other was dead.

It was bad enough at the Quidditch game, feeling that strength. Now he appears to be wandering Hogwarts at will, as if he were invisible. Dumbledore knows something, but won't tell, which is even more disquieting.

Snape knew two things for certain about this unknown. He was interested in spells of guarding and protection — but to create them, or to bypass them? And he'd tried to kill Potter. *If he's still trying to kill Potter, he may be watching him constantly. If I can spot someone who's always keeping an eye on Potter, I may learn who this mystery spell caster is.*

Drawing up a list of all the staff and students who'd remained at Hogwarts over the Christmas break helped somewhat, though Snape couldn't see a single name that he'd suspect of being the one. Maybe he was hiding on the grounds, only pretending to leave. *Maybe he's hiding on the grounds anyway, not a student at all.*

The beginning of the new term found Snape nervous and edgy. He reevaluated everyone, trusted no one. He began checking the places Harry Potter frequented to see if anyone else was following the boy. Growing in the back of his mind was a doubt, a worry, the rebirth of a long-dormant fear.

January was a hellish month. In addition to Snape's other troubles, the first years advanced from the simple stages of gathering, preserving, and storing herbs, and the brewing of infusions and decoctions, into full-fledged potions making. All the stunning ineptitude of that first Friday back in September reemerged.

It took two sessions before even half the class managed to grasp the difference between stirring, beating, and folding in. Snape's muggle half was throwing hissy fits. *Didn't anyone ever show them how to bake cookies? Scramble eggs? Make a pudding? Idiot wizard brats!*

Friday mornings were a running commentary on potential disaster. "Bulstrode! Newts' eyes, not bats' eyes. Newt! It begins with an N. You know, the letter with all straight lines . . . Weasley! Remove that cauldron from the fire before you add the venom — unless you want to redecorate the classroom . . . Longbottom! Are you missing an entire page! There are six ingredients that come before the nettles . . . No!" For Longbottom threw the nettles in anyway.

Snape sprang between the cauldron and Finnigan, seizing Longbottom by the wrist and flinging him towards Weasley and Potter, as he whipped out his wand with a quick incantation just as the brew exploded. There was a pop, and a gurgle, and the surface of the concoction belched a little, but catastrophe was averted, except for Snape's wand and right hand, which were splashed with the liquid. Welts and boils rose immediately, and it burned like fire.

Trying to suppress images of what might have happened if he hadn't been standing near the cauldron, Snape wheeled on Longbottom. "Are you deaf as well as illiterate?" he yelled at the boy. "Or do you enjoy sending half your classmates to hospital?"

The thoroughly frightened Longbottom rejoined Finnigan, and they began making the potion again. Snape went to his cabinet to look for a salve for

his inflamed hand. It would be better to get something from Madam Pomfrey, but there was an hour left to go for the class, and leaving the students alone for even a moment was unthinkable. Still in pain, he forced his eyes to sweep the room again. Snape himself had been a relatively powerful eleven-year-old. What if the one he was looking for was here?

“Potter, you dunderhead! Can’t you read either? Stir that with a clean spoon or we’ll have an accident worse than Longbottom’s! Don’t you pay attention to anything at all?”

Azkaban has to be better than this.

February’s Quidditch match drew closer, and more of the staff discovered that Snape was going to referee. Sprout was telling everyone that she had nothing to do with it, preferring to have Hufflepuff win or lose on its own merits. McGonagall and Flitwick started eating together, pointedly avoiding Snape’s company. He cornered McGonagall on the stairs after breakfast one morning three days before the game.

“How can you believe that of me, Minerva? We’ve been colleagues for ten years. Why would you think I would miscall a game for the sake of the Cup?”

“Are you or are you not the same rascal that talked the best Seeker I ever had into following dragons? I’ve never known you to want to referee before. It occurred to me that someone who fought like the devil to get to the top might fight just as hard to stay at the top. Set my heart at ease, Severus. Withdraw from refereeing. Otherwise I’ll judge on the outcome of the game.”

But Snape couldn’t withdraw, not if he was going to have even the ghost of a chance of finding out who the spell caster was.

The Saturday of the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch game was cold and overcast. The first thing Snape noticed was that he was being ignored at the breakfast table by every other teacher except Trelawney, who normally never spoke to him. She glided up as he was helping himself to a kipper and some toast and muttered. “All your hopes will be dashed today.”

“Good morning to you, too, Sibyll,” he replied, then stayed longer at the table than usual, trying to eat in a leisurely fashion to show how little the ostracism affected him.

Earlier in the week, Snape had tried out the school brooms and found one that was easy to manage and docile. After breakfast he went down to the Quidditch pitch to practice a bit well before anyone else arrived. It was fairly easy and, as he’d reasoned, from the air he could see every spot in the stands.

If any spectator started to jinx Potter's broom, Snape would be able to see who it was.

Lunch was a repeat of breakfast. It'd never struck Snape so forcefully before how much the other teachers resented the fact that Slytherin had been in first place for so long. He could understand McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout. They naturally wanted their houses to win. But the rest? He reviewed the staff in his mind and experienced a small revelation. None of the others had been in Slytherin as students. *I'm still the only Slytherin on the staff. I haven't thought about that since I started teaching. No wonder they resent our success.*

After lunch, the entire school began to make its way to the Quidditch stands. Everyone wanted to see if Gryffindor would win. Snape had the feeling that even Hufflepuff would cheer a Gryffindor victory.

The teams were still in their locker rooms when the next thunderbolt struck. Just as the game preliminaries were set to start, a flurry of excitement at the center stand attracted Snape's attention. From his aerial position he could see a tall, white-bearded figure take a seat.

What is Dumbledore doing here? He never comes to Quidditch games, why this one? ... Because he knows that no spell caster would try to jinx Potter with him here. He's here because he doesn't want me to find out who the spell caster is.

As the teams filed out of their locker rooms onto the field, Snape felt himself consumed with a sudden anger, and it was directed against Dumbledore.

Why couldn't he just tell me he wouldn't let me referee? Why let me go to this effort, be hated by all and sundry, and then at the last minute make all the trouble worthless by ensuring the one thing I want can never happen? Snape knew his anger showed on his face, and he didn't care.

Madam Hooch sent the teams into the air, and almost immediately George Weasley sent a bludger straight at Snape's head. "Penalty for Hufflepuff!" Snape called, and he and Weasley exchanged glares across the pitch. Just a moment later, Snape caught Fred Weasley trying to hex the quaffle. "Penalty for Hufflepuff," he called again, and this time there were boos from the Gryffindor stands.

Then suddenly the entire crowd was on its feet. Snape turned as Potter flashed past him in a dive for the ground. Though Potter did not actually hit him, the backwash of his speed nearly knocked Snape off his broom, while his robe lashed Snape's face, and bits of broom straw entered his mouth and nose.

Within five minutes of the game starting, Potter caught the snitch and

the stands erupted in cheers. It was over, irrevocably over, and nothing of importance happened.

Snape landed his broom, furious with Dumbledore and with Harry, and spitting bits of straw out of his mouth. He stood respectfully in line to accept the congratulations of the Headmaster, since he was one of the game staff. When it was his turn to shake hands with Dumbledore, however, Snape looked him straight in the eyes and said softly, "Are you ever going to tell him it was rigged?"

Dumbledore froze, then his eyebrows shot up, but he said nothing.

C H A P T E R T H I R T Y - S I X

THE MENACE REVEALED

"I tell you, Minerva, Fred was jinxing the quaffle. I've cast enough jinxes in my life; I know what one looks like."

"Well, I didn't see it, or anything like it. I saw you give two penalties against Gryffindor in the first three minutes, and I didn't see cause for it."

Trelawney cackled as she swept past. "Hopes dashed! What did I tell you? All hopes dashed!"

You don't know the half of it, you old witch. Something happened out there that Dumbledore was controlling, and now I'm still no closer to solving my problem.

Then Snape saw Quirrell heading toward his first floor rooms. *No. I still have cards to play. If I can't go after the spell caster, I'll go after Quirrell. That'll be something Dumbledore can't interfere with.*

"Quirinus!"

Quirrell looked around. "Did you . . . want to talk to . . . me, Severus?"

"Did you enjoy the game? You've become quite a Gryffindor fan. I saw you at the November game as well. Don't remember your being so keen on Quidditch last year."

"I . . . thought the air, you . . . know, the excitement . . ."

"Would do you a world of good, yes I know. Or maybe you're just curious about Gryffindor's new seeker."

"Severus, I don't think . . ."

"Time you did. You and I are going to talk. Now. But not here. Meet me in the forest, just behind the willow, in about fifteen minutes."

In a spot where no listening spells will work properly. Not even the ones I invented myself.

Snape went first to his rooms to slip on a heavy hooded cloak, partly because it'd gotten quite cold, and partly to minimize notice. Enough people

walked around in the warmer cloaks during the winter that few would pause to question another one. Then he left the Castle and hurried down the hill as if heading for Hagrid's hut. A little past the willow, he turned suddenly and darted into the trees, hoping that in those few seconds no one had been watching from the Castle windows.

Quirrell was already there, standing with his back to Snape, facing into the forest. As Snape reached him, he turned around. Snape lowered his hood.

"I came," Quirrell said.

"Very wise. I thought, before this went any further, that I'd give you the opportunity to show that trust in you was not misplaced. You and I have been running into each other at the most awkward moments, and I can't shake the feeling that your motives aren't entirely blameless. I have an interest in seeing that my labor isn't in vain, so you understand why I take this personally."

"We could . . . talk about this inside. I . . . don't know why you wanted . . . to meet here of all . . . places, Severus . . ."

"Oh, I thought we'd keep this private. Students aren't supposed to know about the Philosopher's Stone, after all."

"You know that I'm . . . just as dedicated to . . . protecting it as . . . you are."

"Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid's yet?"

" . . . But Severus, I —"

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell." Snape took a step towards Quirrell and was satisfied to see that Quirrell retreated.

" . . . I don't know what you —"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. Not everyone was fooled by your little bit of hocus-pocus. I'm waiting."

" . . . But I . . . don't —"

"Very well. We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie."

Snape drew the hood back over his head and left, not bothering to look back and see if Quirrell followed him or not.

Done. All cards on the table. No more guessing. He'll either be scared enough not to try anything else, or he'll come after me and prove I'm right. Either way, something will happen. And if it was Quirrell targeting the Potter boy, that should stop because now he knows I'm the greater danger. If it happens again, I'll know there's someone else behind it.

The most infuriating thing was that after their conversation, Quirrell did

nothing at all. At least nothing that could be specifically tied to Snape's threat. What he did appear to be tied to the Quidditch game.

Walking into the Great Hall that evening for supper, Snape found that he was being ignored by every teacher there. It seemed that McGonagall's opinion about the penalties was universally shared, and the general consensus was that if not for Potter's lucky catch of the snitch within the first five minutes, Gryffindor would have been cheated of a victory.

Snape sat at the end of the high table anyway, so he didn't usually talk to most of the teachers except Quirrell, who sat beside him. Now Quirrell moved his chair to the left and spent the entire supper with his back to Snape, discussing the transits of the planets with Professor Sinistra. *Not really a bad tradeoff. I'd rather look at that stupid turban all evening than his face.*

At least he could use the time to think. One of the biggest question marks was Dumbledore's role in the whole business. The Headmaster's presence at the Quidditch match made it twice that Snape was discouraged or prevented from looking for the spell caster. But what game could Dumbledore possibly be playing?

Suddenly, without warning, Snape began to shut down. Doors closed and locked, thoughts sank into hiding below the level of consciousness while other decoy thoughts swam to the surface, and Snape found himself remembering the first time he'd been jumped by James Potter and Sirius Black. He looked quickly around the Hall, and glanced down the teachers' table. No one was watching him, no one attempting to establish eye contact, and yet . . . *Someone is trying to read me. Someone here in the Hall.*

Snape let the decoy thoughts float freely in his brain, trusting to instinct to keep him safe, while he began slowly reviewing the face of every student in the Hall. No one was looking at him. No one gave the least sign that he or she was practicing legilimency. Again Snape glanced past Quirrell's back and along the teachers' table. No one there was acting suspicious either. *An animagus? A mouse in the corner? A bat or bird in the rafters?*

His appetite now completely gone, Snape rose and quietly left the Hall. No one appeared to notice, probably assuming that it had to do with the afternoon's Quidditch game.

Back in his office, Snape sat alone in the dark room for several hours. He now had more evidence that a powerful wizard was in Hogwarts, but this evidence was even harder to prove. The first time, everyone at the game had seen that Potter's broom was being jinxed. The second time, Filch was a witness to the night prowler in the library. This time there was no evidence

outside Snape's own head. *Can I go to Dumbledore with this? Will he believe me? Will he tell me if he does?* He realized with a start that he was absentmindedly rubbing his left forearm.

Turning the lights on in the room, Snape stared for a moment at the arm, then rolled up the left sleeves of his robe and the gown underneath. The mark of the skull with the serpent issuing from its mouth was faint, but clear. *Is it my imagination, or is it itching? And maybe just a touch darker and clearer? It isn't definite enough for proof. Besides, he's dead. He is dead, isn't he?* Was there something Dumbledore knew?

Then Snape thought again of Dumbledore's sudden secretiveness, and a knot tightened in the pit of his stomach, and an icy foreboding gripped his heart.

* * *

The next two months passed quickly as the students and teachers realized that the time until final exams could now be counted in weeks. In the hourglasses in the entrance hall, Gryffindor's rubies still topped Slytherin's emeralds, and McGonagall was speaking to Snape again.

"You've been jumpy as a cat on coals lately, Severus. Whatever is the matter with you?"

"It must be the students. It must be collectively the most incompetent new class I've ever taught. Don't you have the same experience?"

"Now that you mention it, there has been a higher percentage of mistakes and unfortunate incidents than usual, and Flitwick is rather on edge about some of the problems he's had. But you're worried about something more than just classes."

"I don't know why you think so, Minerva."

"The way you've been prowling the halls and watching the students... There! You're doing it again. You keep looking around like you thought something was going to jump out at you."

"Maybe I just need a holiday."

"Speaking of which, what are you doing for the Easter break?"

"Nothing special. Just try to relax."

"I was thinking of getting down to London for a day, pick up a few things..."

Over McGonagall's shoulder, Snape's restless eyes continued to search the faces of the passing students, finding nothing there to ease his apprehension.

* * *

Because Easter fell after the middle of April that year, the Spring Term had been long, while the Summer Term would be very short. As a result, a much larger percentage of the student body stayed at Hogwarts for the Easter break than had for the Christmas break in order to study for exams. There were no classes, but supervisory duties did not diminish.

McGonagall managed to fit in her London trip on the Tuesday after Easter. She'd been planning to go on the Monday until Snape reminded her it was a Bank Holiday, and while Diagon Alley would still be doing business, some other things might be closed.

"Stupid to give a holiday to a bank," fumed McGonagall. "These muggles and their idiot ideas, interfering with a person's plans."

So it was that Snape felt partly responsible for McGonagall's frustration, and made a point to speak to her on her return.

"How was London?" he asked at supper, snagging Flitwick's seat and forcing the Charms teacher to sit next to Quirrell for one evening.

"It was lovely, lovely. And I even managed to get into the Public Record Office for an hour, which I couldn't have done had I gone yesterday, so I owe you one."

"What were you looking for in the Public Record Office?"

"Oh, I'm doing this thing on seventeenth century witchcraft trials. A little here, a little there. Did you manage to find some free time today?"

"I'd thought to get down into Hogsmeade, but it wasn't going to happen today. The terrible twins managed to release whooping gas into the study hall on the second floor, and there was pandemonium."

"Well, that didn't stop Quirrell from getting out."

"Quirrell was in London?"

"No, silly. He was in Hogsmeade. I saw him when I apparated back in, late this afternoon. He looked like he'd just come out of the Hog's Head, and he was taking off this enormous hooded cape and stuffing it into a bag. I thought it odd because it's been so warm all day. I certainly wouldn't want to wear something like that in weather like this."

"I've given up trying to figure out why Quirrell does what Quirrell does. Maybe he was raised in a greenhouse."

But Snape began to look around the half-empty Hall again, and noticed for the first time that Hagrid had not come to supper.

* * *

More than a month passed, a very hectic month. The only bright spot in first year Potions was the Granger girl, and she managed to spoil it all by being an insufferable know-it-all, even when she was wrong. A major disappointment was Draco Malfoy.

“Your marks in both the autumn and spring terms were mediocre, Malfoy. I can’t give you extra material to study when you can’t excel in the classes you’re required to study.”

“I can handle the extra work. I’ll work harder at everything, and bring my other marks up, too. Father says I have to learn this from you.”

“Lucius can be . . . very insistent. Very well. I am going to give you a description of the formation and dispersing of sound waves, and of various important frequencies. I want you to learn them, and be able to explain them to me in words other than the ones I’ve given you.”

“What do I need to learn this for? It’s just a bunch of numbers.”

“That bunch of numbers can help you invent spells that will prevent anyone from overhearing what you’re saying, let you listen into a conversation on the other side of a Quidditch pitch, or allow you to walk silently over autumn leaves. But if you don’t know the numbers, you haven’t got a prayer of inventing the spells. Physics first, magic second.”

Malfoy looked at the list as if it were the mythical crock of gold. “I can do all that? I’ll learn this so fast. You won’t be disappointed in me, sir.”

And there’ll be snow fights in Hell when you come back to me knowing everything on that list. Oh, Draco. You haven’t stuck to anything for longer than two days since you got here. Where do you get it from? Neither of your parents was like that.

At the end of May, Draco Malfoy was brought to Snape for reasons much less admirable than studying the physics of sound waves.

It was a Saturday night, and Snape was up reading well past eleven, since he didn’t have night patrol and didn’t have to get up early the next day to prepare for classes. It was a murder mystery that he’d never read before, and he was deeply involved in the identity of the corpse plowed up in a field, and whether it was the missing wife of the potter turned monk, when there was an emphatic knock on his office door.

Crossing through the office, Snape opened the door on an infuriated Professor McGonagall and an embarrassed but defiant Draco Malfoy. McGonagall was clearly already dressed for bed.

"Professor, I... do come in." Snape gestured to a chair next to his desk. "Sit down, please. Has Malfoy been causing you trouble?"

"This young man has been wandering the corridors, in the middle of the night, up on the top floor near the Astronomy Tower. And he has tried to fob me off with a story about Gryffindor students and a dragon."

"But it's true, Professor. They're getting rid of it..."

"That will do, Malfoy. We haven't gotten to you yet. Now, Professor McGonagall, you apprehended Malfoy on the seventh floor near the Tower?"

"Not ten minutes ago. I've deducted twenty points from Slytherin for his offense and cheek."

Snape was taken aback by the severity of the penalty, but could not argue about another teacher's authority in front of a student. "Now what have you to say for yourself, Malfoy?"

"They've got a dragon. Hagrid got it over Easter break and it hatched, but it keeps getting bigger so they have to send it away before it burns his hut down and someone's coming tonight to take it from the Astronomy Tower. You've got to catch them."

"You see, Professor Snape. It's a concoction of lies. Where would Hagrid get a dragon? He didn't leave Hogwarts the entire break. And how could no one notice a dragon down there since Easter? And you cannot just fly in and out of Hogwarts. We have shields, defenses, that would have to be turned off..."

"But I saw it! I saw it with my own eyes! In Hagrid's hut!"

Snape shook his head. "First, Malfoy, nothing gives you the right to be out in the corridors after curfew. If you thought something untoward was happening, you should have come to me or another teacher. Second, you may not talk to a teacher in a disrespectful way, and you must apologize to Professor McGonagall. And then you must go directly to the dormitories and go to bed. Your housemates won't be happy to learn tomorrow that you've lost them twenty badly needed points."

A resentful Malfoy apologized and left. Then Snape turned to McGonagall. "Twenty points, Minerva? Isn't that a bit steep? We dole them out in ones and fives and tens. To lose twenty at a shot..."

"I'm sorry, Severus, but I've said what I've said. To be out and about, and then that ridiculous story, and his defiance... twenty points."

Snape escorted McGonagall back to the entrance hall, where Slytherin's emeralds had already been removed from the hourglass. "I certainly hope

the rest of your night is peaceful, Minerva. I'm just glad I'm not on duty tonight."

But McGonagall was to have no rest. At that moment, Filch appeared on one of the staircases. "Professors," he called, "there's students out of bed."

"We know, Filch," Snape called back. "One of mine. We've already got him."

"Not him, Professor Snape. Them. And they ain't yours. They're Professor McGonagall's. I've got 'em in your office right now, ma'am."

McGonagall turned scarlet, but whether with rage or shame was hard to tell. A brisk "Good night, Professor," and she was hurrying up the stairs after Filch.

I wouldn't want to be those students for all the tea in China. Not tonight. Not after what just happened with Malfoy.

The next morning on his way to breakfast, Snape saw a crowd of students looking at the hourglasses. *Rejoicing at Slytherin's loss, probably.* He started to move past them, then saw the points and stopped dead. Slytherin was once more in first place. Gryffindor was last. Gryffindor had, overnight, lost one hundred fifty points.

Snape went quickly into the Hall where a stony McGonagall was already eating breakfast. He slipped behind her and crouched down so his presence wasn't obvious. "Minerva, a hundred and fifty?"

"There were three of them. Fifty each." McGonagall turned to face him. "Severus, how could I punish your house yesterday, then not punish my own for a worse offense? They were actually up in the Tower. Malfoy was only in the corridor."

"Who was it?"

"Potter, Granger, and Longbottom. And Longbottom had the same silly story about a dragon."

Just then a great bulk moved in behind Snape. "Ya ought not t' be down there, Professor. I mighta stepped on ya."

Snape rose and started towards his own seat, but Hagrid touched his elbow and pulled up an extra chair. "T' tell the truth, I'd not mind having a chat with ya. Somewhat's come up."

"Love to be of help, but why me?"

"It's a dark sorta thing, needing a darkish sorta viewpoint, no offense meant."

"None taken, Hagrid, but Quirrell is the Defense Against..."

"Pshaw! Quirrell don't know his behind... Begging yer pardon, ma'am... But Quirrell don't know half what you knew at thirteen."

Realizing this might take time, Snape started putting eggs and sausages on a plate. "I'm all ears, Hagrid. I only hope I can help. With whatever it is."

"There's a unicorn died in the forest this last Wednesday." As both Professors turned horrified faces to him, Hagrid continued. "I don't know how it happened, but it'd been bleeding from the neck."

"Have you spoken to Kettleburn?" Snape asked.

"This ain't a matter of care, Professor. It's a matter of killing. I think something was drinking the blood."

"Adult or juvenile?"

"Adult male."

"There's nothing that preys on adult unicorns. It has to be human."

"I knew ya'd have the answer right at y'r fingertips. But who'd it be?"

"I don't know. But I've been worried about there being someone... unusual... on the grounds for some months. Nothing solid, just strange coincidences. What will you do now?"

"Wait. See if it happens again. Go looking for who did it."

"Professor McGonagall has a foursome looking at detention if you need eyes and ears."

Hagrid brightened as McGonagall added, "And a fairly intelligent group they are, too. They might actually be useful."

Two days later Hagrid reported another wounded unicorn, and Malfoy, together with the three Gryffindors, was sent out to help him find the beast and help it if possible. The following morning at breakfast, Snape noticed that Potter, Granger, and Longbottom were acting as if he'd transformed into a devil with hooves, horns, and a pointed tail.

"Hagrid, what happened last night? Did you find the injured unicorn?"

"We did, sir, but it were already dead. Something were slithering around it, no offense intended, an' it even drew the centaurs out. One of them was talking t' Potter, but I don't have particulars."

"Well if it's just centaur talk, there's nothing to it. Still, it would be nice if they stopped looking at me like I was going to roast them over coals." But what could have been 'slithering' around the unicorn? Snape was suddenly reminded of Quirrell's snake of the year before.

It was testing week, and no one had anything to think about but exams. Preparing them, taking them, proctoring them. And for the Professors, another week of grading them. At the very end of the last exam, Snape watched the students stream out of his room, locked the exam papers in his office, and headed out toward the entrance. After so many hours cooped up, he wanted a bit of sunshine and a little stroll.

As he crossed the entrance hall, Snape heard, among the babble of voices, a student say his name. Not sure if someone wished to speak to him, he paused, and then realized the sound came from the three Gryffindors in front of him: Potter, Granger, and Weasley. He moved toward them and caught something about the Ministry of Magic, and Dumbledore turning up. Then the Granger girl saw him and gasped. *What are they plotting that my presence startles her like that?*

“Good afternoon,” Snape said. *There’s that look again, as if I was going to turn them into . . . something unnatural.* “You shouldn’t be inside on a day like this.”

“We were . . .” the Potter boy began, but hesitated. *What does he feel guilty about?*

“Hanging around like this, people will think you’re up to something. And Gryffindor really can’t afford to lose any more points, can it?” The boy flushed, but his face was still defiant, James’s face. Then suddenly Snape thought about McGonagall, and the distress this obstinate child had caused her. “Be warned, Potter—” he said quietly, “any more nighttime wanderings and I will personally make sure you are expelled. Good day to you.”

Without another word, Snape turned and left, no longer going outside, but heading to the staff room to find McGonagall.

They were all in the staff room when Snape entered, McGonagall, Sprout, Flitwick, and Quirrell.

“Thank goodness you’re here, Severus,” McGonagall said as he entered. “Something’s happened. They know about the Stone.”

“Who knows about the Stone?” Snape tried to act surprised in front of Quirrell, not wanting Quirrell to suspect he’d already talked to Dumbledore.

“The Three Musketeers. Potter, Granger, and Weasley. They were looking for Professor Dumbledore to tell him that they think someone will try to steal the Stone tonight. But Dumbledore’s been called to London.”

The Ministry of Magic. The students knew that, too. He glanced at Quirrell, who didn’t meet his eyes. *Maybe they’re right about stealing the Stone. Maybe it is tonight.* “They volunteered this information?”

"They practically screamed it at me in the entrance hall."

"How many other people heard them, then?"

"It was just before the last classes let out. No one else was there."

"Is it possible someone will try to get the Stone?" Sprout asked.

McGonagall thought for a moment. "It is a strange coincidence that they would think someone would on precisely the day Dumbledore leaves for London. He won't be back until tomorrow."

"The students aren't going after it, else they wouldn't have run looking for teachers," Snape said. "If anyone is going to try, it would probably be tonight when the corridors are empty."

Flitwick spoke up. "My office is on the third floor, too. I shall watch the door for the rest of the afternoon and early evening."

"You need more time for your own work," said McGonagall. "I'll watch until after you have supper, then you watch this evening until curfew. Professor Sprout, if you would take the middle watch, then Professor Snape, you can watch from two to morning."

"What about me?" asked Quirrell.

"You have patrol duty tonight. If we change the routine, whoever it is might get suspicious. You just keep to your rounds."

Snape made no effort to hide his satisfaction at McGonagall's plans. He smiled sweetly at Quirrell as McGonagall left the staff room, then turned and walked out himself.

The Granger girl was standing there, looking nervous. "Is there something you need, Miss Granger?" Snape asked.

"I was waiting to see Professor Flitwick," she stammered. "I wanted to ask him about my exam."

"Professor Flitwick is right here. Let me get him for you." Snape went back into the staff room to tell Flitwick a student was outside, then left for his own rooms. He had the distinct impression, however, that Granger would rather have followed him than talk to her Charms teacher.

* * *

Snape couldn't sleep. He had the ominous feeling that the children were right, that tonight Quirrell would try to take the Stone. As midnight crept nearer, he decided not to wait for the beginning of his own shift, but to go up and keep Sprout company.

When he got there, the door to the dog's chamber was open and Sprout was nowhere in sight. The moon was just two days from full, and its light flooded most of the corridor. A quick search, and Snape found Sprout on the landing of the stairs leading down to the first floor. She was sound asleep.

"Pomona? Pomona, are you all right?" It was clearly an enchantment, and Snape spoke a quick waking spell. As Sprout blinked and sneezed, he asked, "Who attacked you?"

"I don't know," she replied. "What am I doing here?"

"Someone's after the Stone and knocked you out." He helped her to her feet and made sure she was steady. "You get Flitwick. I'm going downstairs after McGonagall. Don't go in until we join you. It could be dangerous."

Leaving Sprout to wake Flitwick, Snape ran down to the first floor and banged on McGonagall's door. "It's happening," he said when she opened the door, and together they hurried back upstairs.

Flitwick and Sprout were waiting. The four teachers edged near the door of Fluffy's chamber, and Snape felt a momentary twinge in his leg. *How do we get past the dog? Why didn't we bring Hagrid into this?*

Fluffy was growling at them, and the trapdoor under him was open, but there were three things in the chamber that weren't supposed to be there. A small harp, a rudely carved wooden flute, and an invisibility cloak.

The rush of anger that swept through Snape on seeing the cloak was almost uncontrollable, and he fought it down with an effort. James Potter's cloak. The cloak that helped change Snape's life irrevocably nearly twenty years before. Snape turned to McGonagall. "Your Three Musketeers are already here," he said, pointing to the cloak, and knew there was a note of bitterness in his own voice.

"Music must calm the beast," said Flitwick. He picked up the flute and muttered a charm. The little instrument began playing a soft, haunting tune, and Fluffy yawned and dropped his heads onto his paws.

"Now," Sprout said, "we can jump down. There's a Devil's Snare there. It'll cushion our fall, then I'll immobilize it. I'd best go first." She stepped to the trap door and jumped. The other three teachers followed her.

Each chamber was under the control of the teacher who'd created it. Sprout got them past the Devil's Snare with no problem. Flitwick didn't need the key to open the door on the other side of his charmed room. The four teachers advanced into the shadowy chess room. There in front of them was the Granger girl, kneeling on the chessboard, trying to revive the Weasley boy, who appeared to be unconscious.

"Hermione! Ronald!" cried McGonagall, "What happened here?"

"Oh, Professor McGonagall, thank goodness you're here. Ron sacrificed himself to win the game so Harry and I could go through and stop..." That was when Granger looked beyond McGonagall at the three other teachers and saw Snape. "You're not... you're supposed to be..."

"Pomona, stay here and see what you can do for Weasley," ordered McGonagall. "The rest of us need to find Potter."

Leaving Professor Sprout with the children, McGonagall, Snape, and Flitwick hurried into the next chamber. An unconscious troll lay sprawled on the floor, and the door to the other side was easy to open. The next to last chamber was Snape's. *I wonder which child solved the puzzle. Probably Granger. Must be the muggle blood in her. No wizard brat could do it.* Snape opened the door, and they ran through, McGonagall in the lead.

There, kneeling beside the unconscious Potter, was Professor Dumbledore. "Ah," he said as the three teachers burst in, "there you are. And just in time, too. Even if I had not gotten here, you would have been able to stop him. He has just left."

"Who..." McGonagall started to say, then looked with the others past Dumbledore. Quirrell was lying on the floor in front of a tall mirror, his face and hands covered with third-degree burns, and blood seeping from the back of his head onto the stones beneath him. The cloth of the turban lay tossed to one side.

"Lord Voldemort," answered Dumbledore, and Snape winced as pain shot from the mark on his arm up into his shoulder. "It seems that Voldemort was inhabiting Quirrell's head all year, and has been trying to get his hands on the Stone since last August. He discovered how to get past Fluffy around Easter, and has been awaiting an opportune moment ever since. Can you help me get this young man to hospital?"

The others attended to Potter, but Snape walked over to Quirrell, who was still moaning softly and obviously dying. Snape knew what it was like to have the Dark Lord probe his mind — it was one of the worst experiences of his life — yet the horror of what Quirrell had lived through was something Snape could only guess at. To have the Dark Lord share every moment of every day, know every thought, control every action...

Snape knelt and lifted Quirrell to a sitting position cradled against his left arm, and began a low chanted healing spell to ease the pain of the burns. Quirrell opened his eyes.

"Severus, is that you? I need to... I don't..."

“Shh, Quirinus, it’s all right. He’s gone. You’re free.”

Quirrell shuddered and sighed, turning his face into the fabric of Snape’s robe. “He suspects,” he whispered. “You must be careful.” There was a catch in his voice, and he seemed to gag.

“I will,” Snape assured him and resumed his chant.

Gradually Quirrell relaxed, the pain fading from his eyes. A moment later, at the end, he sighed again and died in Snape’s arms.

Dumbledore came and knelt with them, laying a hand on Snape’s shoulder. The fear that had slept for over ten years was awake and growing once more. Snape looked into Dumbledore’s eyes. “What do we do now?” he asked.

* * *

“So, the spell caster was Quirrell all along. Or rather, him — the Dark Lord — through Quirrell. No wonder he was so strong. And the mysterious prowler in the library was . . . ?” Snape watched Dumbledore across the desk in the Headmaster’s office.

“Young Potter in his father’s cloak. Somehow I did not think it would do you any good to know that he had it. I caught him out after hours, and he stopped using it. Until it was truly needed.”

“And the Dark Lord, through Quirrell, killed the unicorns. When did you know it was him?”

“I suspected that first day, when you told me that Potter’s scar was hurting. You have no idea how disturbed I was to find that you might have been dueling your former master over the curse on Potter’s broom. I do not want to lose you, Severus, and the thought of what Volde . . . I am sorry. I must remember to be careful around you . . . — he could do if you got directly in his way was not something I wanted to take a chance on.”

“So you came to the Quidditch match. You might have told me. He tried to read my mind once. You might have warned me.”

“Why? He clearly did not want you to know he was there. Otherwise he would have contacted you. I trust your instincts. I cannot read you. He could not read you even when you wanted him to. I was not too worried about that.”

“You weren’t worried? For a year he shared all Quirrell’s experiences, had access to all Quirrell’s memories. Every time Quirrell turned his back on me, he was watching me. Do you know that I’ve been trying to remember every

conversation I ever had with Quirrell, trying to figure out what he knows about me? He's not gone. He's coming back."

"And you are here with me."

Snape rubbed his left arm. "He can summon me. He can punish me. Nowhere is safe."

"We shall deal with it when we come to it. By the way, Quirrell told Potter that you had been trying to help him. Potter could not understand why, so I told him that James had saved your life."

"You...! That's none of his business! That's my private life. You promised!"

"I tend to think it is his business. It was his father. Besides, it seemed the least personal of all the reasons I might have given him. I shall try to keep you out of it as much as I can, but you are part of his family history."

There was little that Snape could say to this. A few minutes later he left Dumbledore's office.

McGonagall caught Snape on the stairs. "I thought maybe I would congratulate you now, since we won't be sitting together at the feast tonight. The Quidditch Cup and the House Cup seven years in a row. I think that's some kind of record."

"It was a record last year, Minerva, and you know it. Still, if you'd punished your students the same as Malfoy, instead of going overboard like that, you'd be in third place now instead of fourth."

"And if I hadn't punished them at all, we'd be in second place. You have a well-oiled machine there, Professor."

There was also one last interview with Malfoy.

"You've done well with the lesson I gave you. It seems you do understand something about the propagation of sound. Now I have a summer assignment for you."

"Homework? You're giving me summer homework?"

"Your enthusiasm seems to have waned. If you don't want to do it..."

"No, I'll do it. What do I have to do?"

"Design a spell that will permit you to talk unheard in a crowded room. Use the information about sound, and see what you can come up with."

"That sounds really useful. Is it one you've already done?"

"It is. And your father knows it too, because I invented it for him and your mother. I shall find out if you learn about it from him."

"I'll get it done for you. I'll work on it all summer. You won't be disappointed."

We'll see about that, Draco. We'll see if the passion is really yours, or if it's just Lucius living through you.

The Great Hall was resplendent that evening with green and silver, and a banner with the Slytherin serpent was displayed behind the high table. The Hall was already crowded when Snape entered and made his way to his seat. He tried to conjure up the same feeling of pride in his house that he'd felt in previous years, but somehow this year was not joyful.

First and foremost was the dread that lodged permanently in his heart knowing that the Dark Lord was back and had intimate knowledge of Snape's place at Hogwarts. He'd never released a former servant and never let a fault go unpunished. As long as his disembodied presence existed, there would be the danger of his return. When the Dark Lord returned, Snape knew that his own name would be at the top of the list for destruction.

The second reason was less in magnitude, but perhaps greater emotionally. For the first time, Snape truly saw the depth of resentment felt against him and against Slytherin for their long years of winning, and realized that the students of other houses, even some of the staff, suspected him of favoring his own house to keep it on top. Snape had no way to defend himself against the rumor, and he understood that every victory in the future would be a hollow one.

It was odd sitting at the end of the table without Quirrell beside him. No one moved to take Quirrell's place, though whether out of respect for the dead or to isolate Snape was anybody's guess.

Everyone, absolutely everyone, was in the Hall when the Potter boy appeared at the door. *Did he do that on purpose? It would be so like his father to stage his entrance for maximum effect.* Students in the Hall were climbing onto benches to see him better as he made his way to the Gryffindor table to sit with Granger and Weasley.

Then Dumbledore arrived, and the Hall settled down to listen to his end-of-year speech. It was the usual stuff. When he reached the announcement of points for the House Cup, the Slytherin table erupted in cheers, but Snape was more sensitive than ever before to the silence of the rest of the Hall.

"Yes, yes, well done, Slytherin. However, recent events must be taken into account."

Snape froze. The room became eerily quiet. *What is he doing? He's never changed points at the feast before.*

As Snape listened in disbelief, Dumbledore began to hand out points. Fifty to the Weasley boy for beating McGonagall's chess game. Fifty to the

Granger girl for getting past his own logic puzzle. And sixty to Harry Potter for his courage. Not one negative point for the rules they'd broken. Gryffindor and Slytherin were tied. The suspense in the Hall was palpable.

As long as you decided to take the Cup away from us anyway, you might have the kindness to do it quickly instead of dragging it out like this. I never suspected you of being sadistic before, but now...

Dumbledore was still talking. "There are all kinds of courage. It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom."

The Hall exploded as everyone but Slytherin began to cheer. Snape clapped his hands mechanically for Gryffindor's victory, but he really wanted to sink right down through the floor in shame at the way Dumbledore had so publicly humiliated him and his house. *You couldn't have done this before, so at least we wouldn't have come to the feast thinking we'd won.*

"Which means we need a little change of decoration."

Green and silver became scarlet and gold. The serpent vanished to be replaced by a lion. McGonagall was beaming. The Hall was wild with cheers. Snape rose and went to McGonagall to congratulate her on her victory, trying to smile as if he meant it. He glanced over at Potter. Never before had the boy looked so much like his father, cocky and self-centered as he celebrated the defeat of a rival.

Then, as Snape started back to his own seat, he too became a small center of attention. Kettleburn was first, coming to shake his hand. "Second place isn't so bad, Severus, but that's got to hurt, the way it was done."

Flitwick and Sprout hurried over, too. "Hard luck, Severus. Never thought Dumbledore would do something like that." And Sprout added, "You come sit with us, dear. To think of treating you that way in front of the whole school."

It was an invitation not to be refused. "Save me a place," Snape responded, then went down to talk to his house and cheer up the Slytherin students a bit before returning to the teachers.

And so, as McGonagall basked in the glow of Gryffindor's triumph, Snape found that the ill feelings against Slytherin had vanished into sympathy and good will. While still less than perfect, it was at least a partly satisfactory end to a most unusual year, and Snape settled back to enjoy the feast with his colleagues, putting aside for tomorrow the troubles that tomorrow would bring.

C H A P T E R T H I R T Y - S E V E N

GILDEROY THE GREAT

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 12, 1992 (THE DAY BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

Severus Snape was in his bedroom in the dungeon of Hogwarts castle putting the books in order in his small private bookcase. Professor Snape had a secret passion for murder mysteries, and every year brought a different set from his home in Lancashire to read during his free time at Hogwarts. For years he'd been interested in a series about a medieval monk who also happened to be a potions maker. Thoroughly enchanted with the book he read, he purchased the whole series, or at least as many as had been written and published, and planned to read them in sequence. Now he was fascinated by an English lord and the upper class world of the 1920s. There were enough books in the series to keep him busy and content all year.

That task done, Snape double-checked his room, then the supplies in his office and the orders he'd placed to replenish what was running low or had gotten old, and finally his classroom. All was in order and ready to begin classes in September. *I don't know why we have to be here so early. It never takes me a month to prepare.*

A glance up at the slits that served for windows in the dungeons told Snape that it was probably around lunchtime. He locked up — something he was careful always to do because of the quantity of poisons in his rooms — and went to the Great Hall.

Only seventeen people were there, the Professors and the rest of the staff of the school. Snape sought out Professor McGonagall, who was reading *The Daily Prophet* and sipping a cup of tea.

"Anything interesting?" Snape asked.

"I've located our missing Dark Arts teacher," she replied. "He's in London." She handed the newspaper to Snape and pointed to an advertisement for Flourish and Blotts bookstore. It announced that Gilderoy Lockhart, the

celebrated author, would be signing copies of his books at the store that day between 12:30 and 4:30.

"He must be just about to start. Do you want to pop down to London, accost him at his book-signing, and ask him why he's not up here doing his job?"

"Humph. I don't think he'd care. Did you see his book list for the course?"

Snape shook his head.

"Every book he's ever written is on it. He's using this job to increase his book sales and his profits."

Snape shrugged. "Maybe I should write some books. *Potions for the Ungifted*, or *Seven Ways to Burn Your Hands Off While Mixing Floo Powder*."

"More useful than this rubbish. *Gadding with Ghouls*. *Voyages with Vampires*. The man has an alphabet fixation."

The two professors began inventing their own — *Surfing with Succubi*, or *Percolating with Pixies*. Snape's best was *Fan Dancing with Faeries*, but McGonagall topped that with *Grocery Shopping with Grindyloves*, and he had to admit defeat.

Later Snape spied Professor Dumbledore down by the lake practicing fly-casting. He went down one of the side paths from the Castle and stood where Dumbledore could see him out of the corner of his eye, but where he wouldn't interfere with the fishing line.

"Ah, Severus, I see you are waiting to ask me something."

"Why Lockhart? Lockhart's a joke. Why not me?"

"I need you around for longer than a year."

"Quirrell was here for three."

"But not in succession. He had that year off. And the third year cannot really count as it was not really Quirrell."

"But Lockhart?"

"I will confess that after Quirrell's demise not that many people were interested in the job. You, of course, but I will not have you. Not yet, anyway. Lockhart seems to think it will improve book sales, but at least he is willing to come. And he has worked with vampires and werewolves, so how bad can he be? Give the poor man a chance, Severus."

"Yes, sir," said Snape, and went back up the hill to spend some time with the English lord.

It was the last weekend before the students arrived, and the teachers were taking advantage of being able to sleep late, linger at breakfast, and not look at a clock or listen to Hogwarts's bell all day. Snape and Flitwick were deep into their second cribbage game when Hagrid entered the Great Hall with a fuchsia vision in tow.

"Good morning, Professors," said Hagrid, and there was a fizzing undertone to his voice that Snape immediately recognized as either suppressed laughter or the onset of pneumonia. "I'd like you t' meet the newest member of the staff, Professor Lockhart. He's just been up t' see Professor Dumbledore. Professor, this is Professor Flitwick and Professor Snape."

'Pleased-to-meet-yous' and handshakes were exchanged, as Snape and Flitwick took in the exquisite coiffure and perfect tailoring that was Gilderoy Lockhart. Then Hagrid delivered his punch line.

"Professor Dumbledore says you're t' show him around."

Snape looked at Flitwick, and Flitwick looked at Snape. There was about to be a fight over seniority, which Flitwick, having been at Hogwarts fifty years longer, was sure to lose, when Hagrid spoke up again.

"That'd be you, Professor Snape. The Headmaster says y're t' settle Professor Lockhart into his room, office, an' classroom, an' show him around the Castle an' grounds."

Flitwick grinned and patted Snape on the elbow. "Have a wonderful day, youngster," he said, and walked out of the Hall laughing quietly.

"Well," said Lockhart brightly, "I must say you are certainly high in the Headmaster's estimation to be selected to escort me on my first day here. I fully intend to mention your kindness in my next book, Professor, uh, Shape."

"Snape. Your classroom is on the first floor. If you would follow me."

As they left the Great Hall, Snape chose not to pay any attention to Professor McGonagall, who had risen from the table and was doing a really superb imitation of Lockhart's stance and gait before an audience of totally silent, yet thoroughly convulsed teachers.

As the two professors left the Hall, Lockhart was remarking on his home schooling and education abroad. They paused at the foot of the marble staircase. "This is quite a large entry hall, isn't it? I say, there must be a zillion staircases here. Don't know that I'd want to climb them all in a day, what? I understand the Castle is . . . one or two hundred years old."

"Closer to a thousand. And your rooms are on the first and second floors.

You should never have to climb higher than that unless you visit the headmaster."

"And that was quite a climb, I'm not ashamed to tell you. Fairly set my heart beating, don't you know, although I am really quite athletic. I won the *Witch Weekly* triathlon competition two years ago. I'm sure you read about it in the papers."

"I fear I don't keep abreast of such things. Here is your classroom."

They entered the Dark Arts classroom, with its rows of desks and benches. Lockhart seemed taken aback. "My, look at the quantity of desks. There must be—six times three, carry the two—at least twenty-six desks here."

"Eighteen, actually. Though your classes generally never run over ten. You have twenty-two sections a week, which in your case is four on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and five on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"My that is a lot, isn't it. Though I'm sure you're used to such things. The packhorses of education. I am so proud to be able to immerse myself in the stultifying routine of your existence this year. I have so much admiration for those of you who do the same dreary thing, day after day, year after year, for the good of our children. I've already planned to immortalize you and your efforts in a new book, *Plodding with Professors*. Once your friends and family see your name in a Gilderoy Lockhart book, you won't be able to keep the adoring worshippers away."

"I can hardly wait," replied Snape. "Your office and private rooms are on the next floor."

"Well, it certainly is old," was Lockhart's first comment after standing and looking around the office and private room for a minute or two. "Rather small and dim too, what? Still and all it is a place to hang one's hat, and we shall make the best of it."

"I am thrilled to hear you say so." Snape's own room was a quarter the size of Lockhart's, and his office smaller and, being in the dungeon, darker.

"Well we are all part of the same team, and I'm definitely a team player. Always something for my colleagues. Now you, for example, you teach what?"

"Potions."

"Ah, yes," and Lockhart nudged Snape with his elbow. "Love philters and tonics for indigestion. Wonderful stuff. Now if you wanted to expand your capabilities, I would be willing to show you a thing or two about the Dark Arts. What to do if you ever meet a werewolf, say, or even a curse or two."

"You're very kind."

"Not at all, not at all. Part of building collegiality and team spirit. And you could show me how to brew, well, whatever it is you brew."

"As you can see, your things have been brought up. Would you like to tour the grounds now, or would you rather settle in here first, and see the rest this afternoon?"

"I think I really ought to unpack here first. Get all the little homey effects out so our minds can focus on what's important. We can meet . . .?"

"Lunch is at noon."

"Excellent, excellent. That'll give me time to have everything in order. Oh, and Shape, old boy . . .?"

"Yes?"

"There wouldn't happen to be any extra wardrobes lying around, would there?"

McGonagall was still in the Great Hall when Snape returned. "So. What's our new celebrity really like?"

"He's offered to teach me something about the Dark Arts. Maybe even a curse or two."

"And you said . . .?"

"I told him he was kind."

"You wicked, wicked, naughty boy! You're going to lead him down the garden path, then turn and pounce on him like the cobra you are. Pomona! Come over here, dear. This is just too rich. Our Snape has finally agreed to accept instruction in the Dark Arts. He may even learn his first curse."

Professors Sprout and Sinistra both joined Snape and McGonagall. "What's this Minerva? I thought . . ."

"From Gilderoy Lockhart!" McGonagall shrieked with laughter.

"It's true. He offered. He wants to promote teamwork and collegiality, so he's going to immortalize us in a book called *Plodding with Professors*." Snape looked around at the three faces, mouths open in shock. "It's true. Could I make up something like that?"

"Well, actually, you were doing a pretty good job of it a couple of weeks ago," said McGonagall, "but I believe you anyway. Now, are you going to take him on? About the Dark Arts lessons, I mean. I'd love to be a fly on the wall."

"You could be a cat in the corner. I'm not sure though. It might have been first day jitters had him talking like that. I think I'll wait and see if his

attitude changes over the next week or so. If he turns out to be decent, no harm done.”

“And if he turns out to be a pompous ass?”

“Why then, Minerva, our consciences are clear.”

“Five sickles says that he’s a pompous ass.”

No one would take McGonagall’s bet.

Teachers dispersed to work or relax as the mood seized them, then returned to the Hall for lunch. Snape at first hoped that Lockhart was busy with his room and office, but at precisely 12:15, the man walked in. As Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, his place was next to Snape, and he made his way across the Hall and sat down, nodding and smiling to the others as he did so.

“Is everything so far to your satisfaction,” Snape inquired.

“Yes, lovely, but odd thing you know. There seem to be a lottish number of, well, heads of garlic here and there. What sort of chap was in the position before.”

“Oh yes, Quirrell. You’d have liked him. Last summer he was zapping zombies along the Zambezi. The local prince presented him with a ceremonial turban to mark his status in the tribe. Just your sort of thing. It was purple.”

“Really? How nice. Yes, a purple turban would be nice. What happened to him?”

“He died.”

“Dear me. Rotten luck. Well, not for me, eh? Rather good luck for me. I say, this food is quite tasty. Who prepares it for you?”

“We have a whole crew of house elves that see to the proper running of the Castle.”

“Excellent! I shall speak to them, of course, about the menu and the spicing of some of the dishes. When I was helping the *École de Gastronomie* in Paris rid themselves of some pesky poltergeists, I astounded them with my gourmet dishes. Just a natural talent. It could put the finishing touches on the meals. Oh, and we are seeing the grounds after lunch, no?”

Snape smiled.

It never stopped.

At the Quidditch pitch: “I was asked to play for England, you know. I would have been their best Seeker yet, except I had the misfortune to sustain a minor injury in that spectacular duel with the Voodoo Chief of Pico Duarte

and had to sit that season out. After that there were too many other demands on my time . . .”

At Hogsmeade: “Quaint little village. So charming. Needs a bit of life though, don’t you think? I could take a room at the Three Broomsticks for readings of my books to the general populace. It would bring in oodles of people and help the local economy. Do you think once a week would be enough . . .”

At the Forbidden Forest: “Such a shame you can’t use it for something. Nature hikes, camping, sell the timber for profit. If it’s just a matter of clearing out the dark creatures, well I’m your man. I’m sure Professor Dumbledore would agree, now that he finally has someone on staff who really understands dark forces. I mean I know all you teachers are very good at the subjects you teach, but the Dark Arts, now that takes practical experience . . .”

By the lake: “Angling! Now there is a sport that requires a cool head and a gifted arm. I could write the definitive book on fishing if my fans didn’t keep me occupied with public appearances, or the world at large with the dangerous task of protecting it from evil. The noble art of fly-casting is one at which I excel, and I hope to spend many pleasant afternoons out here demonstrating the techniques . . .”

Lockhart returned to his rooms while Snape went to the Great Hall. After the students arrived, the professors would seek more the privacy of the staff room, but for now they enjoyed the luxury of the extra space. Snape went to the table where McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, and Sinistra were playing whist, and sat watching them for a few moments. McGonagall caved first.

“Well,” she snapped, “don’t just sit there and make us suffer. What was it like?”

Snape grimaced. “What truly frightens me is that I’m going to have to sit next to that man at every meal, every day for the entire year. I’ll probably restrain myself from killing him, but I may have to cut his tongue out.”

“That bad.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

Flitwick chuckled as he played a jack. “Better you than me, boy. Better you than me.”

“What are you going to do to him?” Sinistra asked.

“I don’t know, Aurora. I can’t just gratuitously strike him, much as I would like to. Something will have to come up that I can play on.”

“Severus, that sounds ominous,” Sprout said. “What did he say to you?”

"He told me Dumbledore was fortunate to finally have a teacher on the staff with practical experience of dark forces."

It was McGonagall's turn to chuckle. "He may have just pounded the first nail into his own coffin."

Snape gritted his teeth all through supper, then fled to the blissful solitude of his own rooms for the rest of the evening, leaving the other teachers the pleasure of experiencing Gilderoy Lockhart. Monday breakfast looked to be more of the same until Filch came into the hall. Filch normally ate in his own room, so his presence at breakfast was unusual.

"Begging your pardons, Professors," said the caretaker, "but Hagrid's needed down at the gate to admit a delivery."

"Can't ya take care of that yerself, Filch?" Hagrid grumbled.

"Not allowed to seeing as it's creatures. Gamekeeper's job."

To Snape's immense relief, Lockhart sprang from his seat. "They'll be mine, I'm sure. Got the order in just a tad late, but when I mentioned who it was for, the delivery company assured me they'd be here. One of the advantages of fame." He grabbed biscuits and sausages and abandoned the now thoroughly delighted Snape. "I'll just go down with you, my man, and take charge of them myself."

The dynamics of the situation shifted immediately, for Hagrid's authority was challenged. "No ya don't, sir," he said at once. "Living creatures is my responsibility, an' they doesn't come onto school grounds without I personally inspects them."

The outcome of the confrontation was that Hagrid and Lockhart went together down the hill to the Hogsmeade gate to bring in and pen Lockhart's living creatures.

Snape went down to Hagrid's hut later in the morning because curiosity was burning him like a consuming fire. He found the door open, Hagrid fuming over a pot on the hearth muttering into his beard, and a large crate in one corner of the room. The crate was emitting piercing squeaks and whistles.

Hagrid looked up at Snape standing on the threshold. "You got a brain between y'r ears. Bet ya know what's in there."

Snape crossed to the crate and listened to the piping and trilling. "Pixies?" he ventured. "Cornish pixies? Are you sure you want them in your hut?"

"There. There's still someone with an ounce of sense in the school. He wanted t' open the crate and look at 'em right there at the gate."

"How many are there?"

"A good dozen."

"And he was going to release them into the air on the grounds?"

"There ya go. But he's the professor with all the experience handling creatures, so I don't know nothing."

"He told you that?"

"He did. But I'm big as about ten of him, so it really weren't no argument."

"Whatever are they for?"

"His first class Wednesday afternoon. He's planning t' test the students' mettle."

"And I have a class then, too. Drat! I'd love to see it."

Word spread quickly about Lockhart's little surprise, primarily because Snape told almost everyone else in the school personally. His excuse was that he was looking for volunteers to help contain the pixies when they got out of Lockhart's control, but the truth was that he was turning into a terrible gossip where Lockhart was concerned.

It was McGonagall who revealed this unpleasant fact to him. "You're turning into a terrible gossip where Lockhart's concerned, you know," she told Snape after supper.

"No I'm not. I'm just relaying essential information in the hope of averting a catastrophe."

"I think you need a nice saucer of milk before you go to bed tonight."

"All right, all right. But you don't have to sit next to him all the time."

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1992

The day that the students were to arrive was an especially hectic one as every teacher made last minute checks of his or her classrooms and materials. In particular, the teachers who were heads of houses had to inspect the dormitories and common rooms.

Around noon, Snape finished with his checklist for Slytherin house and headed for the Great Hall and his last relatively peaceful meal until the Christmas break. *And today I'm sitting at the other end of the Hall. There must be something I have to discuss with Professor Vector today. Then again, that would put me next to Professor Trelawney. Hardly a trade-up. Would Trelawney like Lockhart? I wonder.*

Professors Sprout and Flitwick were whispering together in one corner, and Sprout waved to him to join them. "The most distressing thing has happened. Two students refused to board the train!"

"That's impossible," replied Snape. "No one refuses to get on the train."

"These two did. They were at King's Cross, but wouldn't even go onto the platform."

"Who was it?"

"Two of Minerva's. The youngest Weasley boy and, you'd never guess it, Harry Potter. Dumbledore got a message from Arthur and Molly. It seems the two stole the family car as well. Poor Arthur's had to admit that the car does things it shouldn't. Like fly."

"It isn't hard to believe," said Snape. "It's the sort of stunt Potter's father would've pulled. Anything to stay in the limelight. And I was hoping this year would be relatively normal. How's Minerva taking it?"

"She's furious," said Flitwick. "Dumbledore's trying to calm her down. She still hasn't gotten over the hundred and fifty points she had to deduct from Gryffindor on Potter's account last year. I understand she'll be waiting on the lawn with a crossbow to shoot them down."

"Assuming they can get in." Snape thought for a moment. "Much as it would serve them right to hit the defenses in that car, it wouldn't do to have squashed student all over the place. Aside from unnecessarily irritating Filch, it would upset some of the parents. He'll have to let them land."

Late afternoon brought the owls with copies of *The Evening Prophet*. Shock and anger swept through the ranks of the teachers as they read about the unforgivable carelessness of Weasley and Potter in allowing the magical car to be seen several times.

"Don't they understand what it means to have muggles aware of our world?" cried Professor Burbage as she threw the paper down on the table. "You'd at least think Arthur would teach his children some discretion."

"We are talking about the father of Fred and George, you know," commented Sprout. "I think the only child they have who doesn't get into trouble is Percy."

Snape was nodding agreement when Dumbledore strode into the Hall. Moving to a table in the corner, he motioned Snape to join him.

"I fear, Severus, that I must place a distasteful duty on you tonight. You have, of course, heard of our errant twosome. We do not know yet when they will arrive. I need someone outside patrolling the grounds during the feast..."

"I'll do it."

"Really, I do know how much you must be looking forward to the feast, and explaining the Sorting ceremony to our new Dark Arts teacher..."

"I'll do it. Just tell me what it is, and I'll do it."

And so it was that later that evening, as every other denizen of the castle was joyfully preparing for the arrival of the students, the Sorting, and the feast, Professor Snape was down by the Hogsmeade gate with a pair of binoculars, searching the sky for a turquoise Ford Anglia with two twelve-year-old boys in it and feeling himself very lucky indeed.

It was getting late. The train arrived, the thestral carriages climbed the hill, and the boats had crossed the lake with the first years before Snape heard the car's engine. He was, at that moment, near the Quidditch pitch, reasoning that it presented a large, clear area in which to land. The drivers of the car had other ideas.

The car came across the lake, and there was enough light from the setting quarter moon to glint off its windows and chrome. As Snape watched in growing horror, the car headed straight toward the hill and the wall of the Castle on its peak. *They're going to crash the car into Hogwarts!*

The car disappeared from his view, yet there was no crash. *They must have missed it on the other side, which means they're headed for the Forest.* The quicker way was along the narrow beach at the base of the hill, and Snape hurried as fast as he could in the moonlight. Shielded by the rock of the hill, he heard no sound.

Rounding the hill Snape could see the black line of the forest and the lighter shadow of the Whomping Willow, but nothing else. No car, no students, nothing. He strode forward until he was abreast of the willow, where he lit a Lumos spell.

The willow was in dreadful shape. Broken branches lay scattered about, and there were great tears and dents in its bark. One huge branch had split away from the trunk and hung mutilated, ready to fall onto the grass. Nearby were the marks of the car's tires ripping up the sod, leading into the forest. Snape followed them a short way under the trees, but saw no sign of the car.

Climbing back up to the Castle, Snape could see clearly the traces where Potter and Weasley had dragged their luggage. *At least they're not in the forest. But what did they do with the car?* At that moment cold fury broke through Snape's barriers. *Just like his father. Has to be special. Has to be noticed. Doesn't think about the consequences and doesn't care about the rules. And doesn't care who or what he hurts.*

As Snape reached the castle steps, his anger abated a bit. *It's always possible they hit the tree by accident and are scared and contrite. I wouldn't mind seeing Potter contrite for once. Rare moment.* But it was not to be. From the

steps leading into the entrance hall Snape saw both boys peering between the massive doors of the Great Hall at the feast, and as he approached silently, he overheard:

“Where’s Snape?”

“Maybe he’s ill!”

“Maybe he’s left because he missed out on the Defense Against the Dark Arts job again!”

“Or he might have been sacked! I mean, everyone hates him—”

Standing right at their backs, his voice as low and deadly as he could make it, Snape entered the exchange. “Or maybe he’s waiting to hear why you two didn’t arrive on the school train.”

Although clearly not contrite, the boys had the sense to appear nervous, maybe even embarrassed. Snape led them down into the dungeon area to his office. The room was dark and cold. As he entered and closed the door, Snape turned with his back to it to face the shivering boys. He was fighting to control his anger. Dim moonlight still filtered in through the slits near the ceiling.

“So, the train isn’t good enough for the famous Harry Potter and his faithful sidekick Weasley. Wanted to arrive with a bang, did we, boys?”

And of course, Potter tried to blame someone else. “No, sir, it was the barrier at King’s Cross, it . . .”

“Silence!” Snape ordered, his voice still low. “What have you done with the car? You were seen.” He snapped his fingers for light and showed the startled boys the headlines of *The Evening Prophet*, then read part of the article to them. By this time he was calmer. He looked up at Weasley, “I believe your father works in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office? Dear, dear . . . his own son . . .”

Potter seemed more upset about that than Weasley. Snape continued. “I noticed, in my search of the park, that considerable damage seems to have been done to a very valuable Whomping Willow.”

Incredibly, they still tried to shift blame from themselves, for Weasley burst out, “That tree did more damage to us than we . . .”

“Silence!” Snape’s anger flared again, and he no longer trusted himself to keep his voice low. “Most unfortunately, you are not in my house and the decision to expel you does not rest with me. I shall go and fetch the people who do have that happy power. You will wait here.”

He left the boys in his office and went to find McGonagall.

The Sorting was finished and everyone concentrating on the food as

Snape made his way along the edge of the Great Hall and slipped behind McGonagall's chair. He whispered so that both she and Dumbledore beside her could hear. "I've got the pair of them. They're in my office."

Dumbledore nodded, but McGonagall rose at once. As the two professors left the hall, McGonagall began to question Snape. "Are they hurt?"

"Not really. Weasley has a small cut over his eye. They don't even seem too shaken up, though Weasley will claim the Willow damaged them. They brought up their own things, and when I found them peeking into the Hall, they were speculating on whether or not I'd been sacked because they couldn't see me at the table."

"Dear, dear. That doesn't sound at all penitent. What happened to the Willow?"

"They drove the car right into it. It'll need major work in the morning. Poor Sprout. I haven't the heart to tell her now."

"Have you deducted points from Gryffindor?"

"No. I wasn't thinking about points."

They reached Snape's office door. "How do you stand the cold down here, Severus? My fingers are numb already." As she entered the room, McGonagall raised her wand and lit the fire. The boys cringed as if they thought she would curse them. "Sit," she commanded. "Explain."

It was as ridiculous a story as Snape had ever heard, about the King's Cross barrier not letting them through, and stealing a flying car that just happened to be parked in the center of London. Both Snape and McGonagall already knew about the car from the Weasleys. When McGonagall asked why they didn't send an owl, the pair blushed scarlet.

Then Dumbledore knocked and entered, and the whole tale was repeated. As Snape listened, he watched Dumbledore, and the realization slowly dawned that the Headmaster did not intend to punish the boys. Sure enough, all Dumbledore would do was write to their families. *But Weasley's family already knows, and Potter's family doesn't care. So he's not punishing them at all!* Snape coughed slightly.

"Professor Dumbledore, these boys have flouted the *Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry*, caused serious damage to an old and valuable tree — surely acts of this nature . . ."

Dumbledore would not budge. Turning all responsibility for the matter over to McGonagall, he put an arm around Snape's shoulders and practically pushed him out of his own office. "Come, Severus, there's a delicious-looking custard tart I want to sample . . ."

Snape glanced back at McGonagall, yet had no choice but to accompany Dumbledore. Once in the corridor and out of earshot of any students, though, he refused to be silent.

"It isn't right, sir! It isn't fair! If it were any other student in this school you wouldn't leave it in the hands of the head of house. What they did happened outside and affected the whole school, not to mention the work it's created for Professor Sprout. And that story!"

Dumbledore stopped and, with both hands on Snape's shoulders, turned him so they faced each other. "Severus, look me in the eyes."

Snape glanced up into Dumbledore's blue eyes, then down again. His gaze darted from place to place in the corridor, then fixed on the floor.

"Do not worry, Severus, I am not going to try to read you. But do you remember how many times you lied to me when you were a student? Admittedly it was usually to conceal what someone else had done to you, but they were nonetheless lies. And I did not punish you for them. So in the broader picture of things, I do not think I am being unfair. Consider it *payback*."

"Yes, sir."

"I now have you in a most difficult position. You cannot go back to your office and rooms as they are currently being used by Professor McGonagall to discipline students. You are therefore constrained to go back with me to the Hall and get some of that wonderful food that you have not had a bite of yet. And you will sit with me in McGonagall's seat and not have to talk to Professor Lockhart all evening."

Snape agreed and went with Dumbledore to the feast. The only bad moment was when McGonagall returned and informed him that the boys were eating supper . . .

"In my office! You left those two hooligans alone in my office unsupervised!" Snape rose to go, but Dumbledore pushed him firmly back into the chair.

"You have to learn not to be so paranoid, Severus. Have some custard. It really is quite good."

* * *

Though he would never admit it to anyone, Snape had a certain respect for Molly Weasley, a woman he'd met on very rare occasions. She was the sister of the Prewett brothers who'd been murdered during the time Snape was a Death Eater, and despite the fact that he had nothing to do with their

deaths, Snape always felt guilty about it. More importantly, Molly was ready to do something that few others had the courage or stamina to do — discipline her sons. It was a Herculean task, especially where Fred and George were concerned, but she never gave up.

That next morning, Snape had cause to bless Molly Weasley, for she sent her youngest son a Howler. “RONALD WEASLEY!” it thundered across the Great Hall at breakfast, silencing all conversation as heads snapped around to listen to Weasley’s mother telling him he should be expelled, he had shamed the entire family, and he would be brought straight home if he put another toe out of line.

Thank goodness she sees the situation clearly. Too bad there’s no one to send a Howler to Potter. Maybe I could speak to that uncle of his.

Then, since the week was half gone and there was no extra day for interviews with new students, it was time to begin classes.

At lunch Snape noticed that Professor Sprout glared down the table from time to time at Lockhart. Lockhart was explaining how he managed to rid a Brazilian village of bewitched marsupial anteaters, but Snape finessed the conversation around to the Whomping Willow.

“Professor Sprout was most fortunate that I happened to be here to assist here with that fine specimen of a tree. I’m sure she’s quite competent with her subject matter, vegetables and all, but a willow of that sort needs a specialist’s care. Luckily I happened to have some experience with . . .”

Snape was thinking of a way to rent out Lockhart’s services to people with chronic insomnia when he remembered — “Excuse me, Professor. I’m sorry I have to run, but I have interviews with some of my students before afternoon classes.”

One student actually, Draco Malfoy, who was waiting outside Snape’s office. He was there to show Snape the results of his summer homework, which was to create a spell to permit one to have a conversation that couldn’t be overheard. Snape didn’t expect him to have the spell, and he didn’t, but he’d grasped the concept that silencing spells didn’t create silence. Rather they targeted specific sound frequencies and either masked or augmented them. Snape gave the boy some pointers on how to proceed with the task.

“Sir,” said Draco, when they were through, “could you teach me to defend myself?”

“Your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is Professor Lockhart.”

“I don’t mean that, sir. I mean defend myself. Father says you used to be a defensive combat instructor for . . .”

"I don't discuss certain periods in my past, and I'd prefer you didn't either. What makes you think you're going to need self defense?"

"Well I don't know that I'm going to need it, but if you wait until you need it, it's too late, isn't it?"

"Good point. All right, I'll consider it if you accept that it isn't all magic. The first thing you'll have to learn to do is fall."

"Fall? Fall down? What would I want to fall down for?"

"If you don't know how to do a diving forward roll, you may not have the chance to get your spell off. You think about it, Malfoy, and let me know."

And then there was the news about Lockhart's pixie class. Snape was not among the lucky few to have a free hour that afternoon. Those who did regaled the others with their account of how Lockhart had been driven ignominiously from his own classroom, which now looked as if a bomb had exploded inside it. Kettleburn and Flitwick howled with laughter as they repeated the incantation *Peskipiksi Pesternomi* to the delight of all listeners.

"Where are the pixies now?" asked Snape.

"About half a dozen broke through the windows and are being rounded up outside. A couple of students got the rest," answered Kettleburn.

"And which students might those have been?"

"Harry Potter. And Weasley and Granger, I understand."

My money says you should've named the Granger girl first. I'll wager Potter had a lot less to do with it.

On his way back to his rooms to get ready for supper, Snape ran into Marcus Flint, the captain of Slytherin's Quidditch team. "Sir. Begging your pardon, sir. Could I have a word with you for just a minute. Something's come up."

"Certainly, Flint. Come on in. Is this about you or the team?"

"Team, sir. We got a chance to get something good for the team, but there's tit for tat involved."

"All right, what's the good?"

Flint held out a broomstick. Even Snape, who had about as little experience with brooms as was possible for an adult wizard, recognized the quality. It was sleek, streamlined, and obviously fast. "Nimbus 2001, sir, seven of them. Just out last month and a present to every team member. We could sure use them."

"I heartily agree. What's the catch?"

"They're from Malfoy's father. Draco's to be the new Seeker."

Snape sat on the edge of his desk to consider. "I see. On the one hand, Mr. Malfoy is on the Board of Governors of the School, and the team gets new brooms. Of course, Mr. Malfoy was in Slytherin, and it's not unusual for former house members to present gifts. In and of itself, that's not the problem. The problem is the other hand. It's odd that the gift would be directly connected to Draco's becoming Seeker. Mr. Malfoy is usually more subtle than that, and he would have come to me."

"I'm not sure how it's happened, sir. I got the feeling Draco told his dad that he already was Seeker, and his dad gave the brooms as a thank you. So it's Draco sort of controls the brooms. We could sure use them."

"But not at the expense of a good Seeker. Who else is in line for the position?"

"That's it. No one. Draco's good on a broom, he's quick, and he's hungry. He really is the best shot we got. It just doesn't look good. And Draco, well he can get cocky, if you get me."

"Got you. The insufferable arrogance of the rich. Look, Flint, why don't you make him try out? Even if no one else shows. Tell him if he can't make the grade then you or Derrick'll be Seeker, and brooms be damned. You know he'll make it, and I know he'll make it, but he doesn't have to know. Sound good?"

"Cracker Jack, sir. We'll have to train him up. Wood's booked the pitch solid. No one else's got a shot before next month, he got in so fast."

Snape reached for a small parchment roll. "Here. If Malfoy is satisfactory, take this to the pitch on Saturday. It gives you permission to use it together with Wood. It's a large area. Just keep out of each other's way."

"Thank you, sir. For this and for the advice."

On Friday Flint informed Snape that Malfoy had, indeed, been accepted on the Slytherin Quidditch team as the new Seeker.

* * *

"And what right did you have to take the pitch away from Gryffindor when it was already booked?"

Snape was taken aback at McGonagall's ire. "I didn't take it away. I allowed it to be used at the same time."

"Wood booked it in advance!"

"Wood booked it for four weekends in a row! You can't expect that no one else can train until October. Talk to Flitwick. Talk to Sprout. I'm sure they're not happy either."

"You're just afraid that we're finally going to take that cup away from you this year."

"I am afraid of a lot of things in this world, Minerva McGonagall, but that is not one of them."

The two professors glared at each other for a moment, then a spirit of Puckishness entered Snape. "I understand that rather than train at the same time, your team simply abandoned the pitch. Walked away. Gave up. Surrendered without a fight. Starting with your Seeker."

"Weasley was spitting up slugs. He needed help."

"I sympathize. Not a pleasant experience. But Weasley is not on your team. And Granger was there. And what's-his-name — Creevey — was there. There were others to help him. No, your Seeker just walked away from his team mates. If anyone wins the cup this year, it will be Slytherin."

"I will see you eat those words, Severus Snape, if it's the last thing I do!"

* * *

By October it was easy to see that Lockhart had alienated the entire faculty, except perhaps for Filch since Snape could find no one who'd ever heard Lockhart claim to be good at janitorial work. Snape still had to sit next to the man at meals, and had started refining sleeping and paralyzing draughts, and begun to practice using an Amazonian blow dart.

Malfoy was turning out to be better at hand-to-hand combat than at spell construction. At first he balked at learning the physical techniques until Snape challenged him to a personal duel by the lake during supper. Alone and unwatched, Snape allowed Malfoy any spell he could think of, while Snape promised not to hit Malfoy at all, and use only one defensive spell to every two of Malfoy's attacks. After ten minutes, the boy was ready to learn anything Snape could teach him.

This physical self defense had always been a strain for Snape to teach, since he had to analyze, for the instruction of others, body movements that for him were instinctive and adapt the analysis to fit uniquely different students. Then, while eager, Malfoy was not remotely athletic off a broom. Still, they slowly progressed, and it quickly became clear that Draco was immensely pleased to be learning something Lucius had not learned in his youth.

After much serious thought, Snape also sought out Dumbledore during the first week of October. Together in the quiet period before supper one

evening, they walked down the hill and into the edge of the forest where the trees would frustrate listening spells.

"I think you were wrong about me," Snape said after a moment of silence.

"How so?"

"The first time I lied to you, when I told you we were just talking about summer vacation, you should have stopped me."

"Ah, yes. That little fight Professor McGonagall prevented between you and the Gang of Four. As I recall, you were restricted to your dormitories."

"It wasn't enough."

"What was I to do? I could not prove you were lying. I could not even tell that you were lying, and that disturbed me, I assure you. The only reason I knew it, was because Professor McGonagall witnessed the confrontation."

"You should have forced me to show you the truth. When you know you can get away with something, it tempts you to break more rules. It makes you arrogant."

"We are talking about Harry Potter, are we not?"

"I don't think you should let him lie to you and go unpunished. Or at least let him know that you know. Don't let him think he can deceive you."

"Severus, we do what we can, but we cannot see the future. Sometimes being too strict is not the answer. What would have happened to you if in school I had broken down those amazing defenses you have? You would never have been able to stand up to . . . him. And we very likely would not be here today to have this conversation."

"Are you honestly telling me that you're allowing Potter to break rules today in order to save the world tomorrow?"

"Well, not exactly. It might happen though. Especially since things have changed somewhat since last year. The boy needs to be strong, not timid. He has his special gifts, just as you have yours, and they must not be weakened in the exercise of misguided strictness."

"He is going to continue lying to you."

"As you did. But in the end you came around. And the strengths you had when you finally did come around served us well."

"I still don't agree with you."

"Then it is fortunate that I am the Headmaster, and not you. The boy has a good heart. He will not stray too far from what is right."

"Perhaps, Professor. I still think events could prove you wrong."

C H A P T E R T H I R T Y - E I G H T

THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN

HALLOWEEN, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1992

(TWO DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)

Snape hated Halloween. More than anything, it was for him the anniversary of Lily's death. The fact that he had to make a public appearance at a major feast and pretend to be enjoying it made it worse, although it did usually keep him from thinking too much about the Astronomy Tower. The year before hadn't been so bad in terms of memories since everyone ended up dealing with a troll, and Snape was mauled by a three-headed dog, which tends to distract one's attention. This year was more normal.

It was something, at least, to note that young Potter and his friends were not at the feast. Last year he'd been new and unsure of himself. This year, it appeared, he was sufficiently at ease at Hogwarts to be able to absent himself from the gathering without feeling like he was doing something wrong. For the first time, Snape actually felt some sympathy for the boy. After all, it must be equally difficult for him to have the whole school celebrating on the anniversary of his parents' deaths. Luckily, he had friends for moral support.

As they left the Great Hall at the end of the feast, Snape and the other teachers noticed that student radar had detected a disturbance upstairs. Even the Hufflepuff and Slytherin students were hurrying upwards, away from their dormitories. Since this could signal a fight, the teachers ran for the stairs, too, as quickly as they could go.

Snape reached the second floor with the other teachers in time to hear Malfoy's voice ring out, "Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next, mudbloods!" Then Filch's voice soared above the babble, screaming that his cat had been murdered.

On the wall, written in red letters that might be blood, were the words: *THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.*

Dumbledore swept through the crowd to where Mrs. Norris indeed hung by her tail from a torch bracket. By then Snape was near enough to see that the students directly in front of the stiff body of the cat were Potter and his two friends. *What are they doing here?*

Dumbledore was gathering Filch and the three students to go to his office when Lockhart appeared. "My office is nearest, Headmaster — just upstairs — please feel free —"

"Thank you, Gilderoy," responded Dumbledore, and followed Lockhart with Filch, Potter, Weasley, and Granger. McGonagall went, too, since the students were in her house.

Suddenly, Dumbledore turned to catch Snape's eye. With a slight smile, he lifted a finger and beckoned Snape to follow as well. *This must have something to do with our conversation. We'll see now just exactly how truthful Potter is.*

Inside Lockhart's office, Snape stayed in the background. Filch sobbed like a parent for a dead child as Dumbledore examined the cat and Lockhart babbled about how Mrs. Norris had been killed and all the things he might have done to save her if he'd been there. No one paid any attention to him.

Then Dumbledore calmly informed them that the cat was not dead. "She has been Petrified, but how, I cannot say . . ."

This led to Filch accusing Potter, Potter insisting on his innocence, and the startling revelation that Filch was a Squib who subscribed to a Kwikspell course. Snape and McGonagall glanced at each other. *I really did not need to know all of this.*

Meanwhile, Dumbledore did and said nothing. Snape finally couldn't contain himself any further.

"If I might speak, Headmaster. Potter and his friends may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but we do have a set of suspicious circumstances here. Why was he in the upstairs corridor at all? Why wasn't he at the Halloween feast?"

Expecting Potter to talk about his parents, Snape was astonished to have all three students burst into a simultaneous description of Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington's deathday party. He was now genuinely curious.

"But why not join the feast afterward? Why go up to that corridor?"

And then Potter began his lies. "Because — because — because we were tired and wanted to go to bed."

Snape glanced over at Dumbledore in barely concealed triumph, then looked quickly at all three students. Weasley and Granger were nervous. *Probably wondering what Potter will say next.* "Without any supper?" he asked. "I didn't think ghosts provided food fit for living people at their parties."

"We weren't hungry," said Weasley, a statement betrayed by the unmistakable look of near starvation on his face.

Realizing he could tease McGonagall over the Quidditch flap, and trying to keep a straight face, Snape said, "I suggest, Headmaster, that Potter is not being entirely truthful. It might be a good idea if he were deprived of certain privileges until he is ready to tell us the whole story. I personally feel he should be taken off the Gryffindor Quidditch team until he is ready to be honest."

McGonagall's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Really, Severus, I see no reason to stop the boy playing Quidditch. This cat wasn't hit over the head with a broomstick. There is no evidence at all that Potter has done anything wrong."

Dumbledore turned his gaze from the students to the squabbling teachers. "Innocent until proven guilty, Severus." He then suggested to the still agitated Filch that Mrs. Norris could be cured as soon as Professor Sprout's mandrakes matured and a Restorative Draught was prepared.

"I'll make it," Lockhart interjected, unable to resist stepping into the line of fire. "I must have done it a hundred times. I could whip up a Mandrake Restorative Draught in my sleep..."

Snape turned to him with icy contempt. "Excuse me, but I believe I am the Potions master at this school."

Seeing imminent battle between all three professors, Dumbledore wisely dismissed the students back to their dormitories. Filch left after them.

As soon as the children were out of the office, McGonagall ignored Snape and Quidditch and turned to Dumbledore. "Do you think it's true about the Chamber?" she asked, and her voice sounded worried.

"I do not know, Minerva," Dumbledore answered. "I would think it more likely a prank were it not for the cat."

"What's the Chamber of Secrets?" asked Snape, and noted the look of relief on Lockhart's face. *Happy that he didn't have to be the one that asked.*

"It is a hidden chamber supposedly created by Salazar Slytherin before

he left Hogwarts. Legend says it contains a monster. No one has ever been able to locate it.”

“Then it could be a hoax.”

“Oh no, Severus,” McGonagall whispered. “It was opened at least once before, in my seventh year. A muggle-born girl was killed.”

Lockhart was clearly drinking all of this in. “Ah, the Chamber of Secrets. I’ve thought before that I should put my sleuthing talents to good use by coming here and discovering it. I’ve done similar things, most recently the hidden caves of Samarkand . . .”

“Thank you for your hospitality, Gilderoy. I am getting rather tired now, and shall wish you good night. Pleasant dreams. And to you also Minerva. Severus.”

Snape and McGonagall left with Dumbledore after wishing Lockhart good night. As Snape reached the stairs down to the entrance hall, Dumbledore stopped him. “Would you come up to my office for a moment, Severus?”

“This will not take long,” continued Dumbledore as they entered the office from the griffin stairway, “I merely wanted to give you a ‘heads up’ on this Chamber of Secrets business. Something you really need to know.”

“And that is . . . , Headmaster?”

“A couple of other students you know were at Hogwarts when the Chamber of Secrets was opened the last time. Hagrid was one.”

“Hagrid was a student here? I didn’t know that.”

“A long story. Perhaps he will tell it to you sometime.”

“And the other?”

“Tom Riddle.”

Snape felt as if the room had suddenly turned cold. “Did he have something to do with it opening.”

“I cannot prove it, but I believe so.”

“He came back last year after the Philosopher’s Stone, and now the Chamber of Secrets is open. Are they connected?”

“I do not know. But you, of all people, should be aware of what is happening. You stand to lose more than anyone if he returns. I understand he is unforgiving and has a long memory.”

Snape returned to his rooms in a somber mood and had trouble sleeping that night.

Thus it was that November opened in a haze of unfocused anxiety. Only Gilderoy Lockhart seemed convinced that everything was not only explainable but under control. As an extra strain on already frayed nerves, the first

half of November brought the year's first Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin.

Until Halloween night, Snape wasn't dreading this first match. Now, with the specter of the Dark Lord's return and the memory of the previous year's match, he was wondering if Potter would once again be attacked. This time he would be prepared. He even planned to bring a pair of binoculars to search the crowd with. Just in case.

The night before the match, Draco Malfoy sprang the next piece of information on Snape.

"My father's coming to watch my first game. He said to tell you that he looks forward to a little chat."

"And when exactly did he tell you this, Malfoy?"

"Last week. Sorry. I forgot to mention it."

Snape met Lucius Malfoy when the latter apparated to the Hogsmeade gate and escorted him onto the grounds. It was more than a decade since they'd last seen each other. The seven year difference in their ages that had once made the adolescent Snape the follower had become unimportant. Malfoy had grown more reserved and Snape more self-assured in the intervening years.

"Narcissa asks to be remembered to you. She holds a fondness, it seems."

"As do I. Tell her I think of all of you often."

"So tell me, how is this son of mine shaping up on the Quidditch field?"

"He has talent, at least in practice. We'll see today how it translates into open competition. I must admit I am a bit leery of his temper. He needs to keep it under control to focus more."

"Draco isn't one to let others walk over him. We've taught him to put himself forward and not take second place to anyone. He'll be fine. And just send this down to the kitchen," Malfoy added, referring to the house elf he'd brought to valet for him. "He knows what to do."

Snape presented Malfoy to the staff at lunch. Lucius was deferential to Dumbledore and respectful to his former teachers, principally McGonagall and Flitwick. He greeted Lockhart with the politeness due to the latter's fame, but without any invitation to familiarity. In sum, he was the perfect patrician.

Alone at a side table, the two reminisced for awhile, then allowed the conversation to touch on more recent events.

"The Ministry is actually conducting raids to find so-called 'dangerous' artifacts." Malfoy was almost, not quite, complaining. "Now take a family

like ours. We have quite an extensive collection, really museum quality, of historical items and personal memorabilia. You would think that something of that intrinsic cultural value might be exempt from some of the new rules, but no. They must examine everything from the point of view of its potential harm in the hands of a psychopath. Hardly a responsible attitude, I'd say."

"I should probably check my own things as well. All very ordinary and commonplace, but one never knows what the Ministry will see as a threat."

After lunch the whole school made its way down the hill to the Quidditch pitch. There was a special electricity in the air since not only were Gryffindor and Slytherin particular rivals, it was generally known that the two Seekers, Potter and Malfoy, despised each other. The students were expecting action.

Snape settled next to Lucius Malfoy in one of the boxes and the game began. The Slytherin team shone on the new brooms, and Snape quietly asked Malfoy if he would mind meeting the team afterwards so that they could thank him for his generous gift. Malfoy agreed with well-bred condescension.

Then, suddenly, one of the bludgers began to misbehave. Instead of shooting around randomly, it seemed to target Potter almost exclusively. From a potentially painful nuisance, it had transformed into a dangerous missile. After a few passes, there was no mistake. The bludger was after Potter.

This is like last year. Last year it was the Dark Lord working through Quirrell. Where is he now? Snape focused on the bludger to divert it with a counter spell and got the shock of his life. Nothing he could do had any effect on the bludger at all.

In disbelief, Snape concentrated all his mental energy on the ball. He didn't dare try to simply destroy the thing because it was flying in zigzag patterns around the fourteen players. There was too much risk of hurting one of the students. Instead he tried for the core of the ball itself.

What Snape touched in the center of the bludger was a power so strong that it threw him back like a physical blow. He tried again, and was tossed back again. No one was that strong. No wizard in the world had that kind of power, and Snape was now very afraid.

* * *

Dumbledore had tea set out with biscuits and scones. He motioned Snape to sit and poured a cup, insisting that Snape relax for a few minutes before reporting on the afternoon's events.

"Has Lucius left yet? I do hope his visit was enjoyable." Dumbledore's inquiry was more than mere politeness.

"It would've been more so if Slytherin had won. He's with Draco now, touring the grounds and talking. Probably reviewing every teacher and student in the school. Draco will see him out to the gate. Is Potter's arm all right?"

"It will be. Madam Pomfrey is getting up a party to tar and feather Gilderoy Lockhart. I understand there is a waiting list. But the less said about that the better. Now, tell me what happened."

"There isn't a lot to tell." Snape said. "When the bludger went crazy, I thought about destroying it, but there was no way to get a clear shot. So I tried to countercurse it. I was slapped down and tossed back like a rank amateur. Closed out completely. Don't smile. That's never happened to me before. I mean never."

"You have never directly taken me on. Nor, despite last year's Quidditch match, have you ever directly taken on . . . You know, Severus, we are going to have to decide on something new to call him. I respect the fact that when I say his name it causes you pain, yet I cannot say something like 'You-Know-Who.' I long ago grew tired of the name Moriarty. Since it appears we are again going to be speaking of him regularly, we really have to resolve this."

"How about 'Riddle'?"

Dumbledore looked at Snape over the rim of his glasses. "Most interesting that you should suggest that. Take him back to his school days, before he began to acquire power. Do you know that when you were in school I worried that you might become like him?"

"I was never like him, sir!"

"At eleven, he was not like him either. Two boys from traumatic childhood situations — yours was actually worse than his — both interested in the Dark Arts, both gifted in unique yet similar ways, both with a, shall we say, unconventional moral compass . . . Oh you had us worried for a while."

"When did you stop worrying about me?"

"I have never stopped worrying about you. My worries simply changed their focus. It was, I believe, your second year, when you started stealing telescopes out of the Astronomy classroom. No boy interested in the Apollo moon shots was going to try to become a Dark Lord."

"I was interested long before my second year."

"Ah, but I did not know it because you were not stealing telescopes."

“Yes, that was for . . .” Snape stopped. He knew both of them remembered who that was for.

“Right,” continued Dumbledore, “You have never directly taken either me or Riddle on. What you felt today with the bludger, would you expect to feel that if you were locked in a confrontation with me?”

Snape considered this question for a few moments, trying to recreate in his mind the exact sensation he’d felt when thrown back from the bludger. “No, I don’t think so. It wasn’t really like a very, very powerful wizard. It was something different. Something more alien.”

“Did I understand that Lucius brought a house elf with him?”

“No. I mean, yes he did, but no that can’t be it. Lucius wouldn’t try to win a Quidditch game through magic. He’d expect Draco to do it through superior skill. And if Draco didn’t, it would be between him and his father. Draco does a lot to try to please his father.”

“But this force you felt. Could it have been a house elf?”

“I don’t know. I know they’re powerful, but I don’t have any direct experience of one. You know, if that was a house elf, if anyone ever tries organizing them against us . . . we’re in trouble.”

The following morning was Sunday. Normally it was a day to relax and take things easy, especially for the teachers not assigned to supervisory duties. Today, however, there was a note under Snape’s door asking him to come to the staff room before breakfast.

When they’d all crowded in, Dumbledore explained. “Last night a most unfortunate incident occurred. One of our first year Gryffindor students was discovered on the stairs petrified in the same manner that Mrs. Norris was attacked. He is in hospital now. We must all accept the fact that the message we received on Halloween was not a prank. The Chamber of Secrets has indeed been opened.”

“Such a pity I wasn’t there with the boy when it happened,” piped up Lockhart. “I would have been able to — Ow!”

“I am sorry, Professor. Was that your foot? So crowded in here.” Professor Sprout looked angelic as she smiled sympathetically up at Lockhart. On the way out she was quietly but warmly thanked by several teachers, Snape among them.

“So there really is a Chamber? I thought it was a myth.”

“As did I until Halloween, Pomona.” Snape nodded towards McGonagall. “Minerva knows as much as anyone, I’d guess. She was a student here the

last time it was opened.” Sprout immediately scurried after McGonagall to question her.

The next few weeks saw an upsurge of interest among the student body for any information about the history of the Chamber, defensive spells, protective potions, and all kinds of good luck charms. The teachers kept running across signs of, and trying to control, a thriving black market in bogus items, and poor Professor Flitwick was constantly fielding questions about amulets.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1992 (THE DAY AFTER THE FULL MOON)

The afternoon lesson was with the Slytherin and Gryffindor second years. It was Snape’s least favorite group since the bumbling incompetence they’d shown in their first year stayed with the class into their second. Class with them was an unending exercise in disaster prevention.

Snape was on edge more than usual since the class would be making a potion with a potential for being dangerous. Swelling Solutions were useful for examining things that in their natural state were too small to see clearly, but also tended to get splashed on careless students. The greatest concern was swallowing any of it, as that would swell the tongue and the muscles of the throat, a possibly fatal situation. Snape always had plenty of the antidote, Deflating Draught, around just in case.

The lesson was going about as expected, which meant that most of the students were doing a miserable job, when one of the potions on the Slytherin side of the room simply, well, exploded. Snape was luckily on the Gryffindor side checking Longbottom’s potion when it happened, and wasn’t hit by any of the messy solution, but the Slytherin students were showered with it.

Panic-stricken students were screaming and blundering around the room as noses, ear, lips, fingers, shoulders, began to swell. There was danger that in the pandemonium other cauldrons would tip over. Snape was on the Slytherin side instantly, pulling students away from the goo and trying to restore some calm. Typically, the Gryffindor students were laughing.

There is no way the potion could have exploded on its own. Someone caused this deliberately. “Silence! SILENCE!” Snape yelled over the chaos, and the Slytherins, used to his presence and voice, did in fact quiet down. “Anyone who has been splashed, come here for a Deflating Draught.” As students lined up for a dose of the antidote, Snape glared at the Gryffindor students, whose continued mirth infuriated him. “When I find out who did this . . .”

The offending cauldron was Goyle's. After treating the last student, Snape walked over to it and with a ladle fished out what was obviously the remains of a Filibuster firework. Someone on the Gryffindor side had tossed it into the cauldron with the intention of harming Slytherin students.

Cold with anger, Snape swept the room with his gaze. Potter's face in particular caught his eye, for the poorly concealed smirk that tried to hide a glint of triumph. Looking directly at the guilty face, Snape said in a tone barely above a whisper, "If I ever find out who threw this, I shall make sure that person is expelled."

"Severus, Severus, calm down. You do not know it was him. You have no proof."

"You didn't see his face, Professor Dumbledore. I don't need more proof than that. He threw that firecracker into that cauldron with total disregard for the safety of other students."

"Really, Severus," McGonagall spoke for the first time. "It doesn't sound like Potter at all. I know he has a certain disregard for rules, but I've never known him to be malicious."

"Like you never knew his father to be malicious? Shall I entertain you some time with tales of the things he used to do when the teachers weren't watching?"

"Are we talking about James or about Harry?" Dumbledore watched both teachers with undisguised concern.

Focus. Focus. This isn't about the past. It's about now. "Headmaster, do you realize what would have happened if any of that liquid had gotten into a student's mouth? Have you ever seen a case of anaphylactic shock? We might very well have had a dead student on our hands. This was not a harmless prank. In all my years as a student and a teacher I have never witnessed such disdain for the safety of others. Not even Fred or George Weasley, not even Sirius Black, has ever done anything that callous. That boy is evil."

"Evil is a strong word."

"He needs to be disciplined."

"Do you have proof that it was his firecracker?"

"No."

"Did you or did any other witness see him throw it?"

"No."

"Then while I understand your being upset at what happened, I cannot discipline Potter. We do not know that he was the culprit."

Snape and McGonagall left Dumbledore's office. Snape felt sick, and it must have shown in his face.

"Are you going to be all right, Severus. It must have been horrendous."

"I have two students in hospital, Minerva. Pressure on the retinas may have affected Goyle's sight, and Zabini has a dislocated shoulder. Your precious charges were laughing about it."

"I'll speak to them all, right now before supper if I can. But I really don't think it could have been Potter."

A little less than a week later, McGonagall approached Snape about a completely different matter. Coming over to his place at supper Wednesday evening, she stood behind him and Lockhart and said, "Refresh my memory, Severus. Isn't it true that you used to teach defensive tactics to..."

"Minerva! That's really not something... Would you excuse us for a moment Professor?"

Taking McGonagall by the arm, Snape steered her into a corner. "What are you doing? Do you think I want that idiot knowing all about my past? It's bad enough that some of the students spread rumors. And where did you learn that anyway?"

"I have my sources. And I just wanted to put a bee in his bonnet. Do you know what he's asked Dumbledore? For permission to give dueling lessons. And he's looking for a sparring partner."

"Oh really?"

"Would you like a chance at him? One that he sets up himself? I've just been doing a bit of ground work for you, laddie. Setting out the bait, as it were. You've got to reel him in on your own."

Snape and McGonagall returned to their respective places. Lockhart was now all eager curiosity. "Teaching defensive tactics? Not as in personal combat, was it? I'm quite a dueler myself, national competition, you know."

"It was a long time ago, and on a very small scale. I doubt I'm in your league at all."

"Well then you really must help me out. The Headmaster has asked me to set up a little dueling instruction to arm the students in their own defense. I could use an assistant to help me demonstrate some of the moves and spells. I'd be very careful not to hurt you, of course. Wouldn't want to have to find a new Potions instructor now would we?"

"When would this take place?"

"Tomorrow evening after supper."

"Agreed. I'll assist you in the lesson."

For the rest of the evening, McGonagall and Kettleburn were making book with the other teachers on who would ‘win’ the next day. Odds were running seven to one against Lockhart by the time everyone went to bed.

The notices went up Thursday at noon, and by eight o’clock Thursday evening the Great Hall was packed. Lockhart had arranged for one side of the Hall to be set up like a stage and personally called to accompany Snape to the ground floor. Lockhart had chosen robes of a deep violet, but Snape eschewed robes completely, finding that they hampered his movements. In their place, he wore his usual black Victorian trousers and frock coat, which flattered his slender frame, yet didn’t overemphasize the fact that he was two degrees to the wrong side of skinny.

The students parted for them, as the Red Sea parted for Moses. Far more to the point were the teachers, who lined the walls behind. *Who among them doesn’t want to see Lockhart taken down a peg?* Snape couldn’t think of one.

Lockhart advanced to the center of the stage and raised his hand for silence. “Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent!” After a plug for his books, he continued, “Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape.”

Snape stepped forward. The students were quiet, except for applause from Slytherin, in which the teachers joined.

Lockhart was now grinning from ear to ear. “He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about dueling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with a short demonstration before we begin. Now, I don’t want any of you youngsters to worry — you’ll still have your Potions master when I’m through with him, never fear!”

Snape was concentrating on the upcoming exchange. *Lockhart will only give me one shot. After that, he’ll back away as quickly as he can, so the one shot has to be good.* For some reason he was reminded of the fencing competition at the Barcelona Olympics that summer. *Olympic wizard dueling. That would be nice.*

They faced each other on the stage, Snape nodding curtly and Lockhart giving an extravagant play-actor’s bow. Then Snape stood with balanced ease as Lockhart noted proper stance and wand position, adding “Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course.”

Despite both temptation and provocation.

“One — two — three . . .”

There was no rule in competitive dueling that forbade casting two spells

simultaneously. Snape's wand came down almost lazily, with classic extension, as he called out, "*Expelliarmus!*" while at the same time nonverbally casting a Rikhno spell. The results were everything McGonagall could have wished for and more.

Flame seemed to shoot from Snape's wand as Lockhart was lifted and flung backwards off the stage, to hit the wall behind him and slump clumsily to the floor. His wand went almost straight up in the air and fell back among the students. The beauty of it was that both spells could have been blocked easily with one simple shield.

Slytherin erupted in cheers, and so did the teachers. "Oh, well done!" cried Pomfrey, and Sprout was positively bouncing.

Snape waited calmly as Lockhart staggered to his feet, his hair disheveled and clothing disarrayed for the first time since his arrival at Hogwarts. "Well, there you have it," he said, as he returned unsteadily to the stage. "That . . . was a Disarming Charm — as you see, I've lost my wand — ah, thank you, Miss Brown." He was eyeing Snape warily now, as if conscious for the first time that he may have seriously underestimated an opponent.

Snape returned the stare without trepidation. *This oaf couldn't read the back of a breakfast cereal box.*

"Yes, an excellent idea to show them that, Professor Snape, but if you don't mind my saying so, it was very obvious . . ."

Snape let him babble, then gently dropped his wand arm into dueling position again and raised his eyebrows in invitation. Lockhart's reaction was immediate.

"Enough demonstrating! I'm going to come amongst you now and put you all into pairs. Professor Snape, if you'd like to help me . . ."

Snape moved quickly. It was the perfect opportunity to test Malfoy's progress and to gauge Potter's abilities at the same time. Potter was automatically looking at his friend Weasley, but stepping lightly down from the platform, Snape intervened.

"Time to split up the 'dream team,' I think," he said, though he doubted the boys would understand the reference. "Mr. Malfoy, come over here. Let's see what you make of the famous Potter."

"Face your partners and bow!" called Lockhart. *As if this was a dance. He can't ever have fought a real battle, not the way he behaves.*

Lockhart cautioned the students to try disarming each other only and began, "One . . . two . . . three . . ."

Malfoy got his spell off before the count was finished, but though he

hit Potter, Potter was not disarmed. He retaliated not with a Disarming Charm, but with a Rictusempra that brought Malfoy to his knees choking with laughter. It brought back unpleasant memories for Snape. *Better here than in Herbology next to the flesh-eating plants.*

Snape started forward to intervene, since they were only supposed to use disarming spells, when Malfoy from his doubled up position on the floor managed to gasp, "*Tarantallegra!*" and the next instant Potter was hopping around like a mad Irishman doing a jig.

Snape struggled to hold back laughter as Lockhart started frantically screaming "Stop! Stop!" *Gad, this reminds me of me and his father. I wonder if we looked that silly while we were hexing each other.*

Realizing that Lockhart was incapable of handling the situation, Snape stepped forward and cried out "*Finite Incantatem!*" to the whole group. All combat stopped as the spells dissipated, all except for the fight between Granger and Bulstrode that had nothing to do with magic.

After establishing a semblance of order, Lockhart said, "I think I'd better teach you how to block unfriendly spells." He glanced over at Snape, seemed to remember the spells he'd not blocked before, and hurriedly continued, "Let's have a volunteer pair — Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you..."

That did not suit Snape, who now wanted to see more of what Malfoy and Potter were capable of. "A bad idea, Professor Lockhart. Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We'll be sending what's left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox. How about Malfoy and Potter?"

Lockhart agreed, and they moved the action to the center of the Hall, clearing away the students from behind the two duelists in case of wild shots. Lockhart started to show Potter a defensive move, but was so nervous he dropped his wand. Snape closed his eyes and turned away, his hand over his mouth. When he looked again, the other teachers were laughing, too.

Bending down to Malfoy's ear, Snape whispered, "This time wait until three. You jump the count, you're disqualified. If Potter actually does what Lockhart tells him, you'll win easily. Send him something to block, but not too powerful."

The boys exchanged nods and glares, and Lockhart counted three. This time Malfoy waited, but was ready with a spell well before Potter. Shouting, "*Serpensortia!*" he shot a long black snake from his wand that thudded onto the floor of the Hall and glided threateningly toward Potter. Students

screamed and fell back, and Potter froze on the spot as the snake raised its head to strike.

Snape started forward. "Don't move, Potter," he said, "I'll get rid of it..."

Lockhart beat him to it. "Allow me!" he shouted, and promptly shot the snake into the air. When it came down it was hissing wildly, striking the air at random and slithering toward Finch-Fletchley.

Snape started forward again, then froze as completely as Potter had frozen facing the snake the first time. Potter was advancing on the snake, focused and radiating a menacing authority, and he was talking to the creature. Talking to it in its own language. Hissing commands that the snake heeded, for it turned to him and bowed forward on the floor in submission.

This isn't happening. This can't be happening. Parseltongue is an hereditary gift. James didn't have it. Lily didn't have it. I know of only one wizard of our age... Forcing himself to remember there was still a dangerous snake in the Hall, forcing himself to move forward, Snape raised his wand and destroyed the viper in a puff of black smoke. The shocked witnesses were beginning to mutter ominously, and Snape realized he was watching Potter's movements as if mesmerized.

Potter's friend Weasley grabbed him by the robes, and he and Granger pushed Potter out of the Hall.

McGonagall hurried over to Snape. "What just hap..." she started.

"I have to talk to Dumbledore," was Snape's response.

Dumbledore sat quietly at his desk as Snape paced the office in undisguised agitation.

"He's a Parselmouth! A Parselmouth! How can that happen? He isn't a descendant of Slytherin, is he? James wasn't a Parselmouth. Not that anyone knew. Lily certainly wasn't. Does it skip generations? That would mean James..."

"You really do have to try to calm yourself, Severus. This is not healthy."

"Healthy! We may be harboring a second Dark Lord here at Hogwarts and my pacing isn't healthy?"

"Now I really must insist that you sit down, Severus. Harry Potter is no second Dark Lord, and you are working yourself into an apoplexy. Sit... That is better. Now, I need to tell you a story. It is a story about three boys, and I do not know the end of it yet, but I know enough to get started.

"Each of these boys was born into a different generation in a different part of England, but against all odds they have met and know each other. Their lives are now entwined. They were all dark-haired and thin, all with lonely,

isolated childhoods, all viewing the world as a hostile force against which they had to fight for survival. All with unique gifts of power and defense. All with, as I have mentioned before, a rather unconventional moral compass.”

Snape shook his head. “I’m not sure this is a story about three boys. I think it’s far more likely to be about just two.”

“And yet the third boy is the catalyst that brought the other two together.”

“I’m not proud of that. And what has this got to do with Potter being a Parselmouth?”

Dumbledore paused and considered Snape for a long moment. Snape refused to meet his eyes and ended up staring out a narrow window. Finally Dumbledore spoke. “Which is it that frightens you more? Being like Riddle or being like Potter?”

“I’m not frightened.”

“No of course not. You just came up to pace a hole in my carpet because you are so contented with life. But I have still not resolved your first question. Here it is. I do not think that Potter was born a Parselmouth. I think he became a Parselmouth when he and Riddle touched each other eleven years ago. I have no details. Does that help?”

Snape still wouldn’t look at Dumbledore, but the answer merited reflection. “Yes,” he replied. “It does. I should probably go now. It’s getting late.”

“Very well. Severus, I know that you do not want to talk about this, yet at some point we shall have to. I am fairly clear about the roles of two of the boys, but the role of the third is a mystery to me. I know he will have a role, though, and I should very much like to find out what it is. Good night, Severus.”

“Good night, Headmaster.”

Hagrid dropped by the next morning before breakfast. “Dumbledore says I need to check on ya.”

“Dumbledore is wrong. I don’t need checking.”

“That’s what I told him. Ya don’t need checking. So I’ll just sit here for a few minutes so ’s I can tell him I checked.”

After a moment, Snape spoke. “Hagrid, how well do you know Potter?”

“Bout as well as any. Better’n most.”

“Do you see any resemblance between him . . . and . . .”

“Naw. Not a bit of it. You were always so independent. Never wanted t’ share a plan, never wanted help. Worst thing ever happened t’ you was when ya was forced to admit ya couldn’t handle it by yerself, that ya needed

someone t' back ya up. Potter now, he wants t' share, wants friends, hates the idea of being alone. He's eager for support and plays best on a team. Night and day the two of ya are in that respect."

"Did you know Tom Riddle?"

"I did. Not someone I want t' talk about. But you ain't a bit like him either. Ya got too much sense of balance. Someone tips ya into a stand of Venus Flytraps, ya sets bats on him. Riddle now, he'd kill the person. No sense of proportion. No balance. You draws lines and sticks to limits. Riddle, he didn't know the meaning of limits."

Hagrid stood and stretched. "Well, I got t' go now. I'll tell Dumbledore I looked in, but ya didn't need no checking. See ya at breakfast."

"At breakfast, Hagrid."

As Snape walked through the entrance hall to breakfast, he noticed it was snowing. Not a gentle, sifting snow, but a dark swirling storm, almost a blizzard. That meant the students would be stuck inside most of the day, which frequently meant trouble.

Professor Sprout was announcing that all Herbology classes were canceled. *Lucky her. She has an excuse to cancel class. What kind of excuse could I come up with? We're too high to flood...*

The best thing about breakfast that morning was that Lockhart was not talking. He kept glancing at Snape as if he were trying to complete an assessment, and a couple of times he opened his mouth, but he never actually said anything. *Maybe I should toss him against a wall more often.*

Morning classes were normal, except that there was an inordinate amount of whispering going on in the icy Potions classroom. From what Snape could catch, it was more about Potter and the snake than it was about the dueling. Not at all surprising, under the circumstances. Snape would be doing the same thing in their place.

Just before lunch time, Snape was once again making his way to the Great Hall when he was stopped by a flustered McGonagall, who pulled him toward one wall and away from the students.

"It's happened again," she whispered fiercely. "Another student's been petrified. And Sir Nicholas, too!"

"Who?"

"The Hufflepuff boy, Finch-Fletchley. The one the snake almost bit last evening. The one who found him was Potter. He's up with Dumbledore now."

"And Sir Nicholas?"

"His aura's gone out. Dark as coal."

"Where?"

"Fifth floor corridor."

Hagrid was crossing the hall and saw the two talking. "Are you telling him about Justin?" he asked McGonagall.

"When did you hear?" McGonagall asked.

"'Bout an hour ago. I been up t' Dumbledore's office. Harry's all right. Dumbledore knows he didn't do it."

"Hagrid," said Snape quietly. "Why do you have a dead rooster in your hand?"

"Oh, that. Somewhat's been killing them. This is the second. I need permission t' put a spell around the coop t' keep off the varmints."

Snape never ignored the warning bells. *Last year it was dead unicorns. Now it's dead roosters. This means something, but what?* "I'm going up to the hospital wing to talk to Madam Pomfrey."

"What about lunch?"

"I'm not hungry."

Dumbledore was there as well, talking with Madam Pomfrey about the four patients. "Ah, Severus. I was thinking of interrupting your lunch, but you seem to have read my mind. What do you think of all of this?"

"I wouldn't want to steal Professor Lockhart's glory. He is, after all, the Dark Arts instructor."

Dumbledore stared down his glasses. "Do not be cheeky, Master Snape. Come, look at them. What could have done this?"

There were no marks on the bodies, just straightforward paralysis. Dumbledore pointed out the slight hardening of tissue as well as the stiffening. "It seems to be a mild form of Petrification. I am not familiar with it."

"Gorgons and cockatrices petrify, but it's a full petrification, nothing like this." The warning bells rang in Snape's head again. "Did Hagrid tell you about the roosters?"

"Yes, he did. Do you think it is connected?"

"Basilisks die when they hear roosters crow. But that would mean a person helping the basilisk. And in any case, basilisks kill. They don't paralyze or petrify."

"Is there anything such a creature would not affect?"

"Weasels. Weasels are immune to basilisks, and have been known to kill small ones."

"Come to my office again, Severus. I need to talk to you."

Once up in the Headmaster's tower office, Dumbledore wasted no time. "Have you ever summoned a patronus?"

"No. I've never tried. I'm not sure I could."

"Why not?"

"You need to concentrate on a good memory. A very strong good memory. I have a little trouble coming up with one."

"I'd appreciate it if you would start working on it. It takes a while to develop the skill, and the time may be coming when you will need one."

"Professor, what happened the last time the Chamber was opened? McGonagall said a muggle-born girl died. What did she die of?"

"That is the problem. She did not die 'of' anything. She simply died. The results were a little like an Unforgivable Curse. No marks, no trauma, just dead."

"That sounds more like a basilisk. Why are our victims being petrified? And not full stone petrification either, but this halfway state that I've never heard of?"

"I cannot answer that. I do not know. But the idea that a person may be involved, killing roosters to protect this monster, that disturbs me greatly, especially in light of what happened last year. I really would like you to work on summoning a patronus. If you need my help or advice, let me know."

"Yes, Professor."

That afternoon's Potions was with the Slytherin and Gryffindor second years. Potter stayed in a corner with Weasley and Granger while the rest of the class gave them a wide berth. Snape found himself constantly glancing at the boy, wondering what else he might be capable of besides Parseltongue, and trying to see if there was anything in him that reminded Snape of either the Dark Lord or himself. *Get a grip on yourself. You're losing your concentration on this.*

That evening after supper, Snape settled in his small room to consider the patronus problem. A powerful memory of something positive, something good, something happy. Nothing came. There were good memories, but either they were weak, or they were tainted with an inseparable sorrow and guilt. Nothing. Nothing to summon a patronus with.

Snape went to bed and was trying to drift off to sleep when one powerful, unspoiled memory did surface. He was a teenager in Lancashire with his grandmother, Nana. They were kneeling beside a dying muggle boy, a boy who'd fallen from a roof. Nana gripped him and told him, 'You have the gift! Use it.' And he looked into the boy's unconscious eyes and saw the ruptured

spleen, the spleen that Nana could witch to health again with her healing powers.

I saved a life. Snape ran it through his mind over and over again. Was there anything that sullied it, that stole its cleanness? And there wasn't. Not even Nana's death at the hands of a muggle mob, because now he knew they'd been under an Imperius curse.

Snape made no attempt to summon a patronus that night. He needed to bring back the memory, to relive it and conjure up all the feelings he'd had at that moment. When the memory was full-grown and vital inside him, then he could try the summoning.

An underlying doubt still gnawed at him. *Why is Dumbledore so sure I'll need this?*

The Christmas break started out very quietly, for most of the students were only too glad to leave Hogwarts for a couple of weeks. Having little work and few duties, Snape spent a lot of time by the lake, hidden from the Castle, trying the patronus charm.

At first it didn't work at all, and he was afraid that his best memory was still not good enough. The relief he felt the morning he produced his first small, wispy Patronus was immense. *It's only a matter of time, now.*

Christmas Eve was the turning point. Snape worked all afternoon and into the evening. The sun had set, it was time for supper, he was cold and hungry. His little wisps of cloud were growing larger and stronger, and beginning to take shape.

Then, just as he told himself it was finished for the day, just as he extended his wand and cried, "*Expecto Patronum*" for the last time, it happened. The cloudy patronus assume a shape, shadowy and indistinct, yet nonetheless an animal he could identify.

I wonder why that one. Snape returned to the Castle for supper in a pensive mood.

"Fawkes?" said Dumbledore that evening in the Great Hall as they lingered after supper. The Hall was so empty of students that there was no trouble finding a spot to speak privately over an after-dinner glass of port. "Are you sure? I was not certain it would be possible."

"I don't know why not. It's not uncommon. I'm still trying to determine what it means."

"Loyalty, of course. It's one of the greatest symbols of faith and trust we have."

"Really?" Snape was puzzled, but the Hall was warm, and he was

comfortable. There were worse ways to spend Christmas Eve than debating patronuses. “I was thinking more of cleverness, intelligence, resourcefulness . . .”

“Well there is that, too, but above all, loyalty. It is an excellent sign.”

Snape took a sip of the port before he said, “And then, of course, the color.”

Dumbledore looked puzzled so, a little embarrassed, he added, “The red hair, you know.”

“Yes, indeed. She had red hair. I fear that is something that you would be more likely to think of than I. There is also the element of renewal, regeneration . . .”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me there, sir.”

“What is there more obvious about a phoenix than its death and rebirth? That should be the first thing . . .”

Snape laughed, something he did so rarely that Dumbledore stopped in mid-sentence. “No, sir. Not Fawkes. A fox — f-o-x — little wild hunting dog, you know. Tally-ho and all that.”

It was Dumbledore’s turn to laugh. “We have been talking at cross purposes, have we not? Still, I wonder . . . might there be something to the fact that your patronus’s name is a homonym for my phoenix? As if the reality were hiding, knowable only to those who had the code. A little like you eleven years ago, concealing your true loyalty behind a guise of cleverness. Fawkes the Fox. Now I see what you mean about the red hair, too. It is closer to her color.”

“So what can we say about foxes? What does this patronus mean for me?”

Dumbledore thought for a moment. “Able to live almost anywhere, tend to be nocturnal, solitary hunters, wide variety of hunting techniques adapted to prey, very cat-like, often blamed for the depredations of weasels and polecats, hunted for sport, passionately defended by animal-rights types . . . what have I left out?”

“So I’m doomed to be alone, survive by my own cleverness, be hunted mercilessly for things I didn’t do, and be defended — probably posthumously — by a group of fanatic nut-cases.”

“All the while being secretly faithful, but having your loyalty known only to those who have the code.”

“I’ll take it. Pass the port.”

Later that evening, in his own rooms preparing for bed, Snape thought again about his patronus, his animal avatar.

Foxes are clever and adaptable. I'll have to check, but I think they're monogamous, so the loyalty aspect is there. They're an icon of sport hunting, but also the epitome of destructive pillage. I wonder if Dumbledore is right about the fox/Fawkes connection. That would be interesting.

He went to sleep and dreamt of foxes. He also dreamt of Lily and the Apollo moon shots, but wasn't sure when he woke if the dreams were connected or not.

Christmas Day was quiet and peaceful. Snape spent a little time in the afternoon working on his new patronus, then played cribbage with Flitwick. After supper he settled down to read another of his mysteries. He'd gotten to the fourth book and was trying to work out how a corpse still in *rigor mortis* would have a loose knee when there was a preemptory knock at the door.

It was Filch. "Madam Pomfrey needs you in the hospital right away."

Since Filch either didn't have or refused to divulge any other information, Snape followed him out immediately. Filch left him in the entrance hall. *At least I wasn't already asleep.*

Madam Pomfrey met Snape at the door to the hospital wing. "It's the Granger girl," she said quietly.

"Another petrification? Shouldn't you have sent for McGonagall? It's her house."

"Not petrification. A hex."

Snape started to smile. "Isn't that for Gilde . . ." he began, but thought the better of it as Pomfrey's face turned murderous.

They entered the hospital dormitory where Granger was sitting on the bed. She was probably dejected, though it was hard to tell since she had the face, paws, and tail of a cat. She looked up at the sound of footsteps, then quickly back down again when she realized who it was.

"Good evening, Miss Granger."

"Good evening, Professor."

"Do you happen to have any idea who hexed you like this?"

Granger shook her head.

"I hope you'll excuse me, but I'm going to have to examine you." Snape lifted the girl's chin to check her eyes, and began a murmured litany of instructions. "Open your mouth a little, please. Tilt your head so I can check your ears. I'm going to push up your sleeves to look at your arms. Now we need to remove your shoes. Don't worry, Madam Pomfrey will check the tail later . . ."

"Miss Granger," Snape said when he was finished. "I do not believe that you don't know who hexed you. You've been transformed by Polyjuice Potion. You would have had to drink it, and since it's quite a disgusting concoction, you would have noticed at once. Did someone give it to you, or did you make it yourself?"

"I made it myself, sir."

"Considering how long it takes to make, you must have started shortly after I mentioned it in class. Do you remember that it was an example of a Potion that could only involve humans and must never be made from animals?"

"Yes, sir. I got the cat hair by mistake."

"So you were trying to turn yourself into someone who owns a cat. I'll leave it to Professor McGonagall to find out who, and to determine your punishment, though the fact that the spell is permanent when worked with animals ought to be punishment enough. Don't worry," Snape continued at the sight of her stricken face, "there is an antidote potion, but it takes nearly as long to make as the Polyjuice Potion does. You're going to have to stay here for the next month. Unless you want to attend your classes as a cat."

Granger shook her head. *Silly girl. At least when she decided to do something foolish it was also something relatively harmless.*

Snape turned to Madam Pomfrey. "I'll start on the antidote right away. There really isn't anything else to do but wait and watch her diet very carefully. If she starts craving mice, let me know immediately. I'll keep you informed of the antidote's progress. Well, good night, Madam Pomfrey. Good night, Miss Granger."

Back in his office, Snape cleared off an area well away from any drafts or heat and began setting up the cauldrons and ingredients. It was a foul-smelling brew, which would make his office and private room unpleasant for a while, but there was no place else to make the antidote. He couldn't do it in the classroom for fear one of the students might contaminate it, or worse, drink it.

The initial setup took a few hours, and it was three o'clock in the morning before Snape finally got to bed.

The next morning Lockhart eased into his seat at breakfast with a face all careful sympathy. "They say that Miss Granger has been confined to the hospital wing. You wouldn't happen to know why? The dear girl is a great fan of mine."

Point against Granger. Unless there are two Grangers. “She seems to have developed a slight gatanthropic tendency.”

“Oh. Uh . . . yes. It isn’t the contagious kind, is it?”

Snape fixed his attention on his kipper. “Not as these things go. The usual precautions, of course. Face mask if you get within ten feet, latex gloves when you handle her homework. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Lockhart studied the backs of his hands. “No special symptoms, what?”

“No, no. A perfectly normal progression. Fur, pointed ears, whiskers, retractable claws, tail . . . The very first thing is that a couple of days before full onset, the eyes start to turn yellow. Would you excuse me for just a minute? There’s Professor McGonagall, and I needed to tell her something.”

At the center of the table, Snape bent next to McGonagall’s right ear. “You and I are ostensibly discussing a cough syrup I’m making for you, but in about five minutes I want you to tell Sprout to talk to Lockhart on the way out and casually comment that his eyes look a little yellowish this morning. I’ll explain later.”

McGonagall nodded. Sure enough, about five minutes after Snape sat back down with Lockhart, she got up and moved next to Sprout.

As soon as Lockhart pushed himself away from the table and started down the Hall, Sprout also rose. They met halfway down the center aisle, and she stopped him with a friendly greeting and began to chat. Snape had already shifted his seat to join McGonagall and Flitwick and fill them in on the details.

Sprout squinted and looked at Lockhart quizzically. Lockhart went white and bent down closer to her. Sprout peered into his eyes and nodded emphatically. Lockhart searched frantically in his pockets and pulled out a lady’s cosmetic compact with a mirror. He studied his reflection with increasing nervousness as she patted him tenderly on the arm, then he turned and fled from the Hall.

The instant Lockhart was through the doors, Sprout raced for the table. “Give!” she cried as she hit Snape with her hat. “Give, you wicked, evil man, you! What did I just do?” while McGonagall and Flitwick dissolved in helpless laughter. Snape explained.

When she was able to breathe again, Sprout asked, “What was the word you used?”

“Gatanthropic. A gatanthrope is a werecat.”

“And look at the man! Grave as an undertaker. Not even the decency to twitch the corner of his mouth. You are dangerous, Severus Snape!”

"Ah Pomona! You don't know the half of it. Lass, how much do you already know of what he and James Potter used to do to each other when they were in third year . . . ?"

Snape left McGonagall and Flitwick to fill Sprout in on more details of his nefarious past and headed upstairs to the hospital wing.

Life was more serious for Poppy Pomfrey and her charge.

"There's a full moon on January eighth. I'll be able to gather the last ingredients then, and a week later the antidote will be finished. It is powerful medicine, and you'll only be able to take small doses at a time, though if you prove amenable to the treatment they can be frequent. That way the condition will clear up sooner. If you need me for anything more, Madam Pomfrey, you have only to ask."

"Thank you, Professor."

On the way out to the stairs, Snape ran into Lockhart, who was coming down from his rooms on the second floor, heading for his classroom. When he saw Snape, Lockhart stopped.

"Yes, there you are, Severus. Look, old boy, could you do me a bit of a favor. I seem to have taken a bit of chill on the liver, what. A holdover from that time I caught malaria while chasing down hoodoos in a Louisiana bayou, and malaria does keep coming back, don't you know. Think I might have a touch of jaundice. Would you mind checking? I'd just hop along to Madam Pomfrey in the hospital, but she has . . . uh . . . other patients to care for."

With somber professionalism, Snape gravely inspected Lockhart's eyes. "Well, now that you mention it, there may be a bit of yellowing to the whites, but I rather thought they'd always been that color. I really think you should talk to Madam Pomfrey about it, though. It is her area of expertise."

Snape left Lockhart in the first floor corridor, torn between his hypochondria and his fear of contagion. *Lockhart brings it on himself. Perfect example of the North Carolina Equine Paradox if you ask me. On the other hand, Sprout may be right. Maybe I am just wicked and evil.*

The last week of December was Snape's normal time for taking a midyear inventory. With no classes and almost no students, he could work for hours undisturbed. He started with the classroom, where supplies had been depleted from use in potion making and had to be reordered, then moved to his office.

Inventorying the office was more of a formality, since the ingredients there were seldom touched. Snape was nonetheless very careful to keep up-to-date records since so many of them were poisonous.

Working his way methodically through the shelves, Snape checked flower, leaf, stem, and root supplies, then reached the area where animal products were stored. The small jars were minutely calibrated to measure the normally small amounts used in potion making. Some of the things in the office were quite powerful.

Halfway down the list, Snape stopped. He was short of powdered bicorn horn. He checked it a second and a third time, but there was no mistake. The jar was short by two grams. Working more slowly now, he continued his inventory, and was not really surprised to find that a similar amount of shredded boomslang skin was also gone. Both the bicorn horn and the boomslang skin were needed for Polyjuice potion.

It's all coming together. This was why a Filibuster firework was tossed into Goyle's cauldron. It did its job — it kept me busy. The girl stole my supplies with the help of an accomplice, probably Potter, to make Polyjuice potion to turn herself into someone with a cat. I wonder if Potter turned himself into someone, too. But who? And why? It was Christmas Day, so the number of people they could choose from would be small.

The first thing to do was make up a list and then scratch off the names of those it could not possibly be. If he could figure out who, he might be able to figure out why. When questioning students, it always helped to be able to tell them things they thought they'd kept secret. It made them think you could read their minds.

It turned out to be surprisingly easy, especially since Crabbe and Goyle had been discovered sleeping in a broom closet later on Christmas Day. Snape suspected the cat owner was Millicent Bulstrode. He called Malfoy into his office.

"I need your help, Draco. You remember that Crabbe and Goyle were, shall we say, a little under the weather at Christmas? We're trying to find out if they've been into things they oughtn't. Do you recall any time during that day when they were behaving a bit . . . strangely?"

Malfoy did. He recounted an odd little conversation in which the two had seemed to sympathize with Arthur Weasley and Colin Creevey, and hadn't remembered previous conversations about Slytherin's heir and the Chamber of Secrets. He seemed to feel that it made sense that the two may have been imbibing something, since Crabbe had complained of stomach ache as well.

After Malfoy left, Snape thought carefully about what he'd said — and hadn't said. *Insulting Weasley and Creevey, and the two couldn't go along. But*

*they wanted information about the Chamber. Which means they didn't open it.
Time to talk to McGonagall again.*

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

RIDDLES RESOLVED

“Okay, let me get this straight. Her name was Mabel.”

“Myrtle! Her name was Myrtle.”

“And she was way younger than you, but you don’t know exactly what year. And her body was found in the girls’ lavatory on the second floor.”

“Right.”

“And she’s a ghost.”

“Right.”

“So why haven’t I ever heard of her before? I mean, after eleven and a half years I should know all the ghosts.”

“It is a girls’ lavatory. And I don’t think Myrtle was ever fond of either boys or professors, so you lose on both counts.” McGonagall looked down her nose with a decidedly superior attitude.

“Was anyone else on staff at Hogwarts at the time. Besides Dumbledore, I mean.”

“Binns, of course, but he’ll be of no use. Kettleburn. Oh, and Hagrid was a student. You might want to talk to him. There was also Tom Riddle, but I expect you already know that.”

Snape went up to the second floor that evening to check the girl’s lavatory. There were so few students, all of whom were in their dormitories anyway, that he had no fear of meeting anyone. Just to be sure, he knocked on the door before going in.

It was a perfectly ordinary lavatory. There was a row of stalls with toilets, and opposite each toilet was a sink with soap and hand towels, and a hamper for the used towels. The hamper was empty. Like the rest of the school, the plumbing here had been installed just before World War I. In all respects, it was one of the more modern of Hogwarts’s rooms.

"Is that you, Harry?" came a small voice from one of the stalls, and a young girl ghost came gliding out. She stopped and fled back to the stall when she saw it was a teacher.

"Myrtle?" Snape said calmly. "How do you know Harry?" There was no answer, only a splashing from one of the stalls, and Snape assumed the ghost had left.

Is this the scene of the crime, the place where they made the Polyjuice potion? It may have been a good choice, since McGonagall says it's seldom used because of Myrtle. Potter was one, Granger another, and probably Weasley. Asking Malfoy about the Chamber of Secrets.

Snape left the second floor and returned to his dungeon office to think.

Why does Potter want to know about the Chamber of Secrets from Malfoy? Malfoy doesn't know anything.

The Chamber is open. Only the heir of Slytherin can open it. If the Dark Lord is the heir — and we know he's returned — he would need corporeal servants to assist him. Someone has opened the Chamber for the Dark Lord.

I don't think it's Draco. I'm sure Draco knows nothing, but could it be Lucius? Lucius brought a house elf on the day the bludger attacked Potter. Maybe that had something to do with the Chamber. But Lucius wasn't here when it was opened. So he had to get someone to do it for him.

What if it is Potter? Dumbledore says he's a Parselmouth because of his contact with the Dark Lord. What if there's more contact that Potter isn't conscious of?

What if the Dark Lord can watch us, watch me, through Potter's eyes?

* * *

The students returned with the new year. Almost immediately, the rumor spread that Granger had been attacked by the monster from the Chamber of Secrets, and students kept trying to get a glimpse of her. The truth of the matter was, though, that there were no more attacks. Everything settled down to routine, though Snape kept a much closer eye on Potter than before.

With the full moon, the last of the ingredients for Granger's potion were collected, and by mid January she was taking regular doses and showing visible improvement. Snape kept the potion brewing in his office, and carried the necessary amount up to Madam Pomfrey each day to be sure it was fresh.

On one of these trips, on an evening toward the end of January, he met Filch stomping down the stairs on his way to the broom cupboard. The caretaker was furious.

"These students have nothing better to do with their time than make work for me, Professor," he complained. "Some of 'em has gone and flooded the lavatory on the second floor. I'll be half the night mopping it up."

Questioning revealed it was Myrtle's lavatory. Snape decided to accompany Filch back to the second floor and have another look.

Water was running down the second floor corridor and onto the staircases. Filch, glad of a sympathetic ear, continued his complaining. "Don't know how they did it. Ceiling wet, walls wet, candles guttered and soaking, floor two inches deep. These students've got nothing better they can do but torment me. I went straight to Dumbledore and told him I can't take it anymore..."

"You went to Dumbledore before you came downstairs?" Snape asked, mentally working out times as he helped Filch relight the candles and begin sweeping the water toward the drains.

"I did. And I told him I wasn't going to take it anymore."

"How long do you think that took you?"

Filch eyed Snape suspiciously. "Maybe fifteen, twenty minutes. But if you're thinking I let them get away, you're wrong. I checked first. They weren't in here."

"How did you discover it?"

"I was keeping an eye out, right over there where... where Mrs. Norris was attacked. I heard the water splashing and saw it coming out the door. They can't leave me alone. It was the same on Halloween night. I had to spend the night mopping and worrying about Mrs. Norris at the same time."

Snape straightened up. "There was water on the floor that night? I don't recall..." He conjured up an image of what he'd seen, but the corridor had been so full of students that he had no memory of what the floor looked like.

"Not so bad as this tonight, but puddles of it everywhere all the same. Oh, I could've wrung their necks."

It was worth waiting. Snape stayed until the lavatory was relatively dry and Filch left. Then he called quietly, "Myrtle. Myrtle, what happened here?" There was no response, so he tried again. "Myrtle, I'm not angry. I just want to know what happened."

Nothing. Either the ghost wasn't there, or she wouldn't talk to teachers. Snape decided to see if McGonagall was still up.

"Creevey?" McGonagall was reading in her rooms when Snape knocked, but was more than willing to chat. "What do you need to know about Creevey for?"

"He was the second one attacked, and the first student. Just exactly where was he, and what was he doing?"

"I'll tell you, Severus, if you promise to keep me informed. It was the night of the Quidditch game, and Potter was in hospital regrowing his arm bones. Creevey was apparently coming up to see him from the kitchens because he was carrying a bunch of grapes. We found the boy on a landing. It seems he was trying to take a picture of the thing that attacked him."

"Picture?"

"He was holding his camera up to his face. We don't know if he got the photo or not, for when Dumbledore opened the camera, the film dissolved."

"Where was that?"

"When we were putting the poor boy to bed in the hospital."

"Did Potter see any of this?"

"I don't think so. I think he was asleep. He certainly didn't move or say anything."

Snape bade McGonagall good night and went back to his own room. *Water on the floor when Mrs. Norris was petrified, Creevey with a camera in front of his eyes, Finch-Fletchley in the company of a ghost. Dead roosters. Maybe it is a basilisk after all. That or something similar. But how is it getting into the castle? And from where?*

Snape decided he had to speak to Hagrid, and went down to his hut early the next morning before breakfast.

Hagrid was always up early, checking the verge of the forest or caring for his garden. He saw Snape coming down the hill in the faint light of dawn and went to be sure there was water heated for tea.

"Morning, Professor. Bit chill t' be up and about. What can I do for ya?"

"Sorry to bother you so early, and I have to be brief so I can get back before the students come out for breakfast, but I wanted to ask you about the Chamber of Secrets. You know, what happened last time."

The response was so less than enthusiastic that Snape was taken aback. Hagrid turned and stomped back toward his hut. "Ya ought t' know that's a sore subject. Come have some tea an' then be off with ya."

"This is a switch," said Snape as he entered the familiar hut. "You used to be the one trying to get me to come here. Now here I am and you don't want me."

"Yeah. Well now we're not talking about you, are we?"

"I didn't think we were going to be talking about you either."

"No? Then what're ya... Ya don't know what happened then, do ya?"

"A girl died."

"Yeah. And I got expelled an' forbidden t' use magic."

It was that moment when you realize you've stepped into quicksand. Snape plunged forward. "Why? What did you do?"

"Brought Aragog into the school."

"Who's Aragog?"

"He's one of the reasons the forest's forbidden. He's an acromantula. I bought him from a chap . . . Well, let's just say I got him an' I brought him t' the school an' that Tom Riddle found out an' had me . . ."

"Tom Riddle turned you in? Look, Hagrid, did you know the girl who died?"

"Not really. She were Hufflepuff, and I were Gryffindor. It was all very hush-hush. We were never told at the time what really happened. Nor later on, neither. What're you so interested in all this for?"

"You know me and mysteries. Besides, it would be good if we could keep anyone else from being hurt. By the way, did she actually die in the girls' lavatory?"

"Don't know. Didn't never ask about it. That were the rumor, though."

And that was where it remained for another month. The school as a whole began to relax as there were no further attacks. Professor Sprout's mandrakes were getting along nicely, and Snape began paying her visits when he didn't have classes, just to examine them.

"Some are more mature than others. Look at these two, Severus. Trying to touch roots through the drainage holes in their pots, thinking no one would notice."

"We certainly don't want them to grow too quickly," said Snape examining the errant mandrakes, one of which had managed to inch an eye above the level of the compost in its pot and was ogling its neighbor. "It makes the tuber too fibrous for a good decoction." Snape had great respect for Professor Sprout. His own witch grandmother had been both an herbologist and a potions maker — a rare combination — and had taught him the value of herb lore. He himself was fair at Herbology, but knew enough to value greater talent in another.

"While you're here, Professor," added Sprout, "could you look at the bubotubers? They seem to have picked up a fungus that I'd swear was Pen-nine greenmolt if we weren't so far north."

"And some people say there is no evidence for global warming," murmured Snape as he examined the fungus.

“Global what?”

Snape explained, and he and Sprout discussed growing seasons, rainfall, and temperature variations until it was time to get ready for supper.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1993

Snape left his dungeon rooms for breakfast a little later than usual since it was Sunday and he had no classes. To his great surprise, McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, and Pomfrey were standing around in the entrance hall with an eye to the dungeon corridor.

McGonagall saw him first and began positively crowing. “Och, he’s here, he’s here. Ye’ll not believe it, lad, not a bit of it,” and she beckoned him to the group.

Flitwick was chuckling, Sprout was fizzing, and Pomfrey looked like a child caught with candy in her mouth.

Before Snape could say anything, Flitwick pushed him toward the Great Hall. “Just look, youngster. Then come back and tell us what to do about it.”

It was hideous. The hall was festooned—festooned!—in pink. Wisteria garlands draped from the beams. Two-foot-wide globular blooms that looked like a mad mating of magenta roses, cerise gladiolus, and lavender ‘love-lies-bleeding’ adorned each torch holder. The grand hearth was a display of fuchsia, heliotrope, orchid, and foxglove, while the walls were plastered with enormous blossoms resembling giant impatiens, pink daisies, and carnations.

The teachers’ table was clothed in honeysuckle, and each professor’s chair was arrayed with a floral pagan nimbus, Snape himself being blessed with passion flowers. The floor was strewn with petals, and heart-shaped pink confetti sifted from the rafters like snow.

“He’s in shock,” McGonagall whispered to the others as she pulled Snape back from the doors. She fanned his face with her hat as she demanded, “This is that man’s idea of Valentine’s Day! What do we do?”

Snape took a deep breath. “Nothing,” he replied. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“What are you talking about, man? We’re not going to take this lying down!” Flitwick was more inflamed than Snape had ever seen him before.

“Nothing,” Snape repeated. “Not in front of the students. We got away with it at Christmas because there were no students here. But teachers do not attack teachers in front of the student body.”

“What about later?” Pomfrey asked.

The teachers bore it stoically for about five minutes, then they began to seethe. That was because Lockhart, after bragging about the number of valentines he’d received, brought in the dwarfs. Short, squat, bearded dwarfs dressed as cupids. For the purpose, Lockhart explained, of sending singing valentine grams.

“And the fun doesn’t stop here!” Lockhart enthused like a carnival barker. “I’m sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion! And while you’re at it, Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I’ve ever met, the sly old dog!”

Flitwick was mortified. Snape gripped the arms of his chair with a force that whitened his knuckles. McGonagall pursed her lips, but was silent. Snape glanced over at McGonagall and mouthed the words, ‘He’s going down.’

McGonagall smiled.

They had fun in the staff room inventing students’ names: Cassiopeia Hicks — Mehitible Dusendorf — Palindroma Yamamoto . . .

One by one the dwarfs were sent out, each one finding Lockhart in a very public place, eager to receive his accolade from an adoring student.

‘Cassiopeia’ sent:

*O Lockhart, dear Lockhart, I’ve waited so long
To tell of my love and to sing you this song.
Your eyes are so droopy, your hair is so lank
You always remind me of fish in a tank.
Your mouth always open to let water in,
Your face is so narrow, with hardly a chin.
There isn’t a teacher as squishy as you
I love you so madly. Do you love me too?*

By the time they got to ‘Palindroma’s’ love song, Lockhart was running from dwarfs as if they carried bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic plague all at the same time.

McGonagall reckoned it as: Teachers —3, Lockhart —0. It was getting so she had to figure in a point spread.

McGonagall and Sprout had followed the first dwarf up to watch Lockhart receive his gram.

“He was preening like a peacock, strut and all, until the line about his hair being lank, then he began to fall to pieces. He didn’t know whether

to be embarrassed, angry, or happy that some idiot girl with no talent had sent him a love message. Pomona and I pretended we weren't listening so he wouldn't suspect us. It was lovely."

Flitwick and Pomfrey had gone up for the second message and reported back as well. This time Lockhart was wary of the dwarf, but was willing to give it a try until the lines:

Lips of fire, fingers of glue,

I love you, yes, I do! I do!

at which he turned beet red and hurried away.

Snape had waited until last since he had always considered both discretion and the final result more important than personal satisfaction. There being one more singing gram, however, and the others already having had their turn, he allowed himself the luxury of following the dwarf to Lockhart's office on the second floor to see what would happen. *Probably nothing. He'll just leave at the sight of a dwarf by this time.*

It was right after lunch, and students were streaming back to their dormitories. Another dwarf scuttled past Snape on its way up to the first floor, calling out, "Oy, you! 'Arry Potter!" as it pushed students out of its path. Snape looked up in time to see Potter dart into the first floor corridor, clearly anxious to escape.

This might be more interesting than Lockhart. Snape followed the crowd up the stairs. Most of them were younger students, so he hung back out of sight, still able to see everything over their heads. What he saw was the dwarf holding on to Potter's torn book bag as the boy tried to gather up his spilled belongings. Students were hopping quickly away from the pile to avoid the — blood?— no, the red ink that spread out from a broken bottle and drenched the books.

Two voices demanded imperiously what was happening, and Snape saw Malfoy and Percy Weasley push forward. At that point Potter tried to run, but the dwarf tackled him and sat on him to sing its doggerel. The 'valentine' was clearly a joke.

Snape had long before, in more dangerous times, learned to pay attention to the real action rather than the show. While the students laughed at Potter and the dwarf, Snape watched Malfoy. *You wrote that valentine to embarrass Potter. Where did you get the idea? Have you been listening at the door to the staff room? Maybe I should keep a closer watch on you in the future.*

Then it was over. Weasley, enjoying his status as a prefect, was breaking up the crowd. The dwarf left, and Potter went back to his stained and damaged

books. Malfoy picked one up. It wasn't a school book, it was more like an old-fashioned appointment book, the kind sold in muggle shops. Seeing potential conflict, Snape started to move forward, then paused. There was a prefect there to keep order. He didn't have to intervene unless things got out of hand.

"Give that back," Potter said in a low voice.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?" Malfoy teased.

"Hand it over, Malfoy."

"When I've had a look."

Weasley moved in. "As a school prefect . . ."

Potter's wand was suddenly out, and he yelled "*Expelliarmus!*" The book flew out of Malfoy's hands straight into the air. That was when Snape noticed the other two Weasleys in the thinning crowd, for Potter's friend Ron caught the book as it fell, and right behind him was the first year girl Ginny. She had a look of absolute horror on her face.

"No magic in the corridors!" the Weasley prefect was shouting, so after exchanging parting insults, the combatants broke off their confrontation and departed in different directions.

Snape returned to the staff room where he had to confess that he hadn't seen Lockhart get his last 'valentine.' He blamed it on a little 'disorder' in the corridor without going into specifics, then the five conspirators left for their separate rooms.

Once in his own room, Snape sat to think for a while. *Expelliarmus is not a lower-level charm. Potter can't have encountered it in his classes. He had to have learned it from me when I used it against Lockhart two months ago. Saw it and heard it once, then used it correctly and powerfully when needed. The boy must have more talent than he's ever shown in lessons to pick up something like that so quickly.*

Then there were the other details. *Why was that appointment book so important that Potter used magic in the corridor to get it back? And why was Ginny Weasley so frightened?*

A few days later, Snape was in Dumbledore's office.

"Unless it's some monster that's never been catalogued, it seems to be closer to a basilisk than anything. We might be able to account for the fact that no one has died by a remarkable series of coincidences. Filch tells me that there was water on the floor the night Mrs. Norris was petrified, and she may have seen the monster's reflection. The Creevey boy was looking through a camera lens, and if Sir Nicholas was between the Finch-Fletchley

boy and the beast, the boy would not have looked at it directly either. I don't think it's ever been documented that meeting the reflection of a basilisk's eye causes Petrification rather than death, but there's no reason why not."

"And the roosters?" Dumbledore asked.

"That's one of the worrisome things. They weren't killed by a basilisk. They weren't killed by an animal either. A person killed the roosters. It could be another coincidence, or it could mean a person is assisting the basilisk."

"The Heir of Slytherin, except the Heir of Slytherin is not at Hogwarts this year."

"Not that we know of."

"You said 'one' of the worrisome things."

"I don't know how it gets around. If it's the same monster that attacked that girl in 1943, it must be huge by now, yet no one has seen it or any trace of it."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"Invest in weasels. Lots and lots of weasels."

"Too bad Weasleys would not do as well. We do have lots and lots of them."

Snape smiled at Dumbledore's little joke, then changed the subject, not feeling particularly like discussing Weasleys that evening. "I wanted to ask you something else. Last year you started to tell me about Riddle and Potter and, well, me. I've been thinking about it. Something happened on Valentine's Day and Potter used an Expelliarmus against Malfoy. I was there. It was impressive. The boy has . . . instincts."

"Very powerful instincts. Quite different from yours. Your instincts are all mental. I have never met an occlumens as powerful or instinctive as you, and you have a gift for defending yourself in face-to-face situations, not to mention your ability to create new spells. Potter's instincts are more physical — his skill with a broom, his quickness in picking up and using spells right when they are needed. Riddle was all planning, all carefully worked-out detail. I do not know if he ever did anything by instinct."

"So you don't think of us as the same?"

"Heavens no! I hope I did not give you that impression. In many ways, you are the antithesis that produces the synthesis. Riddle and Potter are creatures of the world. Riddle does not care if it hates him as long as he can control it. Potter does not want control, only love and support. You just wish the world would leave you alone. Riddle lives by masterful deceit. Potter's attempts at deceit are so transparent that they have never really bothered me.

Your idea of deception is to build a wall and hide behind it. Riddle does not understand the concept of love, Potter craves love, and you are afraid to love.”

“That’s getting a bit personal!” Snape said, half rising from his chair. “I don’t think I like this conversation any more.”

“Sit down. Lily told me what happened after your parents died. It explained much that had been confusing about you. Of the three boys, you are the one who knows what it means to live with an abiding sense of guilt. Another concept that Riddle does not understand.”

“All right, all right. I think you’ve given me quite enough to think about. Now I’m sorry I asked.”

“Any time,” said Dumbledore.

From then through the Easter break, there were basically three things occupying Snape’s mind. The first was classes, getting his seventh years ready for their NEWTs, the fifth years ready for their OWLs, and the rest prepared for exams. Since he only accepted students into his advanced potions classes who had gotten Outstanding in their OWL, the highest level classes were a joy to teach, much more like university seminars than like secondary courses.

The second thing was the mandrake potion for the petrified victims of the mysterious attacker. One of the biggest problems with adolescent mandrakes was that they were so much like adolescent humans. They were driven by raging hormones, totally lacking in self-control, and devoid of any sense of responsibility. The good thing was that he got to chop them up and boil them into a decoction. *Pity I can’t do that with the students. What would student potion be good for? Removing age spots?*

The third thing was counseling for the second years. As third years, they would have to take two extra classes each. This was the first step on the path of career counseling and choice, and the students were generally advised to play to their strengths. Malfoy, for example, was counseled to take Arithmancy, a must for any job in wizarding finance, and Care of Magical Creatures, which always came in handy in a variety of foreign affairs positions.

* * *

The last Quidditch game of the year was set for the second Saturday in May, Gryffindor against Hufflepuff. At the moment, Slytherin and Gryffindor were tied, with two wins each. If Gryffindor won their last game, they would win the Quidditch cup. If they lost, then the two teams would count points to see who got the cup. Since Ravenclaw had won its game against

Hufflepuff, Hufflepuff was not in the running for the cup, so Slytherin was cheering for Hufflepuff. Snape asked Sprout the evening before if he could join her in her box, and she said he was welcome.

Most of the school was already in the stands by the time Snape arrived. The two teams were filing out onto the field, and Madam Hooch was getting ready to start the game. The weather was beautiful, and it promised to be a pleasant afternoon. Snape was more relaxed than he'd been at a Quidditch game for some time, for Gryffindor had played Ravenclaw in March, and there had been no incidents.

Suddenly, surprisingly, McGonagall was hurrying onto the field with a large purple megaphone in her hand. Stopping where the sound would reach all the stands, she called, "This match has been canceled."

Amid the boos from the students and the protests of the players, Snape and the other teachers rose immediately and began leaving the stands. Something had happened, and they would be needed at the Castle.

McGonagall continued, "All students are to make their way back to the house common rooms, where their heads of houses will give them further information. As quickly as you can, please."

It was serious. It was possibly deadly serious. The teachers hurried up the hill as quickly as they could. Dumbledore was waiting for them in the staff room.

Fifteen minutes later, Snape entered the Slytherin common room. Every eye turned to him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to have to inform you that another attack has occurred against students of this school." Snape could tell from their faces that they already knew it couldn't be a Slytherin student. The first thing they would have done was check if any from their house were missing.

"More mudbloods?" Malfoy asked with a sneer.

"Master Malfoy," Snape said with icy calm, "I will thank you never to use that word in my presence again, or anywhere else for that matter. An attack against any student in this school is an attack against all. The two victims this time were Miss Granger of Gryffindor and Miss Clearwater of Ravenclaw. They were attacked near the library. Both have been petrified and are in the hospital wing." Snape watched Malfoy the whole time he spoke, and the boy was wise enough to keep quiet.

"Due to the seriousness of the situation, certain rules are being put into effect. No student is to be outside the common room or dormitories unless a teacher is with them. I shall escort you to breakfast and from that point you

will be taken to your lessons by your teachers. All students must be in their houses by six o'clock, and supper will be served in the common room. No student may go anywhere in the main building unaccompanied by a teacher, and that includes the lavatories as well as the library, classrooms, Great Hall, etc."

"Sir," asked Bulstrode. "Are we in any danger?"

"Very possibly. There is a chance that the school will have to be closed if we can't discover soon what is causing these attacks. We don't think anything can get into the dormitories except through the common room. I shall be staying in the common room at night as a guard. Now, I need to patrol the school with the other teachers. If there are no questions? Prefects, see that the students obey the rules. I'll be back in the evening."

Snape left to look for McGonagall.

Snape and McGonagall were assigned an evening patrol around the entrance hall. Snape took the side with the corridors to the dungeons and the kitchens, while McGonagall patrolled the Great Hall. They met every ten minutes in the entrance hall to check in and chat. Snape didn't really expect anything to happen. None of the previous attacks had been followed immediately by other attacks. Still, it was better to be cautious.

Well after nightfall, Dumbledore came downstairs, accompanied by Filch. "No time to talk, Severus," he called from the stairs. "Cornelius Fudge is coming in at the Hogsmeade gate, and I have to be there to meet him. I trust everything is quiet."

Whether Dumbledore's opening the main doors had let in pollen, or it was something else, a few minutes later Snape found himself sneezing. At the same time, he thought he heard a strange noise, as of someone swearing at something. He paused to listen carefully, but there was no further sound.

It was a night of surprises. Shortly afterwards, Lucius Malfoy appeared at the main entrance. Malfoy was looking for Dumbledore and, finding himself talking to Snape, smiled and confided that it was a message from the Board of Governors that Dumbledore was not going to like. *No wonder Malfoy's willing to deliver it himself. I can't imagine another reason why he'd agree to be a messenger boy.* Snape dearly wanted to go with Malfoy and find out what was happening, but his duty required him to stay on guard at the castle.

A short while later, while Snape was telling McGonagall the events of the night, they all returned: Dumbledore, Fudge, Hagrid, and Malfoy. And there, where all of them could see his reactions, Snape learned that Hagrid

was under arrest and going to Azkaban, while the Board of Governors had suspended Dumbledore, who was leaving Hogwarts immediately.

Glancing from one to the other, Snape was relieved to see that Dumbledore was gently shaking his head. *Play along. Don't make any rash statements. Don't take sides. Especially not in front of Malfoy.* Not that he had to take sides; McGonagall was doing fine all by herself.

"Lucius Malfoy, I have seen you do some silly, foolish things in my time, but this is utter madness! Do you want the situation to get worse? Do you want more students hurt and Hogwarts closed? You know as well as anyone standing here that Professor Dumbledore is our best hope to resolve this problem. One might think you had something to do with it."

"Now, Professor," interjected Fudge, and she turned on him.

"And you, you big puffed-up bureaucrat, Hagrid is no more involved in this than I am. Instead of throwing your authority in people's faces like some strutting little cockerel, you might be doing something to actually get to the bottom of this and stop these attacks."

Dumbledore stepped forward and took her hands in his. "Do not fret, Minerva. Everything will be fine. This is only temporary. You are in charge until I return, and I know you will do all in your power to protect the school. You can rely on all the other teachers to help you. Now, I fear we must be going."

Malfoy had said nothing, but as he turned to leave, he nodded to Snape, and Snape inclined his head slightly in reply. Then they were gone.

"And you!" cried McGonagall, rounding on Snape. "You might have said something to back me up! Standing there like a great mute lump! If I didn't know you better I'd think you were half pleased to see them haul Dumbledore and Hagrid off."

As McGonagall advanced, Snape retreated. He couldn't explain to her, so it was probably just as well that he couldn't get a word in edgewise. When she'd backed him as far as the dungeon stairs, he fled to Slytherin house, leaving her raging in the entrance hall.

The common room was empty, and Snape settled gratefully on a sofa by the fireplace, trying to reason out what had just happened.

The Dark Lord is back and his hand can stretch into Hogwarts. He's opened the Chamber of Secrets — it's only a matter of time before people start dying. He's used Malfoy to remove Dumbledore — what other lines of defense are being destroyed? Dumbledore wants me to stay under cover, but what good is that going

to do if the Dark Lord already knows I've left him? How much does he know? How much did he get from Quirrell?

Yet Malfoy seems to think I'm still on his side. That's a hopeful sign. I just have to be careful. Spies. He has spies in the school. Draco, and the Crabbe and Goyle boys. Who else is the son, daughter, niece, nephew, cousin of a Death Eater? Every word I say, every move I make can be reported. Even with the teachers I have to be on my guard, lest they talk where students can listen.

And the Ministry has sent Hagrid to Azkaban. With Dumbledore gone, how long before Moody comes to get me, too?

Snape dozed fitfully by the fire, dreamed of being dragged bound and helpless before the Dark Lord, and woke unrefreshed with the dawn.

The school went into a state of shock and siege. It was easy for the teachers to keep the students together in escorted groups, for no student wanted to be alone. The hospital wing was sealed off in case the monster, or whatever it was, wanted to get at the petrified victims. The fact that Dumbledore was no longer there made everyone nervous. When not acting as escorts, the teachers gathered in little groups to talk about their fears. The only one who seemed happy was Lockhart, who was convinced that the Ministry was infallible and had arrested Hagrid because he was the guilty party. The rest of the teachers stopped talking to him altogether.

Snape couldn't join the others. He couldn't talk to anyone about his own worry and apprehension. At Hogwarts, only Dumbledore and Hagrid knew of his dual role in the last year of Voldemort's power, and only Dumbledore and Hagrid knew that that role remained ambiguous, had to remain ambiguous if he was ever going to be useful to them again. The power that could remove both of them from Hogwarts at the same moment was the only thing that Snape truly feared, and in empty rooms and corridors, or the privacy of his own office, he checked the mark on his left arm a dozen times a day to see if it was getting darker, dreading that it might start to burn and summon him to the Dark Lord.

Two weeks after Dumbledore's suspension, Draco Malfoy spoke up in class, talking to Crabbe and Goyle, but loudly enough that many of the students could hear.

"I always thought Father might be the one who got rid of Dumbledore. I told you he thinks Dumbledore's the worst headmaster the school's ever had. Maybe we'll get a decent headmaster now. Someone who won't want the Chamber of Secrets closed. McGonagall won't last long, she's only filling in..."

Snape started to admonish Malfoy, then froze. *I'm being tested. How I react and what I say will be reported back to Lucius, and through Lucius to . . . I have to be noncommittal, neither fish nor fowl, nothing to jeopardize my position either at Hogwarts or with the Dark Lord.* Snape chose to say nothing, but continued checking student work in the class.

Malfoy called out to him. "Sir! Sir, why don't you apply for the headmaster's job?"

Steady, Severus, steady. You're talking to both the Dark Lord and Cornelius Fudge now. Nothing is private anymore. Snape forced a weak smile. "Now, now, Malfoy. Professor Dumbledore has only been suspended by the governors. I dare say he'll be back with us soon enough."

"Yeah, right. I expect you'd have Father's vote, sir, if you wanted to apply for the job — I'll tell Father you're the best teacher here, sir —"

Snape decided the best way to keep Malfoy quiet was not to respond, and he continued through the class checking the students' potions. But what Malfoy'd said bothered him immensely. *Does the wind blow that way? Does the Dark Lord want a puppet headmaster at Hogwarts? Or is this just Malfoy shooting off his mouth?*

But Malfoy wouldn't be quiet. "I'm quite surprised the mudbloods haven't all packed their bags by now. Bet you five galleons the next one dies. Pity it wasn't Granger —"

Weasley was off his stool and heading for Malfoy just as the bell rang, and Snape moved fast to get between the two boys. "Hurry up, I've got to take you all to Herbology," he shouted, and the confrontation was avoided.

The rest of the day, Snape was miserable. The calmer, saner part of him kept saying that it was just Draco. Just Draco trying to be the center of attention and bragging about his family's position and influence. The nervous, worried part of him kept asking 'Why now?' Draco was silent for two weeks, then suddenly in public, in a class shared with Gryffindors, challenged him about Dumbledore and about wanting to be headmaster. *He was told to do that. He was following his father's instructions. They're planning another move, and they're trying to confirm which side I'm on. I can't go to Dumbledore for advice. What would he want me to do?*

To make matters worse, they were told the next day that exams would not be canceled, and he had only about a week to make sure his classes were prepared. *It never rains, but it pours.*

FRIDAY, MAY 28, 1993 (THE FIRST QUARTER)

Sprout hurried up to Snape before he could sit down at breakfast. "They're ready! I think they're ready! You have to come check them, especially the roots, but I'm sure they're ready."

Food could wait. Snape turned to the teachers' table where he knew eyes were fixed on the pair of them, and gave McGonagall a thumbs-up. She clapped her hands in delight as Snape and the short dumpy herbologist rushed from the Great Hall with nothing on their minds except the mandrakes and the Restorative Draught for those in the hospital.

In the warm dampness of the greenhouse, both professors fixed plugs into their ears, and then Sprout pulled one of the mandrakes halfway out of its pot. The root opened its mouth immediately and began screaming, but neither of them could hear it. Snape prodded it. It was just the right texture for the decoction. Together he and Sprout selected two others, wrapped the three pots in blankets and carried them into the school.

Returning to the Great Hall, Snape announced, "I need prefects, prefects from all houses for about fifteen minutes." Twenty-three students rose to join him, the twenty-fourth being Miss Clearwater, petrified in the hospital wing. In the entrance hall he gathered them around him.

"This is simple," he told them, "but vitally important. In a few moments, Professor Sprout and I will be in my office dispatching the mandrakes for the Restorative Draught. No one can be within hearing of them when they cry out. Slytherin prefects, go into the dormitories and be sure no one is still anywhere in Slytherin house. You other prefects, check every corridor and room in the dungeons, and get everyone out here into the entrance hall. When all's ready, you'll guard the staircase while Professor Sprout and I kill the mandrakes. Then you can go back to breakfast."

It was, in fact, amazing how many students were in the dungeon area. When the prefects reported all clear, Snape and Sprout went into his office, donned their earplugs and, pulling the mandrakes one by one from their pots, quickly cut off their tops and split each one down the middle. The resemblance of the roots to human children was somewhat distressing, but Snape tried to think of lobster bisque and crab Louie. Taken in a larger context, it was not so bad.

All of Snape's classes for the day were canceled, and his students told to remain in their common rooms until their next classes. This included, of course, his morning double session with the first years. He'd chopped the

roots into a medium dice and begun stewing them with rosemary, bay, and a few cinnamon sticks (How many people realize that potions are not dissimilar to cooking?), when McGonagall's voice came to him on the intercom system.

"All students to return to their house dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staff room. Immediately, please."

Snape checked his equipment to be sure everything was brewing nicely, then hurried to the staff room.

Despite his proximity, Snape was not the first there, Flitwick was. They stood together as one by one their colleagues filtered into the room. The last to arrive was McGonagall.

"It has happened," she announced almost at once. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

Amid the gasps and cries of surprise, Snape looked down and realized he was gripping the back of a chair so tightly that his knuckles were white. Staring straight at McGonagall, he said, "How can you be sure?" and heard his own voice rasping hoarse and unnatural in the stillness.

McGonagall glanced around. "The Heir of Slytherin left another message. Right underneath the first one. 'Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.'"

"Who is it? Which student?" asked Madam Hooch.

McGonagall looked grave. "Ginny Weasley," she said. "We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow. This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore always said..."

The staff room door banged open. "So sorry — dozed off — what have I missed?"

It was Gilderoy Lockhart.

It was too much to take, on top of everything else, that they would have to deal with Lockhart, too. A glance around the room showed that the entire staff was agreed and looked to their natural leaders, the four heads of houses, for action.

Snape advanced towards Lockhart, trying to keep his voice moderate. "Just the man, the very man. A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself. Your moment has come at last."

This was so clearly not what Lockhart wanted that he went white as a ghost. Sprout moved in for her turn.

"That's right, Gilderoy. Weren't you saying just last night that you've known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?"

"I — well — I —" but Flitwick cut him off.

"Yes, didn't you tell me you were sure you knew what was inside it?"

"D-did I? I don't recall . . ."

Snape pounced again. "I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn't had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested. Didn't you say that the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given a free rein from the first?"

"I — I really never — you may have misunderstood . . ."

To McGonagall went the honors of pounding in the last nail. "We'll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy. Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We'll make sure everyone's out of your way. You'll be able to tackle the monster all by yourself. A free rein at last."

"V-very well. I'll — I'll be in my office, getting — getting ready." And Lockhart was gone.

The first concern was that no other students be attacked. McGonagall ordered the teachers into the corridors and onto the grounds to be sure that no single student in the whole school was outside the dormitories. Heads of houses were to go to their common rooms for a head count and to advise the students to start packing their things, for the school would be evacuated the next morning.

All were to return to the staff room as soon as they were sure that every other student had been accounted for, and that the school was clear.

"I have sent owls," McGonagall informed the rest, once they'd gathered again shortly after noon, "to the Board of Governors, to the Ministry and, of course, to the Weasleys, informing them of what has happened. Oh, and to Professor Dumbledore as well, but that was not an official owl. I have also arranged with the Hogwarts Express for a special run down to London tomorrow, and we've started getting the owls out to the other parents, though that will take some time to complete, telling them the children will be at King's Cross late tomorrow afternoon. Now, what do we know, and what can we do?" She looked at Snape.

"There is a good chance that what we're dealing with is a basilisk," he told them. "So far we've never had two attacks close together, so I would guess it's returned to its lair to rest. I have no idea why it would take Miss Weasley, since so far all the victims have been muggle-born and she's a pureblood, unless that was just coincidence."

"Ginny did look a bit upset at breakfast this morning," said McGonagall. "I wonder if there's any connection."

"Can we try to rescue her? Do we know how this thing gets into the Castle?" asked Madam Hooch.

"I fear she is probably already dead," replied McGonagall. "And we don't have a clue how it gets in or how it moves around undetected."

"Master Creevey was attacked on the stairs between the ground floor and the first floor," said Snape, "Mrs. Norris on the second floor, Miss Granger and Miss Clearwater on the fourth floor near the library, and Master Finch-Fletchley and Sir Nicholas on the fifth floor. We don't know where Miss Weasley was taken, but the messages were on the second floor."

"The girl fifty years ago was rumored to have been killed in the second floor bathroom," said McGonagall. "Might there be a connection?"

"I don't know how. The Chamber, if built by Slytherin, is nearly a thousand years old. The bathrooms are less than a hundred years old. I would suspect the Chamber of being underground, but we've never seen any sign of the monster in the dungeon or kitchen area." Snape looked to Professor Sprout for confirmation, and she nodded.

The teachers went out again to search the whole Castle for possible ways the monster may have entered. Snape started to join them when he was blocked by McGonagall. "And where do you think you're going? You march right back to your office and work on that Restorative Draught, young man. I want those people in the hospital unpetrified and on the train tomorrow with the other students."

Snape nodded and returned to his potions work.

All afternoon the teachers searched the school, and all afternoon Snape worked on his potion. Sprout dropped in from time to time to see how he was getting on and bring him news.

"Molly Weasley's arrived. Arthur's still at the Ministry, but he'll be here soon. Have you ever met her?"

"After a fashion. She's come to Quidditch games and we've been introduced. A woman of great strengths, it would seem. Pass the flax seed, please."

Well after nightfall, the potion was in its last stages of brewing, and Snape was getting it down to the proper concentration when there was a knock on his office door.

"Come," he called, unable to leave the bubbling concoction.

Dumbledore walked into the office. "They said you would be hard at work. How is it coming?"

"You have no idea how pleased I am to see you. If it weren't for the potion, I'd be tempted to hug you."

"It has been that bad, eh?"

"Worse. At least the Restorative Draught'll be ready in about an hour."

"Lockhart is gone."

Snape almost stopped stirring the potion. "I knew he didn't really want to face the monster, but I didn't think he'd just pack up and leave. All we wanted to do was get him out of our hair."

"He has not packed and left. At least he has not finished packing — he was clearly in the process. No, he is gone. We do not know where, though we know he has not left the grounds."

Snape stared down at the surface of the potion. "You don't think he really knew where the entrance to the Chamber was, do you? After all our teasing, could it be true that he really went to fight the monster?"

"I would be very surprised, but it is nonetheless another mystery. Do let me know when you take that up to Madam Pomfrey."

An hour and a half later, Snape knocked at the door of McGonagall's office on his way to the hospital wing with the doses of Restorative Draught. He was reintroduced to the Weasleys, who seemed remarkably calm under the circumstances, and then he went to see Madam Pomfrey.

The patients had to be brought around one by one so that the two of them could deal with muscle cramps, nausea, and congestion before moving on to the next one. It was a tedious process, but quite successful considering that Creevey had been petrified for nearly seven months.

Just as they finished reviving Granger and were about to start on Clearwater, Madam Pomfrey looked towards the door, dropped the spoon she was holding, and clapped a hand to her mouth. Turning in surprise, Snape saw Arthur and Molly Weasley. Standing between them, looking very sheepish, was Ginny.

"Oh, child," gasped Pomfrey, "are you all right? Come over here quickly, let me look at you. Sit down on the bed here. Professor can you continue with Miss Clearwater on your own? You must be Miss Weasley's parents — please sit here . . ." Pomfrey rolled up the hospital privacy curtains and shielded the Weasleys from view.

Snape got Clearwater sitting up with a glass of pumpkin juice and started on Mrs. Norris and Sir Nicholas. He was burning, absolutely burning, with curiosity, but needed to work slowly and carefully to see that the patients would recover well.

Finally able to leave the hospital wing, Snape was surprised to find the corridors filled with students making their way to the Great Hall. Descending the stairs, he spied McGonagall.

“What’s happening?”

“Oh, it’s so exciting! Potter found the Chamber of Secrets and killed the monster! You were right. It was a basilisk, but it’s gone now. Dumbledore has ordered a feast.”

Snape looked around. He could see Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff students, but no one coming up from the dungeons.

“Um, I don’t want to be pushy or anything, but has anyone told Slytherin house?”

“Each house has been told by its head. We thought that would be . . . Oh! You were in the hospital weren’t you?”

“That’s all right. I’ll get them up now.” And Snape went down into the dungeon to the Slytherin common room to tell his students the good news and send them up to the feast.

Snape was in Dumbledore’s office the next day, discussing the details.

“So, the Dark Lord was never really involved. You’re sure. You know one hundred percent that he had nothing to do with this.”

“One hundred percent, Severus, at least not Riddle as he is today, so you can relax.”

“Not Riddle as he is today. Why don’t I like the sound of that?”

Dumbledore reached into a drawer of his desk. “Here. Look at this.”

Snape took the mutilated book carefully, wondering why it seemed familiar. Then he remembered. “This is the appointment book Potter took back from Malfoy on Valentine’s Day. What happened to it? It looks like someone stabbed it, like it’s been bleeding ink.”

“Turn it over.”

Snape did and read the name ‘Tom Marvolo Riddle.’ “This was his?” he asked. “How did Potter get hold of it?”

“It seems it was among the possessions of Lucius Malfoy, who only knew about it that it was somehow connected with opening the Chamber of Secrets. He wanted to discredit Arthur Weasley. It seems Weasley’s section of the Ministry is conducting raids to uncover illegal artifacts. Malfoy reasoned that if a member of Weasley’s family were responsible for opening the Chamber, Weasley would be sacked. Malfoy slipped it among Ginny Weasley’s books in Diagon Alley. Look at it more carefully.”

Snape turned the thing over in his hands, then noted how none of the

pages had writing, how the ink had issued from the holes like blood from wounds. "Potter stabbed it?"

"With a basilisk fang."

"Would Miss Weasley truly have died?"

"Oh yes. She was nearly dead when Potter found her."

"Yet walked quite easily into the hospital wing shortly thereafter. Tell me, did Potter see Riddle?"

"Saw him, spoke with him, was threatened by him . . . Destroying Riddle, a teenage Riddle, by stabbing the book was how Potter saved Ginny Weasley's life."

Snape leaned forward and carefully placed the book in front of Dumbledore. "I've read about them. Never saw one before."

Dumbledore peered over his glasses. "You are saying you know what it is?"

"And you keep saying I would make a poor Dark Arts instructor. It's a kind of Horcrux."

"A kind of Horcrux?"

"It's just that I would expect it to bring back a more recent version of Riddle, not a fifty-year-old one. And not with something so simple as one girl's sacrifice. But then no one knows everything there is to know about Horcruxes."

"You would make an excellent Dark Arts instructor. What I keep saying is that I do not want you for my Dark Arts instructor. Not yet, anyway."

"So there's still hope?"

"Only if the world becomes much darker than it is today. But back to the question at hand. Does not the existence of this disturb you?"

"Not really. It's been destroyed. That means Riddle can't use it to come back in full bodily form."

"What if it is not the only one?"

Snape looked at his hands, at the floor, the fireplace, the diary, and then at Dumbledore. "It's foolish to make one Horcrux. To make more is the depth, breadth, and height of folly."

"And yet if anyone could do it, it would be Tom Riddle. I do not believe a more intelligent student ever passed through the doors of Hogwarts."

"I see. To be thought intelligent one needs a psychopathic personality and a desire to rule . . ."

"I said intelligent. I did not say wise."

"Sorry, Sir. I was out of line. I was wondering if you could explain a few more things to me. I'm still trying to figure out how I could've been so wrong."

"Wrong? I did not think you were wrong. You realized it was a basilisk."

"A big basilisk from what McGonagall tells me. Twenty feet long and as big around as a small tree. Where did it come from? How did it move around the school?"

"Why, in the plumbing system, of course. The entry to the Chamber was under a sink in the second floor girl's lavatory."

"That's not possible."

"No? Why not?"

"First, Salazar Slytherin lived a thousand years ago. Flush toilets are about one hundred fifty years old, and the lavatories here were installed just before World War I. Why didn't the crew that put in the plumbing notice that they were connecting it to the Chamber of Secrets? Then, there are no pipes used in the interiors of buildings that can accommodate a twenty-foot long basilisk."

"How do you know this?"

"Common knowledge. Muggle knowledge. Something a pureblood would never think of."

"Only muggle-borns and half-bloods. Riddle was a half-blood. Did you know? Raised a muggle in a muggle orphanage. Of my three boys, you were the only one who knew he was a wizard before getting his invitation to Hogwarts."

"I didn't know that. So maybe he altered the plumbing to further his plans with the basilisk. It would've been a difficult and time-consuming job."

"Something he probably planned for years. He was the long-term planner. You are more the short- to medium-term planner. Potter hardly plans things at all."

"Why couldn't we find the entrance? We searched the lavatories."

"Ah, but to open it you needed to be a Parselmouth. The teachers searched in the afternoon. Potter opened it later that night."

"Does Lucius know he helped destroy Riddle's Horcrux? The Dark Lord will not be pleased."

"He has no clue. It will be a rude awakening."

"One other thing. May I take a crew of students down into the Chamber before they all go home?"

"Whatever for?"

“That basilisk was down there for decades. It would have sloughed its skin about once a year. Do you have any idea how valuable basilisk skin is for potions work? I’ll keep as much as I think I’ll need — for the rest of my life — and we could sell the rest to make money for the school.”

“An excellent idea. You have my permission.”

Hagrid returned, Gryffindor — to no one’s surprise — won the House Cup, the students returned home, and the teachers were once again on their own for a few days as they locked things down for the summer break. Lockhart was sent to St. Mungo’s, what sympathy there had been for him having died when it was learned that the spell that took his memory had been intended for Ronald Weasley.

It was only then that Professor Kettleburn informed them that he was retiring from his post as Care of Magical Creatures instructor. So there were two positions to be filled for the following school year.

They held a roast.

“I don’t want to say that Professor Kettleburn has been here for a long time,” McGonagall confided to the assembled teachers, “but my grandmother took her OWL in his class, and even then he was talking about retiring.”

Dumbledore spoke of Kettleburn’s versatility. “He could have taught any class better than most of the teachers sitting before me now. A much better professor of Muggle Studies than Trelawney, superior in Flying instruction to Snape, his Arithmancy outclassed Sprout — in fact the most well rounded teacher we have ever had in the school.”

“I was privileged to know students who studied under Professor Kettleburn at the height of his powers,” Snape said when it was his turn. “and his lessons were always geared toward the practical. It was he who showed us that Horklumps develop a fondness for wizard ear after the first bite, and that when presented with the possibility of a finger as a snack, a two-week-old Pogrebin is capable of jumping five feet. In fact, until I heard about Kettleburn’s class I was totally unaware that flesh-eating slugs were supple enough to squeeze into a hole the diameter of a human nostril.”

Having said farewell to Kettleburn and wishing each other a pleasant vacation, the teachers left Hogwarts for their various homes. Snape arrived at his own cozy house at Spinner’s End toward evening of a beautiful June day, glad to have put that year behind him and looking forward to a few weeks of peaceful solitude.

One thing is for certain. Next year has to be better than that one.

C H A P T E R F O R T Y

FACING FEARS

SUNDAY, AUGUST 1, 1993 (THE FULL MOON)

Severus Snape finished locking and securing his home in Spinner's End. Aside from the general spells needed to prevent such mundane occurrences as vandalism and break-ins, he also needed to be sure the little town never noticed the old end of the street and its curious lack of electricity, gas, or any civic improvement for the past twenty years or so. *All I need is a bed and breakfast or a shopping mall in the neighborhood and I'd have to move to Hogwarts permanently.* Everything ready, and his Gladstone bag in hand, Professor Snape concentrated on the outskirts of the village of Hogsmeade in northern Scotland and disappeared.

"There you are," growled a hoarse voice practically in his left ear. "Spot on time."

"Good morning to you, too, Moody. Catch anybody this summer?"

"Lose anybody, you mean. Not that it had anything to do with me, but now there's a vacancy, I thought I might interest you in that vacation I'm always on about."

"Sweet man. So considerate. Try me next year."

"Can't guarantee the same rates next year. Right now it's a bargain."

"Have a thoroughly boring year, Moody."

Alastor Moody laughed heartily as he disappeared back to London. Snape watched the spot where he'd been for a moment, then set off through the town toward the Hogwarts gates. He didn't think he was any earlier than usual, yet Hogsmeade seemed abnormally quiet, as if everyone was still at home asleep.

Approaching the gate, Snape saw Professor Trelawney pacing back and forth, shawls wrapped around her thin shoulders even in the rather warm air.

“Good morning, Sibyll,” he said, knowing that Trelawney would probably talk his ear off, “Filch not down yet to get the gate?”

“It is part of the doom that hangs over us all, Severus. While Filch carries in his duty we might be murdered just here, at the very threshold of safety. Mark my words, there will be death at Hogwarts this year.”

“I’ve always admired how you can remain so stoically calm in the face of constant tragedy.”

“Have you, indeed? It is not everyone gifted with the Sight that can do so. O where is that Filch? I fear we are in great peril.”

“Is there something specific you’re concerned with, or just a general sense of foreboding?”

“O Severus, it is that horrible, horrible Black person. They say he is intent on coming to Hogwarts. Is it not so dreadful?”

Steady, Severus. You haven’t read a Daily Prophet in a month, and now Sibyll Trelawney knows something you don’t. Stay cool, and she’ll never find out. “I don’t think we’re in any danger right at this moment, Sibyll. And here comes Filch now, so everything’s in order.”

Filch opened the magically protected gate, and Trelawney scuttled up the hill to the castle as if hellhounds were at her heels. “Seems a mite skittish,” commented Filch.

“Just the recent news. Have you . . . uh . . . heard anything more?”

“He’s been sighted half a dozen places at the same time. Makes me think folks are more nervous than observant. Then again, a bloke that can get out of Azkaban can most like do anything.”

That explains Moody’s remarks, too. A vacancy he wants me to fill. “They’re certain to pick him up fairly soon, though, don’t you think?”

“I’d be surprised if he didn’t give them the slip. He always was a sly character. You’ll know as much about that as anyone, I guess, seeing how often the two of you battled it out in school. My, my, if ever I found slime in the Slytherin corridors or writing on the Gryffindor walls, I could bet my last knut that either Sirius Black or Severus Snape was behind it. No offense, sir, but there were times I wanted to wring your neck.”

“None taken,” said Snape automatically, but he wasn’t listening to Filch anymore. He felt as if he’d been punched in the stomach. As soon as he could, he left Filch and hurried to his own office in the dungeon to digest this shocking news. And as clearly as if it were yesterday, he could hear his own voice coming to him from those dark November days in the hospital wing twelve years earlier:

"If Sirius Black ever gets out of Azkaban, I'll kill him myself."

In the cool dimness of the dungeon office, Snape paced like a caged thing. From a long boarded-up well of memories, emotions gushed like new-tapped oil, dark, viscous, and suffocating. Grief was there, as fresh and wrenching as it had been that Halloween night when he stood, alone and despairing, on the parapet of the Astronomy tower. Guilt was there too, a driving red-hot prod. Overreaching them both was hatred, raw and unyielding. Hatred for the Dark Lord, who hunted rivals like a ravening beast. Hatred for himself, who had given the beast Lily as prey. Hatred for James Potter, who had sacrificed wife and child on the altar of schoolboy sentiment. But above all, hatred for Sirius Black, who had duped his best friend and sold friend, wife, and child to the beast.

Without thought, Snape had picked up and set down jars, paperweights, and vials. He wheeled now and hurled a jar into the fireplace, shattering the glass to slivers with the force of its impact and showering the fireplace and hearth with newts' eyes and green embalming fluid.

There was, at that moment, a tap at the office door. "Severus. Severus, I should like to come in and speak with you." It was Dumbledore.

"Go away and leave me alone!" Snape screamed at the door. "I don't want you! I don't need you!"

"I will not go away, Severus. Now is not a time for you to be alone. If you will not admit me, I shall stay here and listen and wait. I shall not leave you."

"You're a meddling old fool!"

"Yes, and I shall continue to meddle and be foolish while there is breath in my body. Let me in, Severus, and I promise you may yell and shout at me to your heart's content. It is a time for anger. I shall not take that from you."

Suddenly tired and deflated, Snape walked to the door, unlocked it, and opened it to Dumbledore. Behind the Headmaster came Hagrid, and Snape's fury bubbled up anew.

"I don't need a nursemaid!"

"No, of course not. Hagrid is not here to coddle you. He is here to protect me. We understood you might be . . . destructive." Dumbledore nodded towards the green ooze trickling down the stonework of the fireplace.

"Who told you?"

"Filch. He, too, has known you since you were eleven, and there is a certain icy calm about you that generally precedes a volcanic eruption. Filch is

not entirely blind to this. He merely commented that it appeared an explosion was about to occur in the dungeon.”

“I believe he used the word ‘nuclear,’” said Hagrid.

“Sirius Black has escaped from Azkaban Prison.”

“Yes, and you must have just heard of it for this to be so immediate a crisis.”

“How did it happen? Why?”

“They do not know. Something triggered him to think again of young Potter. He was heard to mutter in his sleep, ‘He is at Hogwarts.’ He has always shown some resistance to the dementors at Azkaban and managed to give them the slip. They are expecting him to come here after Potter.”

“He must be stopped. He must not be allowed to harm the boy.”

“For the boy’s sake, Severus, or to foil Black?”

“Does it matter?”

“For your sake it might matter very much. Remember that the boy is Lily’s son, and for that alone we must strive to preserve him. Remember also, that while evil should not go unpunished, vengeance and justice are seldom the same thing. Are you calmer now?”

“I think so.”

“Good. Lunch will be served to the staff in about half an hour, and it would be well if you were there. Hagrid will stay with you for a while. Do not bristle, he is watching out for the school’s interests. Many of these items are quite expensive, and Hagrid will ensure that if you chuck anything else at the fireplace, it will come from your private stores and not the school’s stocks.”

“Thank you, Headmaster,” said Snape, breathing a bit more easily. “I think I’ll be able to make it to lunch.”

Snape and Hagrid went in to lunch together, no more expensive potions ingredients having been spilled in the meantime. Since there were no students, and would not be for a month, the teachers were able to gather around a table in the center of the Great Hall in a more collegial spirit than usual. Hagrid joined them, which he only occasionally did. Today, however, he had a reason for doing so.

“Well, well,” Dumbledore began after they were all settled in. “I do hope you all had a quiet, restful summer break. There are several things we need to talk about, but there is no reason we have to wait lunch. We can discuss things as we eat.”

Food appeared on the tables as the house-elves sent up the first of the

year's many delicious meals, one of the reasons, if truth be told, why the teachers kept coming back to the school year after year.

"Now," continued Dumbledore, "down to business. First, there are two vacancies on the staff that have not yet been filled: Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Care of Magical Creatures. The Dark Arts post is particularly difficult, since the rumor has gotten about that there is no job security. I do have one likely prospect whom I shall be able to contact in a couple of days, but he may not be able to arrive at the school until the very start of term."

Snape said nothing. Most of the teachers knew that he would take the Dark Arts job like a shot, but he never spoke of it to Dumbledore as an actual request except in private.

"As to the Magical Creatures position, there have been a few applications, but the best candidate so far both in terms of expertise and of rapport with the students has been Rubeus Hagrid." Dumbledore paused as the teachers gasped in surprise and turned to congratulate Hagrid, who seemed a touch embarrassed. *That's why he came to the table with us. Dumbledore told him to. I wonder if he'll ask for advice on lesson planning.*

Dumbledore tapped a glass for silence. "Now we come to the matter of school security. As you all probably know, Sirius Black has escaped from Azkaban Prison. There is reason to believe that he is insane, and that he is obsessed with the idea of attacking Harry Potter. For those of you unaware of Black's history, he was the Secret-Keeper who revealed to Voldemort the location of James and Lily Potter, causing their deaths and the destruction of Voldemort. The guards at Azkaban and the Ministry of Magic are both convinced that Black has always wanted to finish the job by destroying Harry as well."

When Dumbledore began speaking of Black, Snape leaned back in his chair and folded his arms, holding the left arm tight against his body in anticipation of what Dumbledore would say. He was thus able to conceal from the others the sharp stab of pain that, at the mention of Voldemort's name, lanced through the Dark Mark tattooed there. Dumbledore knew of it, but there was no reason the others needed to.

"The Ministry," Dumbledore went on, "has asked that all the defenses at Hogwarts be strengthened, and that we be particularly vigilant until Black is recaptured. We do not wish to frighten the students unnecessarily, but we also do not wish to give Black the opportunity to move freely on the grounds.

"On a more mundane note, September first this year is a Wednesday, and so there will be no extra day between the arrival of the Express and the start

of classes. Heads of houses will have to interview the new first years during their spare time in the course of the first week. Everyone else is requested not to impose on the heads while they are thus occupied. I believe that is all the business we have for today.”

General conversation broke out as the teachers relaxed and gossiped after six weeks of separation from each other.

As Snape expected, Hagrid did want advice on lesson planning.

“It’s just that I ain’t never had no training t’ be a teacher, and I’d like t’ do a good job at it, you know.”

“None of us had any training, Hagrid. There are no wizard universities or teacher training colleges. Only muggles actually try to prepare people for the jobs they do. We all picked it up by trial and error.”

“So what did trial and error show you, if ya don’t mind my asking?”

“Establish rules at the outset and be fierce about enforcing them. You can always relax later on, but if you’re lax at the beginning, you’ve lost them. Evaluate their skills at the outset so you know what they need. Try to catch their interest, but don’t go overboard. Remember you’re there to teach them, not entertain them. Start with the easy things and work your way up to the hard ones. Those are the basics, except for the most important rule.”

“What’s that?”

“No matter what they do, try not to kill them. I haven’t broken that one yet, though every year I’m tempted.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep it in mind.”

Dumbledore sought out Snape after lunch, too.

“I am very much afraid that I shall have to impose on your good nature, Severus.”

“I don’t have a good nature to impose on,” replied Snape, who was busy inventorying materials in the Potions classroom.

Dumbledore ignored this. “Since we have no way of getting a Dark Arts instructor until the last minute, I need someone to see that the classroom, office, and private quarters are in order. General cleaning and straightening up will be done by house-elves, but they cannot check materials and equipment. Would you mind?”

“You do just love rubbing salt into wounds, don’t you?”

“I knew I could count on you.”

“Just don’t make me teach his classes as well.”

“I shall keep that in mind.”

After supper Snape went down to the lake, and in the gathering dusk lit by a full moon he skipped stones across the placid water. It was a muggle skill Lily'd taught him when they were twelve.

Do you remember, Lily, the night we broke curfew, stole a telescope, and came out here to try to see the Lunar Landing Module in the Sea of Serenity? It was a moon almost like this one, full and beautiful. There are two full moons this month — one on the first, and the blue moon on the thirtieth. A bad month to be a...

Snape stopped, the stone poised in his hand. *Why did I think of him? Probably because thinking of Lily, James, and Sirius it's only natural to think of Remus, too. Still, it does fit eerily into what Dumbledore was saying about not being able to contact the new teacher for a couple of days, and his not being able to arrive until September first. The day after the next full moon cycle. If it were a werewolf, he'd be so tired he'd probably sleep during the whole train ride. Silly thought, though. Even Dumbledore isn't altruistic enough to give a teaching position to someone who'd kill children once a month. Twice in August.*

Kill children. Kill a child. Kill Lily's child. Snape's thoughts returned to Sirius Black. Dumbledore says it makes a difference if I try to stop Sirius because I hate Sirius or because I want to save Harry. I disagree. Sirius deserves to die. If it saves Harry, all the better, but Sirius deserves to die. I only hope that when it happens I have a chance to be part of it. But don't worry, Lily. I would never let anyone hurt your son.

It was late when Snape finally returned to his rooms in the dungeon to sleep.

* * *

Two weeks later, Dumbledore found Snape in the Dark Arts office, checking audiovisual equipment to see if the old magic lantern and wind-up Victrola still worked, since neither Quirrell nor Lockhart had used either.

"You might," Snape said as Dumbledore walked in, "consider having electricity run into the castle so that we could get some decent equipment."

"I shall put that on my list of things to do right after oil lamps and fountain pens. We do not want to rush into things too quickly."

"Plumbing was put in early."

"Ah, but that had an immediate practical application. Have you ever used a chamber pot?" Not waiting for an answer, Dumbledore continued. "I did

want to tell you that we definitely have a Dark Arts teacher who will arrive on the train.”

“Really. Who is it?”

“An old acquaintance of yours. Remus Lupin.”

Snape straightened slowly. “I don’t think that’s wise, Headmaster.”

“I am not surprised by your reaction. It is as I expected, which is why I wanted to tell you first and in private. Sit down, Severus, please. We need to talk about this.”

“It’s insane! It is absolutely insane! How can you hire a werewolf to teach children?”

“Now Severus, it is not as bad as you seem to . . .” Dumbledore was unable to finish.

“Not bad! Like it wasn’t bad when you exposed all of us to a possible attack when I was a student here? You do remember that he came this close to killing me? I don’t exactly have fond memories of that occasion.”

“That was not Remus’s fault.”

“No, it was his friend Sirius Black’s fault. And, oh my goodness, his friend Sirius Black has just escaped from Azkaban, is coming to Hogwarts to find and kill Harry Potter, and you’re letting his old chum the werewolf in as a teacher and an accessory before, during, and after the fact!”

“Severus, you are once again working yourself into an apoplexy. You have no cause whatsoever to think that Remus is helping Sirius. Now you must remember that Remus was James and Lily’s friend as well and, maybe even more to the point, Peter Pettigrew’s friend. He has as much reason to want Sirius recaptured as you do.”

“He’s still a werewolf. He’s still dangerous.”

“You cannot fool me. I know that you know about the werewolf potion that was discovered five years ago. You cannot tell me you did not learn how to make it.”

“Some werewolves are allergic to it, and others are immune. It isn’t fool-proof.”

“Remus has been taking it with considerable success. You can help him.”

“Me? I’ve just inventoried his supplies, checked his equipment, put his filing cabinets in order, changed the locks on his doors, and you want me to make him a potion — a very complex and time-consuming potion — every month? And another thing . . .”

“I knew there was going to be another thing.”

"While he's off being a wolf three days out of the month — who's going to take his classes?"

"I thought we would all chip in and help."

"I hate this year already."

"As long as we are all agreed." And Dumbledore retreated, leaving Snape with a vicious desire to smash glass.

MONDAY, AUGUST 30, 1993 (THE FULL MOON)

Once again Snape was down by the lake after supper, this time huddled next to Lily's rock with his head on his knees.

I don't know what to do, Lily. I realize he was your friend, but he was never mine. We had a truce at the end, but Lily — a truce was the best we ever got. He always followed Sirius's lead. The first time I ever saw him was when the four of them jumped me at the beginning of third year. And when they attacked me in front of the whole school he was a prefect — a prefect! — and he didn't say one word or lift one finger to stop them. Dumbledore wants me to trust him, but how can I? Sirius Black's little toady.

Everything's changing this year, Lily. I'm losing my bearings. Dumbledore isn't wise, Hagrid isn't sturdy — you should see how nervous and timid he is about this class. Who can I talk to that understands the problem? Madam Pomfrey knows. She used to treat Lupin when he was a student. I'll have to sound her out.

I'm beginning to really dread seeing Draco Malfoy. I'm sure he was acting as his father's spy last year. It'll be worse this year since Lucius isn't on the Board of Governors any more. Draco will be his only source of information for what's going on here. I'm going to have to be very careful around him.

And then there's Harry. I'm sorry, Lily, I don't like your son. He's too much like James — arrogant, self-centered, never thinking before he jumps into things. I wish I could see you in him, but it isn't there. I promise you, though, that I will do everything in my power to see that he's not hurt. If I have to face Sirius, or Remus, or even Dumbledore. Everything in my power.

The lights were still on in Dumbledore's tower office when Snape finally returned to his rooms in the castle. *Is he watching me?* Something else to worry about.

* * *

He walked by the lake shore in the early evening looking for Lily. A nightingale sang, and the air was perfumed with summer flowers. They were to meet for the rocket launch from the island in the lake's center, and a pavilion was erected for the event. A cool breeze swept off the water to refresh the gathering crowds, refresh them and freeze the flowers.

The flower he held had a heart of ice. Its fragile petals cracked, broke, and fell into the water. And from the icy petals frost spread into the lake, freezing its surface and trapping the swimmers, among them Lily and her baby. 'Severus,' she cried, 'Severus, you're killing me, killing me, killed me. You killed me. You.'

The people were pointing at him, crying 'Murder, murderer,' and he cried with them, 'I'm a murderer, murdered her, murdered...' as the people turned into frozen flowers and the flowers into birds. Black birds with tattered feathers and bloody beaks that pecked at his eyes and bored into his head and heart, drawing out his thoughts, his breath, his life... dying...

Snape woke as his body hit the floor, but the dream didn't end. Cold bound his head like iron bands, and the ravens' beaks were long icy fingers that probed into his very soul and stripped warmth, light, joy from him leaving only despair as black as the birds themselves. He was powerless to run, powerless to fight, alone and dying in the cold.

From a great distance he heard a voice, Hagrid's voice muffled in cotton and fading into the freezing night, "They're by the dungeon windows! They're trying to get in through the dungeon!"

Then there was a crash and an explosion as Dumbledore, burning with fury, blasted his way into the room and cried with commanding power, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Light flooded the room, beating against the cold and the thirsty raven fingers, freeing Snape from the frosty despair and leaving him gasping for breath on the cold stone floor of his dungeon quarters.

Hagrid came lumbering in. "Get him out of here!" Dumbledore yelled, and Hagrid dragged Snape from the room, half supporting him, half carrying him up to the entrance hall, where he pulled off his own coat and wrapped it around the shivering Snape.

All through the castle doors were banging as the teachers ran from their rooms, calling to each other, asking what was happening. Dumbledore came up from the dungeon, his wrath still blazing.

"Minerva!" he called, "come up with me to my office. Cornelius Fudge is coming in about fifteen minutes, whether he wants to or not, and we are going to get to the bottom of this. The rest of you, travel in threes and fours

and be sure every possible entrance to the castle is sealed. We have just been surrounded by dementors from Azkaban.”

They started up the stairs, but Dumbledore turned with one more order. “Hagrid, stay with Severus. Since they have already touched him, he may still be a target. Keep him warm and get him up to the hospital.”

It was two o’clock in the morning.

Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, came at Dumbledore’s bidding and stayed for breakfast. Snape was already out of the hospital, having been dosed with chocolate and warm blankets for a couple of hours, though Hagrid still hovered around him like a mother hen.

Dumbledore’s anger hadn’t faded. “I cannot tell you strongly enough how much I disapprove of dementors being allowed anywhere near Hogwarts. I cannot keep them away from the perimeter, but I will not allow them on the grounds.”

“Albus, Albus, they aren’t here to harm you, they’re here to protect you.” Fudge helped himself to eggs and bacon.

“Protect? They attacked one of my teachers.”

Fudge lowered his voice and whispered something for Dumbledore’s ear only. It may have been meant to pacify, but clearly didn’t.

“Mr. Minister, I will thank you to treat my school and my staff with respect, and that includes keeping your dementors away from the grounds and from anyone associated with the school. I will not bargain with you on this. No dementors in Hogwarts.”

After Fudge returned to the Ministry, Dumbledore addressed the teachers. “The Ministry of Magic has seen fit to surround Hogwarts with dementors in an effort to capture Sirius Black. While we all object to this measure, when we speak to the students we must treat the Ministry’s orders with respect. It would serve no purpose to create an atmosphere of distrust or dissension.”

Later, privately to Snape, Dumbledore said, “Tread carefully, Severus. Cornelius Fudge is of a mind that the dementors did not select you at random. He feels your former service may have attracted them to you. Do not give them an excuse to seek you out.”

The teachers worked all that day and the next, the day of the students’ arrival, to adjust their planned activities so as to keep the students away from Hogwarts’s perimeter as much as possible during the school year. It was a long two days, but just after sundown on the evening of September first, they

gathered in their good robes to go into the Great Hall for the welcoming and the Sorting ceremony. The train was due at any time.

Dumbledore appeared on a staircase landing. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, and it was clear he was not happy, "there has been a delay. I have just received an owl from our new Dark Arts teacher that dementors have searched the Hogwarts Express. Under the circumstances, it will be better if you meet the students here, or even outside when the carriages arrive, not just heads of houses. Madam Pomfrey, Madam Hooch, Professor Burbage, if you would meet the boats and be prepared to assist the first years. Professor McGonagall, you may want to separate Master Potter and his friends and talk to them privately. It seems the dementors singled him out for attack."

The teachers separated, the desire to discuss the development overridden by the need to protect their charges. Snape went outside with McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout to assist any students from their houses who might need aid.

They set dementors on children. You don't set dementors on children. Potter is what, thirteen? Snape shuddered at recalling his own experience. He kept a fire burning in his quarters now, to drive away the memory of the dementors' cold.

Soon the thestral carriages were climbing the hill, and hundreds of students descended from them to enter the castle for the Sorting and the feast. They seemed somewhat surprised, but also relieved to find all the teachers waiting at the entrance. The meeting with the dementors had shaken them considerably.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," said a familiar voice, and Snape turned to greet Draco Malfoy, flanked as usual by Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. Death Eater families, all of them.

"Good evening, Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle. Welcome back. I trust you had a pleasant break."

"It was all right. Father specifically asked me to give you his greetings. He's still very interested in what goes on at Hogwarts."

That was a warning if ever I heard one. Softly, Severus, softly. "Send my regards to your father when next you write, Malfoy. I'm always pleased to hear from your family." Snape turned to check for more Slytherin students. Malfoy had other business to attend to as well, for Snape soon heard his voice ring out:

"You fainted, Potter? Is Longbottom telling the truth? You actually fainted?" He pushed his way forward to confront Lily's son. Snape heard no

response but Malfoy's crowing again. "Did you faint as well, Weasley? Did the scary old dementor frighten you too, Weasley?"

Fury bubbled up in Snape as he wheeled toward the little group. *How dare he! How dare he talk of a dementor attack like it was some child's imaginary bogeyman hiding in a closet!* Snape moved through the crowd of students, but someone else got there first.

"Is there a problem?" a soft, calm adult voice said, and Malfoy retreated. The incident was over, and the students broke apart to enter the castle and go to their places in the Great Hall. Snape found himself suddenly face to face with Remus Lupin.

It was an awkward moment.

"Severus," Lupin said, extending his hand. His face was drawn and grayish.

"Lupin," Snape replied, ignoring the hand entirely. "You look terrible. Wrong time of the month, maybe?"

"Dumbledore mentioned that you were teaching here. I was hoping to talk."

"I'm sure you'll want your things taken up to your rooms. They'll be starting the Sorting ceremony in about twenty minutes. Would you like to go upstairs to 'freshen up' after your long trip? Change, perhaps?"

"No, I'm all right. Wouldn't want to miss any of the Sorting."

"Come along, then."

"Severus," Lupin asked as he followed Snape into the Great Hall, "who was the boy who was teasing young Potter?"

"Draco Malfoy," Snape replied without pausing or turning around. "His father was an old 'colleague' of mine." If Lupin was smart, he would take the hint and be cautious around Malfoy. If not . . .

As they approached the teachers' table, Snape realized something had changed. The Dark Arts professor's seat had shifted down the table—Dumbledore had placed Hagrid between Snape and Lupin. *Should I feel relieved, or should I feel insulted? He doesn't trust us. Or maybe he just doesn't trust me.*

The feast was, for all intents and purposes, a perfectly normal first day feast. The Sorting went smoothly, Dumbledore warned the students about the dementors, Lupin was introduced to lukewarm applause, and Hagrid's appointment was announced. At this last, the Gryffindor table went wild, which was only to be expected, while the other tables were more restrained—and yet still more enthusiastic than they'd been for Lupin.

Snape didn't eat much, but then he never did. Nor did he talk much. Hagrid was clearly too embarrassed at being with the teachers, and Lupin still too affected by werewolf sickness, to want to chat anyway. *He really does look awful. We're the same age, but his hair's going gray already, at thirty-three. Skin gray, too. We'll see if he looks any better tomorrow or Friday. It could just be that yesterday he was covered with fur and going on four paws. Not doing well financially either. Clothes all patched and worn. Who'd hire a werewolf besides Dumbledore?*

Lily's Potter son came into the Hall just after the Sorting, looking none the worse for wear. *He's almost exactly the age his father was the first time James and Sirius bullied and threatened me. Gad, he looks like James. Don't look at James, think of Lily. He must be resilient, though, to recover from a dementor attack so quickly.*

Which brought up thoughts of Sirius Black. *No wonder he tried to escape. Twelve years living with dementors — how could anyone endure that? Deserve it — yes. He sold Lily to the Dark Lord. But endure it — anyone would try to escape. What if he isn't after Lily's son? What if he just wanted to escape? He's been punished for twelve years. If he comes here looking for the boy, I'll know his heart is still evil, but if he's just a refugee from dementors would I go out of my way to hunt him down?*

And of course, Draco Malfoy. *Has he changed since first year, or has he just become less concerned about concealing his mean streak? There was someone else involved, though — Longbottom. Longbottom told Malfoy that Lily's son fainted. Gave him the weapon, as it were. Is he really just an idiot — is it that simple? Or is he one of Draco's toadies, too? Either way, he's responsible for that scene outside.*

"Severus? Severus."

Snape started out of his reverie. Lupin was leaning across Hagrid to speak to him. The feast was over and the students were rising from their places to go to their dormitories.

"Severus, Professor Dumbledore said you could show me my rooms. He said you'd locked them up for me and could release them into my control."

"Of course. It's getting late and you must be very tired after — the last couple of days." They left the Hall together.

"I imagine you're tired, too. One or two of the other teachers mentioned that you were attacked by a dementor in your sleep. It's one thing to know they're coming and try to prepare yourself, but as a complete . . ."

"I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind."

They climbed the stairs to the first floor Dark Arts classroom, where

Snape undid the locking spells and let Lupin look around for a moment. Then they went up another flight to the office and private quarters. Again Snape released the doors into Lupin's control. "I trust you'll find everything in order."

"It's perfect. Severus, I know you spent a lot of time and effort getting the rooms ready for me, and I appreciate it very much. I wish we could resolve some of our differences and learn to live . . ."

"Why are you here?"

Lupin seemed taken aback by the abruptness of the question. "I needed a job. The Dark Arts position was open."

"I'm not talking about that. Why are you here now?"

"I'd think that would be very clear. Because of Sirius."

Snape nodded. "Ah, but on which side?" he said, and watched as puzzlement, comprehension, and anger flitted in turn across Lupin's face. "Good night, Lupin. You'll remember, of course, that breakfast is at seven. And classes start tomorrow."

"Good night, Severus. Thank you for your help."

"Don't mention it."

Snape returned to the unaccustomed warmth of his own rooms, but had difficulty sleeping. Aside from the too-fresh memory of the dementor, his brain was full of anger and confusion, of Malfoy and Longbottom, Black and Lupin, Lily and her son . . . He dozed fitfully shortly before dawn and awoke well after sunrise, groggy, bleary-eyed, and in a foul mood. Disturbed at being late for breakfast, he dressed hurriedly and made his way to the Great Hall.

"Y're going t' have t' do something about that Malfoy and his crowd," said Hagrid as Snape took his place at the teachers' table. "They been razzing Harry this morning about that dementor on the train, pretending t' faint and all and telling him dementors is coming."

Snape started to rise to go to the Slytherin table, but a firm hand on his right shoulder kept him in his seat. He turned slightly to see Lupin had moved to stand behind him. "I would prefer you didn't . . ." he began, but Lupin interrupted.

"Don't make a big thing out of it, Severus. Let it die. The boy can handle it."

"Malfoy doesn't let things die easily. And take your hand off my shoulder."

"Sorry. And no offense to you, Hagrid, but this doesn't need to be blown

out of proportion with teachers taking sides.” Lupin quietly sat down again and resumed eating his breakfast.

Snape spoke slowly and distinctly. “Are you aware that I am the head of Slytherin house, and that the behavior of those students is part of my responsibilities?”

Lupin’s fork stopped halfway to his mouth. He reddened slightly. “No,” he said, “I didn’t know that.” He set the fork down and faced Snape, though it was not easy talking around Hagrid’s bulk. “It looks like I put my foot in it that time. I shouldn’t have spoken out of turn. I’m . . .”

“Sorry. Yes, I know. You’ve made quite a career of telling me how sorry you are for things.”

There was an awkward pause. Hagrid was making puffing sounds as if he was trying to get up the courage to intervene. Snape noticed that Dumbledore was watching their end of the table and wondered if he could feel the chill halfway across the breadth of the Hall. He would take Lupin’s side, of course. Suddenly Snape didn’t want to sit there any longer. “You will excuse me,” he said frostily as he rose from his chair, “I have classes to prepare for.”

“What about your breakfast?” Hagrid said.

“I’m not hungry.” And Snape left the table, slipping smoothly along the side of the Hall and out the double doors.

There were footsteps hurrying behind him.

“Severus. Severus, wait please. We need to talk.”

Snape turned as Lupin walked up to him. “I can think of nothing in particular to talk about.”

“Why are you still so angry after all these years?”

“You don’t understand, do you?”

“Do you?”

The question was so completely different from what Snape had been expecting that he had no answer. Neither yes nor no would be a proper response, and he had no desire to be dragged into longer explanations. Certainly not here. Certainly not now. Lupin was manipulating the conversation, but Snape was not going to play along.

“We must continue this delightful chat some other time, Lupin. I really am busy this morning.”

Snape turned and headed for the dungeon. As expected, Lupin got in the last word.

“I look forward to it, Severus. Any time you’re willing.”

Once in his own quarters, Snape couldn’t keep the question out of his

mind. *What does he mean, do I understand? What's changed? What's happened to make it possible for me to stomach his presence? Why would he even entertain the thought?*

Then, because he really did have classes to teach, and because he didn't want to think about Lupin or his question, Snape began to shut down, carefully closing and locking all the mental and emotional doors that might inadvertently reveal something that he didn't want seen, didn't want to see, didn't want to exist.

A half hour later, Snape left his rooms for the Potions classroom to set up for the first lesson of the year.

During the second half of Snape's afternoon double Potions class, Professor Sinistra entered the classroom and motioned to him. "Thought you might like to know," she whispered. "One of your students has been taken to the hospital wing. Injured in his Magical Creatures class."

Snape felt the knot in his stomach tighten. He knew what was coming. "Which one?"

"Malfoy. He's been clawed by a Hippogriff."

Not Hippogriffs for the first lesson, Hagrid. Not Hippogriffs. Temperamental, unpredictable creatures that can eviscerate a grown man with one swipe of their talons. And Malfoy. Why did it have to be Malfoy? "If you could let Madam Pomfrey know I'll be up at the end of the hour..."

* * *

"Big, clumsy, half-wit oaf. They shouldn't let someone like that teach classes. He'll get every student in the school killed. Wait 'til Father hears about this. He'll have that lumpy menace sent up to Azkaban, and this time it'll take more than an owl to set him free." Malfoy was lying in a hospital bed with his right arm heavily swathed in bandages.

"Is it really that serious?" Snape whispered to Pomfrey.

"He's in no danger, if that's what you mean, but he may have scars. The gashes were deep, and they were down by the lake with no one who knew a healing charm. It took Hagrid several minutes to get him up here."

"Damn!" Snape swore under his breath. "Draco will play this for all it's worth, then Lucius will take it up another octave with the Board of Governors and the Ministry. I wouldn't make book on Hagrid's job at the moment, Poppy." Pomfrey returned to her office. Snape went back to Malfoy's bedside.

"Let's go over this again, Draco. Did you say anything that the beast might consider insulting? Please remember that Dumbledore will be interviewing all the witnesses, and if you're shown to be concealing anything it will weaken your case."

"Well, maybe I said it was ugly, but that was all, I swear it."

"Didn't Professor Hagrid warn you that insulting a Hippogriff is dangerous?"

"No. I don't recall him saying that at all."

"Maybe at a moment when you weren't paying attention?"

"You're taking his side! I'm telling Father you're taking his side! We all know what you were, what you are! How long 'll you last if Father gets the Ministry and the Board of Governors against you? Dumbledore can't protect you forever, you know."

"Once again we're talking about witnesses, Draco. Other students will contradict you. You won't win."

"Maybe not. But I could cause a lot of trouble for him just by trying. What do you care about him, anyway?"

"The school is in quite enough uproar over Sirius Black right now. Adding to it won't help anything."

"That's something else you should be happy about. Black's escape. He was on our side and now he wants to finish off Potter."

"I am surprised at you, Draco. Black's information brought about the Dark Lord's fall from power. Hardly something for you to be crowing about."

Malfoy was silent. It appeared it was an angle he hadn't considered. "How should I handle this?" he asked. "Father 'll want something."

"Better the beast than Hagrid. Keep the response appropriate to the injury. It will give you more credibility later."

"All right. I go along with you this time. But you'd better be nice to me or I'll change my mind and go for Hagrid."

* * *

"He threatened me. And not subtly either. A direct threat."

"Draco?" Dumbledore poured sherry for Snape and himself, then joined him in front of the roaring fireplace. The large armchairs were warm and comfortable. "Just exactly what did Draco threaten you with, and how did you respond?"

"It wasn't logical. He accused me of siding with Hagrid, then implied Lucius could have me fired by going to the Board of Governors and the Ministry about my past — and present — and then said you couldn't protect me forever. It was as if he were angry because I was a Death Eater and because I was not a Death Eater at the same time. That's what . . . scares me."

"That is disturbing. It may have just been Draco talking without thinking. And you said . . ."

"I ignored it. I tried to act as if what he said wasn't important."

"That's excellent. Show him you are not afraid of him and keep him off balance."

"So what do I do now?"

"My sources tell me that what is left of Voldemort — I am sorry, I tend to forget over the summer. I hope that was not too painful. — what is left of Riddle is in Albania. We must assume that there is still some possibility that he will return. If he does, the fact that you may be able to rejoin him could be vital to our success. Make sure that Draco, and through him Lucius, sees that your heart is still on the 'right' side."

"And if Sirius Black comes to Hogwarts? If I have to make a choice between maintaining my role and protecting . . . him?"

"I doubt that choice will come to you. And he has a name, Severus. It is Harry."

"Thank you, Headmaster," said Snape, who left the office without meeting Dumbledore's eyes.

MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 3, 1993

There was a little flurry of activity outside the staff room the next morning. As Snape approached, the talk and whispers died down in a most suspicious manner. *Careful, Severus. Something is afoot.*

McGonagall stepped forward. "Professor Snape, so fortunate that you're here. The staff room seems to have acquired some sort of creature during the night. We were hoping that you might be brave enough to confront it and discover what it is. You have much more experience with such things than the rest of us."

Snape looked around at the assembled teachers, all of them watching him with open admiration. Too much admiration. Badly acted admiration through which gleeful expectation seemed to bubble. "This is a trap, Minerva McGonagall, and I am not walking into it. What's in there?"

“Humph. I’m not telling. If you want to know, you’ll just have to go in.”

How bad can it be if the whole staff is amused rather than frightened? “It is always best to play the curiosity card, Minerva. Much more effective.” Snape reached for the door handle, and the other teachers crowded behind him as if eager to look into the room the instant he opened the door. *What is it they want to see that requires my presence?*

Snape opened the door. The teachers pressed forward to look, but there was nothing unusual in the staff room. Nothing at all. “What is this?” Snape started to say, but then the wardrobe began shaking and thumping.

Calmly closing the door again, Snape looked around at the rest of the staff. “That’s a boggart,” he said accusingly. “You were all hoping to see what I’m afraid of. You will notice, however, that it is the boggart that is afraid and hiding. Now if you will excuse me, I’m going to breakfast.” He made his way through the clearly disappointed group and went into the Great Hall.

Hagrid and Lupin were already there, Hagrid being much quieter than usual. “There’s a job for you,” Snape told him as he took his seat. “It seems a boggart has taken up residence in the staff room. Probably trying to escape the dementors. It’ll have to be cleared out.”

“A boggart!” exclaimed Lupin. “Don’t clear it out right away, Hagrid. That’s perfect for my afternoon class. The whole third year curriculum is on dangerous creatures, and there’s no better way to start than to show them straight off how to confront their fears.”

“I don’t know,” said Hagrid, looking at Snape.

“It’s in the wardrobe. It won’t hurt anything. You can take care of it this evening.”

It wasn’t until much later that Snape realized he and Lupin had agreed on something.

Malfoy wasn’t in Potions that morning. The third years were starting complex potion making, which required very careful attention to the preparation of fresh ingredients and the order and timing of their combination. The recipe was on a blackboard in front of the class, and Snape had spent some time going over the specifics. The potion for the day was a Shrinking Solution.

The first half of the session was taken up with explanations and preparation, so that when Malfoy did finally walk into the class at about the halfway point, most of the students were just starting the mixing.

The Slytherin students asked Malfoy how he was doing. The Gryffindor students, who had also witnessed Malfoy’s injuries, did not. *Don’t let it rankle.*

It would be the same if the situation was reversed. Snape shooed the Slytherin students back to their places. "Settle down," he said.

Since Malfoy had just come from the hospital wing where Madam Pomfrey was in charge of his discharge, Snape didn't consider him tardy. There were only a few places left where Malfoy could set up his cauldron, and he chose a place next to Potter and Weasley.

"Sir," Malfoy called a moment later. "Sir, I'll need help cutting up these daisy roots because of my arm . . ."

Since Malfoy's arm was heavily bandaged and in a sling, it was impossible to argue with this. Snape, who'd been monitoring the class and knew that Weasley's preparations were already well along, didn't even look up. "Weasley, cut up Malfoy's roots for him," he ordered.

Everything seemed to be going well for just under a minute, then . . .

"Professor. Weasley's mutilating my roots, sir."

Snape went over to the table to look at Weasley's own perfectly shredded roots and the butcher's job he'd done on Malfoy's. *You insolent little puppy! You're deliberately trying to force me into a confrontation. You can't lay aside a grudge for thirty seconds to chop a daisy root? If I can spend hours putting Lupin's rooms in order, you can take half a minute on potions ingredients.*

That wasn't what Snape said, however. What he said, in a smooth and controlled voice, was "Change roots with Malfoy, Weasley."

"But, sir!" Weasley actually acted as if he were the aggrieved party.

"Now."

Weasley obeyed.

Malfoy was obviously savoring the moment. "And, sir, I'll need this shrivelfig skinned." The look in the boy's eyes clearly said *Be nice to me.*

Don't push it. Snape shifted his glance to the two Gryffindor boys. "Potter, you can skin Malfoy's shrivelfig."

Out of the corner of his eye, Snape saw Potter fling the shrivelfig contemptuously at Malfoy, but his attention was distracted as the liquid in a nearby cauldron changed suddenly from bright green to orange. *Is all of Gryffindor house conspiring against me today?* The culprit was Longbottom.

You! Spreading stories and giving people weapons to use against your friends. How fast did you scurry off to Malfoy to tell him about Lily's son and the dementor? Have you no thought for the consequences of your actions? Does anything penetrate that thick skull of yours?

Snape realized with a start that he'd said the last sentence out loud. It didn't matter. The boy deserved it, and the words came spilling out. "Didn't

you hear me . . . Didn't I state plainly . . . What do I have to do to make you understand, Longbottom?"

Another Gryffindor butted in. "Please, sir, please, I could help Neville . . ."

The icy calm that Filch would have recognized immediately came over Snape as he turned toward the offending girl. "I don't remember asking you to show off, Miss Granger," he said coldly, then turning back to Longbottom he gave the boy incentive to take more care — "At the end of this lesson we will feed a few drops of this potion to your toad and see what happens."

As the now very subdued class returned to its work, Snape went to his desk. *You're losing control, Severus. Why are you losing control?* He began to shut down, jamming the anger, the frustration, the confusion into tightly sealed boxes, plugging the raging volcano, forcing himself to be still.

By the end of the lesson, Snape was quiet again. As promised, he tested Longbottom's potion on the boy's toad, and it worked perfectly. *Probably owing to help from Granger.* The students cleaned up and left the classroom. It was lunchtime.

Snape didn't go to the Great Hall for lunch. He had something more pressing to do. The forced calm had brought comprehension, and he knew why he simmered on the edge of an explosion. *If I open that wardrobe door, I don't know what I'll see. I don't know what I fear most, and the uncertainty is tearing me apart.*

When he was sure the whole school was in the Great Hall eating, Snape rose from his desk in the Potions classroom and went to confront his boggart.

The dungeon corridor was empty, as was the staff room. Snape looked around carefully, then slipped into its familiar, wood-paneled dimness. The wardrobe stood, quiet and apparently quite normal, against a side wall.

Has Hagrid ignored both Lupin and me and cleared the boggart out already? In a way the thought was a relief. Snape was not yet sure he wanted to see what the wardrobe contained. *I'm supposed to have a Riddikulus spell prepared, but how do you imagine a funny form of something when you don't know what it's going to be?* The thought occurred to him that he might not be able to drive the boggart back into the wardrobe. *Do I want to see it if I can't get rid of it?*

There was, however, no real point in delaying. Snape took a deep breath, reached forward, seized the knob of the wardrobe door, and pulled it open. The boggart leapt out instantly, and immediately dropped to the floor in a crumpled heap. It was Albus Dumbledore, and he was dead.

Snape stood staring at the limp form. Its eyes were open in a glassy stare, and blood had trickled from its mouth. Slowly, deliberately, Snape backed away from the boggart and sat heavily in a low armchair. *What do I do now?*

In a way he felt curiously unconnected to the image in front of him. *It's because I closed down before I came here. I stepped out of the water just in time. A sea monster's surfaced, but for the moment I'm safe on dry land. I can't stay here forever, though, and when I go back into the ocean I'll be in danger. Best to stay shut off until I'm alone for the night, since I don't know what will happen when I release the waters.*

It made sense, though. *Dumbledore is the only thing I have keeping me from the abyss. He's the only one who knows who I really am and what I've really done. He gives me my only protection and my only purpose. Without him, everything was in vain. Without Dumbledore I'm fodder for the dementors in Azkaban. Without Dumbledore the Dark Lord triumphs and I become his slave. If I lose Dumbledore, I'll have nowhere to go and no one to turn to. Cast utterly alone into the outer darkness...*

Snape shook himself free of the quicksand of his thoughts. It was like being back in the grip of the dementor again, with everything good and pleasant being drained from him. *I have to get rid of this boggart. I have to dismiss it back into the wardrobe.*

How to make the dead Dumbledore funny? Snape regarded the white hair and beard, and pictured Father Christmas — no, the American Santa Claus who climbs down chimneys — getting stuck in a chimney, his fat legs waving over the hearth... "*Riddikulus!*" he cried, and the image of jolly St. Nick retreated back into the wardrobe.

It seemed like hours, sitting there in the quiet staff room. It wasn't, of course, just lunchtime. Snape had almost forgotten that Lupin was bringing his afternoon class to see the boggart when he heard the sound of many footsteps and student chatter. He roused himself quickly, not hard since he was still shut down and his emotions closed off.

Lupin entered without knocking, and behind him filed the students of his class — the same Gryffindors who'd been in Snape's morning Potions session. Of all the students in Hogwarts, the ones that at this moment Snape least wanted to see. He rose from the armchair as Lupin started to close the door.

"Leave it open, Lupin. I'd rather not witness this." He made for the corridor.

In front of him was Longbottom. Longbottom, whose very life was a constant reminder of Lily's death, whose every action was like picking at

the scab of a festering wound. Snape could feel the locks bursting open, the seals melting, the bonds unraveling as the volcano inside him began building toward eruption. He turned at the doorway to face Lupin.

“Possibly no one’s warned you, Lupin, but this class contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you not to entrust him with anything difficult. Not unless Miss Granger is hissing instructions in his ear.”

The students were silent. Lupin looked at Snape as if shocked, then slowly comprehension seemed to fill his features. *He knows I’ve seen the boggart.*

“I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation, and I am sure he will perform it admirably.”

Snape spun on his heel and went to his quarters. There he sat in semi-darkness the rest of the afternoon, fingertips pressed against his forehead, struggling to control the tidal wave inside himself that threatened to drown him in fear and grief. He didn’t go to supper, not wanting to see anyone, especially not Dumbledore. Not until he was sure that the students were in their dormitories for the night did he get up from the desk and go into the smaller room to lie down on the bed.

Alone in the darkness, Snape began the slow, careful process of unlocking the doors, unsealing the boxes, and unbinding the chains, letting the caged demons free.

It was a hellish night. Every unsealed box, every unlocked door, was a floodgate of memories and emotions that Snape did not want to see, vivid images of every time he had been cornered or felt trapped. He relived moments with his father, with Bella, Rabastan, and Rodolphus, with the Dark Lord, but a surprisingly large number of them contained the sneering, vindictive face of Sirius Black.

By midnight Snape was exhausted. His body was damp with sweat, and his breath was reduced to shallow gasps. He had to get outside. Rising from bed, where he’d lain fully clothed, Snape groped his way out to the entrance hall and from there to the great oaken doors leading outside.

Once on the steps, he looked up at the moon, now more than halfway up the sky and just a few days past the full. Already he was breathing more easily — the night always relaxed him — and he wanted to go to the lake. He took only a few steps, then stopped. The night sky above Hogwarts seemed full of dementors, and the lake was out of the question.

Slowly Snape backed up the steps and into the castle. There was nowhere to go but back to his room. He was now filled with a horrible, dark depres-

sion. *What am I to do if I can't even go outside at night? Is the whole year going to be like this?*

The next morning brought new and unexpected trials. Snape felt sick. He hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours, had been sleeping badly for nearly a week, had a splitting headache, and was emotionally drained. Despite the presence of Lupin, he was looking forward to breakfast, since that would remove the hunger and might help the headache.

As he crossed the entrance hall, Snape noticed that students in small groups were watching him. Watching him, then inexplicably turning away and giggling. Once inside the Great Hall, the phenomenon continued, except that the Slytherin students merely looked embarrassed. At the teachers' table, even some of the professors seemed to find him amusing.

As he sat down next to Hagrid, Snape asked quietly, "Is my nose on crooked or something?"

"Not as I could tell. Why?"

"I seem to be the source of a large amount of good cheer this morning. You wouldn't happen to know about it, would you?"

"I, um . . . well as to that . . . I wouldn't. Professor Lupin might."

Lupin, sitting on the other side of Hagrid eating ham and eggs, suddenly remembered he had somewhere else to be. Snape didn't move when Lupin pushed himself away from the table, but as he passed behind them Snape hissed, "Coward."

Lupin stopped. "Don't call me that," he said quietly.

"Why are you running away?"

"I'm not running."

"Are we going to quibble about relative speed in front of the whole school? You're afraid to face me."

"Move over, Hagrid," said Lupin, and sat next to Snape. Both were aware that a large percentage of the school was watching them. "It was the boggart. The boggart changed into you."

Snape looked at the table in front of him rather than at Lupin. "Let me guess — Longbottom. And how, pray tell, did Longbottom get rid of the boggart?"

"He dressed it in his grandmother's clothes."

There was a pause. "As I recall, you were going to work with Longbottom first, which means you would have to help him with his Riddikulus charm. Who suggested the grandmother's clothing?"

There was another pause. "I did," said Lupin. "I . . ."

“If you say you’re sorry to me one more time, I’m going to strike you.” Snape stood, slender and proudly erect, still not looking at Lupin. “I seem to have lost my appetite. I do hope you’ll excuse me.” He walked out of the Hall.

“That’s torn it,” said Hagrid, not hiding his irritation at Lupin. “Do you know how hard it is to get proper nourishment into him? He ain’t eat since yesterday breakfast and now he’s off his feed again.” He scooped food into a plate, covered it with a table napkin, and stomped out of the Hall leaving Lupin by himself at the end of the table.

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

A CONSPIRACY OF MARAUDERS

There was a knock at the office door. “Go away!” Snape responded.

“I ain’t going away. I’m staying here and if need be I’m breaking down the door.”

“I don’t need a nursemaid!”

“I ain’t nursemaiding, I’m protecting school property.”

“I’m not destroying school property.”

“Prove it.”

Snape opened the door, and Hagrid barged in with his plate of food. As he set it on the desk, Snape protested, “I’m not destroying school property. Look around you. What am I destroying?”

“A very valuable Potions master. Now sit and eat.”

“I’ll sit, but I can’t guarantee eating. Hagrid, why would he do that?”

“I don’t think he did. Not a-purpose, anyways. He lives in the moment, always has. In that moment he wanted Neville t’ feel good about hisself, t’ feel strong and in charge. I don’t think it even entered his head that it ’d leave that room. He don’t understand the cruel side of people.”

“Then he’s dimmer than I thought. He’s seen enough, even participated in some of it, to know about cruelty. I still think that was on purpose.” Snape speared a sausage and bit into it. “He’s a lot sneakier than you give him credit for.”

Hagrid didn’t argue. He just let Snape talk, not even understanding all of it, because as long as Snape talked, Snape ate. That, after all, was the purpose of his visit.

Classes didn’t improve, especially the third year double Potions with Slytherin and Gryffindor. Between them, Malfoy and Longbottom were enough to ruin Snape’s sleep and appetite for a day and a half afterwards, and the others were a constant irritant. It didn’t help that from their first year, this

had been the thickest, most incompetent group of potions makers Snape had ever had to deal with. Malfoy was actually one of the better students. Granger would be tolerable if it weren't for her habit of constantly waving her hand in his face, but the rest were impossible.

In the middle of the second week of school, Lupin came to see Snape in his office. Snape was grading papers, and called "Come" at the knock without bothering to see who it was.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you too much," said Lupin.

"What do you need?" Snape didn't try to hide the sharpness in his tone.

Lupin pulled a folded-up square of parchment from his pocket. "Just this. I didn't want to push you, but I didn't want to leave it until too late either. I'm . . . I hope it's not too inconvenient."

Snape took the parchment and glanced over it. "This isn't the standard potion," he said. "Why did you add betony and valerian?"

"I have a nervous reaction to the original formula. They counteract it without altering its potency."

"It'll take about ten days to make."

"That's fine. I need to start the doses on the twenty-first."

"You'll have it before then."

Snape set up the equipment that evening and started preparing the first of several decoctions. The brew didn't need constant attention, and much of the time necessary for its preparation was taken up by the distilling process. True to his word, Snape had the first doses bottled into flasks and in Lupin's hands two days before he had to start the treatment.

"I wasn't sure how much you would need, so there is extra."

"Thank you, Severus."

On September 28, 29, and 30, Professor Lupin was absent from his classes. He was replaced by those teachers who didn't have a class at the particular times of his courses. Snape's free afternoon was, unfortunately, at the same time as the class with the third year Gryffindors. Lupin had left them a writing assignment, and all Snape had to do was baby-sit. He had no problem with that arrangement at all.

On October first, Professor Lupin was back in his classes. He looked awful. His young-old face was gray and drawn, and he walked like an old man. The depth of his fatigue was so great that it was almost impossible for him to teach his classes, and all he wanted to do was sleep. It was the same as he'd been the day he arrived at Hogwarts on the train.

Pomfrey contacted Snape part way through the day, just at the end of

morning double Potions. "He never used to be this weak when he was a student. Tired, yes, but not exhausted like this. Do you think it's the potion?"

"He did say he had a nervous reaction to the original one, and that the betony and valerian were meant to counter it."

It was a problem like any other potions problem, to be worked out with logic and experimentation. Snape took some of the pre-symptom potion and added vervain, hyssop, and pennyroyal to it. At lunchtime he stopped Lupin in the entrance hall and pulled him down to his dungeon office.

"Try this," Snape said, handing Lupin a smoking goblet of mint-scented potion.

Lupin took the goblet, glanced once at Snape, then drained the contents in three long swallows.

"You probably should lie down, though resting your head on the desk would have the same effect."

"You're the doctor," said Lupin, and did as he was told. About half an hour later he sat up again. "I feel very much better," he said. "I should get some lunch before the afternoon classes start."

And indeed, the supplemental potion seemed to work, for Lupin was back to normal in his afternoon classes, and had a good appetite for supper.

* * *

Quidditch practice was under way. The first match of the year was set for the last Saturday in November, and Slytherin was to play Gryffindor. Slytherin had a chance of winning, especially since team captain Marcus Flint was the oldest, largest, and most experienced Quidditch player in the school. This was due to his having to repeat seventh year, not having completed his classes or passed his NEWTs the year before.

Malfoy was causing trouble, though. He continued to insist that his injured arm was troubling him. He'd gone back to writing his own assignments and cutting up his own ingredients, but he complained that the arm was stiff, and he couldn't extend it fully.

Snape could understand Malfoy's milking his injury for all it was worth to get other students to do his work, or as a weapon against Hagrid, but not to keep him from playing Quidditch. He consulted Madam Pomfrey about the boy, and she was mystified as well.

"When I manipulate the arm, Severus, I can extend it to its full length. There doesn't seem to be any lasting damage to the muscles, cartilage, or bone. It's when he tries to do it himself that the arm won't extend."

"That sounds neurological to me. What do we have on the motor nervous system?" Pomfrey's expression told him 'not much.'

In the middle of October, the notices were put up that the first Hogsmeade excursion would be on Sunday, October 31. Snape got his supervisory assignment the same day, looked at his calendar, and went to McGonagall, who was in charge of the supervision.

"I can't be in Hogsmeade on the thirty-first," he said. "I have to stay at the castle. At least part of the day, anyway."

"And why, pray tell, are you suddenly special and exempt from taking your turn watching the little darlings at play?"

Snape knew that McGonagall was only half joking. Hogsmeade duty could be strenuous, and few of the teachers enjoyed it. When a dozen teachers had to oversee more than seventy percent of the school in an uncontrolled situation, it was not easy. The only problem was that his reason had to do with Lupin and his werewolf potion. The thirty-first was the day after the full moon cycle, and Lupin would be weak and sick. Snape didn't know if McGonagall knew about Lupin.

"I have reason to suspect that one of the teachers will be ill around that time. It's a potions matter. I really can't say any more."

McGonagall looked at him shrewdly. "I see," she said. "Very well, Severus. I'll take your name off the list."

Snape was up before dawn on Halloween morning working on Lupin's morning-after werewolf potion. He was refining some of the ingredients and needed to work out a dosage schedule.

Shortly after sunrise, Snape waited in the entrance hall with the first of the doses smoking in a small goblet. He handed it to Lupin as soon as he entered the hall with the order "Don't drink it too quickly," then watched as Lupin downed the liquid without demure. *I wonder if he's still staying in the Shrieking Shack during the full moon.* This thought brought back the memory of the time Lupin almost killed him, and he locked it up at once.

"The potion is a bit milder than last time. I'm hoping you don't need a stronger one, since we caught this at the first moment. You'll need more at noon and in the evening, though, and if it isn't strong enough, you'll have to tell me."

"Thank you, Severus. I can't express how much I appreciate your doing this for me."

Snape looked at Lupin blankly, honestly not comprehending.

"It's my job," he said.

The school was blessedly quiet with only the first and second years in the castle. As long as you weren't supervising, Hogsmeade days were delightful. Snape caught up on his grading, read a little, and then fixed Lupin's noontime potion. Carrying the goblet upstairs to the Dark Arts office would give him a chance to get out of the dungeon and stretch his legs.

He knocked at Lupin's office door, heard Lupin call "Come in," and entered the room. There, sitting at Lupin's desk drinking tea, was Harry Potter. Snape stopped. *What's he doing here? Why isn't he in Hogsmeade? What does Lupin want with him?*

"Ah, Severus. Thanks very much. Could you leave it here on the desk for me? I was just showing Harry my grindylow."

Snape set the goblet on the desk, watching the interplay between Lupin and Potter. *Interesting change in tone from the last two times I medicated him. He wants Potter to think he's in charge, and he doesn't want me to know what they were talking about.* "Fascinating," he said. "You should drink that directly, Lupin."

"Yes, yes, I will."

"I made an entire cauldronful. If you need more."

"I should probably take some again tomorrow. Thanks very much, Severus."

"Not at all." *He doesn't want to drink my potion in front of Potter. Does he want Potter to think he doesn't trust me?* Snape backed out of the room, trying to see an explanation in Lupin's face. There wasn't one.

Back in his dungeon office, Snape paced. *Am I reading too much into this? They were having a conference. A student-teacher conference that was private. So why not say so? Why the business about the grindylow? They weren't looking at the grindylow at all. They were talking about something that Lupin doesn't want anyone to know about. Talking with Lily's son about something.*

For the first time in quite awhile, Snape thought about Sirius Black again.

Everything seemed perfectly normal during the Halloween feast. Snape found himself watching Lupin more closely and worrying about Lily's son. The boy appeared all right, but kept looking up at Lupin at the teachers' table as if he expected something to happen.

Snape always expected something to happen on Halloween. It was, after all, the anniversary of Lily's death, and he'd been sitting in exactly the same spot when the news reached Hogwarts twelve years before that the Potters and the Dark Lord had all been destroyed. *Nobody else seems to remember*

she died on this night. Potter doesn't. Lupin doesn't. Dumbledore doesn't. I hate Halloween.

Ever since Potter came to Hogwarts, something has happened on Halloween. Last year the basilisk petrified its first victim on Halloween. The year before we had a troll. What's going to happen this year?

It didn't take long after the feast to find out. Snape and his prefects were getting the Slytherins back to their common room when the word began buzzing through the hall — Gryffindor was locked out! The Fat Lady's portrait was slashed and she'd fled in terror! As Snape started making his way up the stairs to assist, more rumors met him. Peeves had identified the assailant.

It was Sirius Black.

Snape never actually reached Dumbledore. As he went up the stairs, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw students were coming down. McGonagall saw him and called down the staircase, "All students are to go at once to the Great Hall. Slytherin and Hufflepuff, too. Tell Sprout if you see her."

He started back down, herding students towards the Great Hall as he went. Reaching the entrance hall Snape hurried down the dungeon corridor to Slytherin house. To the surprised students in the common room he said, "Get everyone out of the dormitories. Take everything you'll need for the night. Everyone is to get into the Great Hall as quickly as possible. There may be a dangerous intruder in the castle. Prefects, start with the far rooms and work your way to the corridor wall. I don't want one student left here. Flint, you and the other Quidditch players check the whole dungeon and stand guard to keep people from going back once you've cleared them out."

In the entrance hall Snape met Dumbledore coming down. "Severus, how fortunate. Would you please go up and check the Astronomy tower, the north tower, and the Owlery tower? McGonagall is taking care of Gryffindor and Flitwick of Ravenclaw. That will take care of the highest points in the school. Then work your way down with the other teachers."

Dumbledore went into the Great Hall while Snape hurried up the stairs. It was logical that he take the towers because he and Lupin were the youngest teachers in the school, and Lupin was sick. As he reached the seventh floor, Snape opted to check the Astronomy tower first. Best to get it over with quickly.

At the top of the spiral staircase, Snape stepped out onto the flat top of the Astronomy tower and glanced around at the parapet and enclosed space. That other Halloween twelve years earlier he'd ended up here, too, though

he'd not been hunting an intruder. *Mightn't it have been better if Hagrid hadn't stopped me that night. How much good have my last twelve years done anyone?*

It was then that the full import of what was happening hit him. *Twelve years ago tonight, Sirius Black betrayed Lily Potter to her death. Now tonight, twelve years later, we're hunting the same Sirius Black who's come into Hogwarts to complete the botched job. Tonight may be the night justice is finally served!* Snape returned down the spiral stairs with a renewed sense of purpose, pondering the quarry he was hunting.

He's been twelve years in Azkaban and a well-publicized fugitive for three months. He can't have a wand with him. So how did he get in? The castle's been locked tight every night against dementors. There's no way. Someone must have let him in. Who do we know in the castle who's a friend of Sirius?

Equally to the point, how did he get onto the grounds, especially with dementors all around? I did it once, through the Shrieking Shack, but ever since then the Shack's been magically guarded. Who knows of the Shack and the passage to the Willow, can release the magic charm, and was actually using the Shack up until this morning?

Odd how this keeps pointing to one person.

As he searched the other towers, Snape could feel the volcanic pressure building inside him. *Control. Control yourself. Need wit. Need logic. Need a cool head.*

He braved the dementors. He didn't even care about the dementors. All he wanted was to get here and kill a child. Right to Gryffindor, he went right to Gryffindor, where the students would be studying and talking and sleeping except tonight was Halloween. Did he remember it was Halloween? Did he expect to find Lily's son unsuspecting, sleeping, easy prey.

He didn't escape Azkaban to flee dementors. He escaped Azkaban to kill a child. Kill children if the others got in his way. Kill his friend's son. My friend's son. Kill all that's left of Lily. Close the emerald eyes. Lily's eyes.

Snape was in the entrance hall again, in front of the double doors. *Quiet now. Children. Children sleeping behind the doors.* He paused and breathed deeply, then opened a door just enough to slip through, in control of himself and his thoughts once again.

Dumbledore was standing in the middle of the Great Hall surrounded by students sleeping peacefully in purple sleeping bags. He was talking to the Head Boy, a Gryffindor. One of the Weasleys. Percy.

Swiftly but quietly, Snape moved across the floor of the Great Hall until

he was close enough to talk to Dumbledore without disturbing the sleeping children.

“Headmaster?” he said.

Dumbledore looked up as Snape approached.

Snape spoke in a low, quiet voice, less noticeable than a whisper. “The whole of the third floor has been searched. He’s not there. And Filch has done the dungeons; nothing there either.”

“What about the Astronomy tower? Professor Trelawney’s room? The Owlery?”

“All searched . . .”

“Very well, Severus. I didn’t really expect Black to linger.”

Snape was not about to let the conversation end there. *Slowly. Go slowly. Stay in control.* “Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?”

“Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next.”

“You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before . . . the start of term?” *He has to listen. There’s too much at stake now.*

Dumbledore seemed to have other ideas, for his voice became cold. “I do, Severus.”

He doesn’t want to talk about it here in front of Weasley, but if I don’t make the point now, it may be too late. Try to calm down and sound reasonable. “It seems almost impossible that Black could have entered the school without inside help. I did express my concerns when you appointed . . .”

“I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it.” And there it was. Dumbledore had cut off the subject, refused to listen, refused to even entertain the prospect. Then he sealed it completely. “I must go down to the dementors. I said I would inform them when our search was complete.”

He knows I can’t follow him . . . can’t go near the dementors.

Dumbledore was talking to Weasley. “. . . but I’m afraid no dementor will cross the threshold of this castle while I am headmaster.” And then he was gone.

You won’t listen to me. Will you listen to Lupin? Do you even know where Lupin is? He was sitting at the feast, and then he was gone. We never did see him while we were searching the castle. Maybe we didn’t find Black because Lupin let him out again. What about that, Professor?

One little, nagging voice at the back of Snape’s skull did mention that Lupin could have told Black that Lily’s son was at the feast that evening, but Snape was in no mood to listen to it at that moment.

Suddenly everyone was aware that Potter was in danger, and the boy was unable even to go between classes without an escort. He appeared to resent it, acting as if the rest of the school were fools and he an immortal god. McGonagall was beside herself.

"He's known since before school started that Black was after him, and he thinks it's not important. Certainly not as important as Quidditch practice. Black was in the castle. In the castle! He drove the Fat Lady away and had free run of the Gryffindor common room and dormitories, but Potter has to have his unencumbered Quidditch practice."

Snape agreed. "The Headmaster is equally stubborn, Minerva. It's impossible for Black to have gotten in without help, yet he refuses to investigate. How are we to do our jobs with no support?"

"Do you have anyone in particular in mind?"

"You know there's only one old friend of Sirius Black's in this building."

"Oh but Severus, I don't think Remus would let Sirius hurt anyone."

Snape folded his arms across his chest and narrowed his eyes. "Funny about that. My recollections seem to be just a tad different from yours."

"Oh," said McGonagall. "Yes. I see what you mean."

Then, just as the end-of-November Quidditch match was approaching, Malfoy announced that his arm had not improved enough to allow him to play. Gryffindor would meet Hufflepuff instead of Slytherin.

To make matters worse, Lupin came to Snape on the Friday before the match. "Could you take my classes this afternoon, Severus? I don't feel well. I'll be gone for a few days."

"I thought that started tomorrow night."

"I did, too, but it seems its coming earlier this time."

The sudden change of plans gave Snape an idea.

Snape did not go to lunch. Instead he went to his office and pulled out the paper that Lupin had given him with the werewolf-calming formula on it.

Why would he start feeling ill two days before the full moon when the cycle starts the day before... Dumbledore should have investigated this before he ever took the post... If the potion is too weak — no, then he'd just be more like a normal werewolf... We already knew Black was loose before Dumbledore offered him the job. It was so obvious... What if it's too strong? He has been having reactions, hence the betony and valerian... He's got to be forced to investigate, or we'll have dead children, but he won't listen to me.

Pulling jars and tins from the shelves around the office, Snape began going through his stores of calmatives, stimulants, and restoratives.

I can't force Dumbledore to investigate, but the Board of Governors could... I wonder if it's the betony. It's an aperient as well as a nervine. It could be weakening him... The parents could, too. If it comes from me, Dumbledore won't listen, but if it comes from the parents...

Potter doesn't have any parents. All because of Sirius Black. And that fool James Potter. Couldn't you see how unstable your 'friend' was? The rest of us could. Crazy and unpredictable. You had the best Secret-Keeper in the world, and you turned to a madman out of 'love.' Did you love Sirius more than Lily? Was that why you let him talk you into it? Sentimental idiot. Lost life, lost wife, lost one friend dead, two friends gone bad, son in danger...

Realizing that it was almost time for Lupin's class, Snape put all his potions material in order, locked the office, and went upstairs to the Dark Arts classroom.

Lupin's Friday afternoon class was Snape's least favorite group of Gryffindors. He allowed them a few moments of horrified realization that the class would be taught by their least favorite teacher, then proceeded to the formality of taking roll. It really was just a formality, as Snape already knew that only one student was missing — Harry Potter.

Just like Potter. A madman loose on the grounds who has access to the castle — a madman he knows to be intent on hurting him — and he's wandering around alone. And Lupin's out, too. Lupin suddenly gets 'sick' and Potter's not in class... The knot was forming again in the pit of Snape's stomach.

"Now," Snape addressed the class, "as has, I am sure, become abundantly obvious to even the least cerebral of you, Professor Lupin is not here today. He feels 'unwell.' He has, unfortunately, left no lesson plan nor any record of what you've covered so far..."

Predictably, Granger's hand immediately shot into the air, and at the same time Potter burst through the door gasping, "Sorry I'm late, Professor Lupin, I—" then skidded to an abrupt halt as he recognized Snape.

Let's make sure he has reason not to wander alone during class time. "This lesson began ten minutes ago, Potter, so I think we'll make it ten points from Gryffindor. Sit down."

"Where's Professor Lupin?"

No 'Professor.' No 'sir.' Just raw, blatant defiance. Snape closed down immediately and braced himself to meet the green eyes. Lily's eyes, now obscenely lit with James's arrogant sneer. A profanation, a blasphemy. Snape's

voice was chill, "He says he is feeling too ill to teach today. I believe I told you to sit down."

"What's wrong with him?"

Don't fight me, Potter. You're making it very hard to want to save your life. "Nothing life-threatening." Unlike the danger you face from Sirius Black. "Five more points from Gryffindor, and if I have to ask you to sit down again, it will be fifty." And if you defy a teacher in front of a class again, you'll have detention for the rest of the year.

Potter, however, took the hint and sat down.

The rest of the class, led by Granger, was equally rebellious, with even Thomas and Patil questioning the assignment he gave them. It was irritating, but he punished none except Granger and Weasley, both of whom went too far, since essentially the class was right. It was too early in the year for them to be studying werewolves. Werewolves, however, were what they needed to know about now, in the real world. *Lupin has been working hard to be popular with this group. It won't be easy to get them to focus on the danger, especially since Dumbledore won't allow me to tell anyone about Lupin's 'problem.' If just one or two notice and tell their parents, though...*

While the class studied the werewolf section in the book, Snape looked at some of the papers. Lupin wasn't exacting enough, in Snape's opinion. But then he'd always been like that, always wanting to ease up on people he liked.

After taking five points from Granger and giving Weasley detention, Snape assigned the entire class an essay on how to recognize and destroy werewolves. *At the very least, they have been forced to study what to do if they ever have to face Lupin in wolf form. May it never happen, but if it does they're better off prepared.*

At the end of the class, Snape returned to his office to continue puzzling over Lupin's potion.

It was well into supper time when there was a knock at Snape's office door. It was Hagrid. "I've got somewhat to say about this habit you're getting into of skipping meals," he said accusingly.

"Potions work. Medicinal," Snape responded.

"In that case, then, you'll let me bring you a plate."

"Of course." Snape absent-mindedly closed the door in Hagrid's face.

He needed pennyroyal and reached up to shift some tins in order to get it. Glancing at the tin in his hand, Snape paused. It was aconite... monkshood... wolfsbane... *Why did I pick up that one?* He rotated the tin in his

hand, aware of the shadow thought forming in the recesses of his brain, but refusing to look at it. He listened instead to the voice of his witch grandmother, Nana. *Potions are a sacred thing, for with them you hold life and death in your hands, and they are not toys to be treated lightly. You can care for the body, but you cannot probe the soul or part the curtain of the future to see if today's actions are good or evil. So above all, do no harm.*

Hagrid knocked again, bringing the food he'd promised. Snape carefully placed the tin of aconite back on its shelf and answered the door.

Noon is generally a good time to visit someone afflicted with Lycanthropy. While the rest of the school ate lunch and buzzed with anticipation about the day's Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, Snape finished his potion. He then checked with Madam Pomfrey, who asked that he take Lupin some food as well, thus sparing her a trip in what was already looking like the biggest storm of the season.

It was a terrible day for Quidditch. Rain pelted down in blinding sheets while wind whipped the castle towers into aeolian pipes. Nothing short of lightning stopped a Quidditch game, however, and the school was prepared to troop en masse down to the pitch to watch as much of the action as they could see through the rain.

Snape took a flask of the modified werewolf draught and a dish of food, wrapped himself in a hooded cloak, and slipped out of the castle, taking care not to be seen, though in the torrential rain it was unlikely anyone would notice his dark figure walking down the hill.

He'd only used the passage under the Whomping Willow twice before in his life, but both occasions had been memorable ones, and Snape found the knot that froze the tree with no problem. Then ducking down between the great, overgrown roots, he entered the tunnel and made his way to the Shrieking Shack.

Lupin was in the upstairs room, sitting at a table with his head resting on his arms. He looked up as the door opened and Snape walked in. "Good morning, Severus. Or is it afternoon already? It's kind of you to call."

"I brought you something," said Snape, setting the plate of food on the table. "Did you change last night?"

"No, actually. I felt like I was going to, but in the end there was no transformation. It looks like I'm on schedule for tonight."

"Drink this, then." Snape handed Lupin the flask. "It's the same, except I replaced the betony with pennyroyal. It should be less enervating and relieve some of the muscle tension. If it isn't effective, we can try something else."

Lupin took the flask and downed its contents at once. Handing it back he said, "You wouldn't care to stay and talk, would you? It gets lonely here sometimes."

"No. I wouldn't."

"Back at the beginning of the term I asked you a question, whether you understood..."

"I remember."

"I'd like to understand." Lupin spread his arms. "Is it because of what happened here?"

"That wasn't your fault."

"Then what...?"

"Did you ever try to stop them? Did you ever once try to stop them?"

"That's unfair. There was that time by the lake."

"Lily was there. You did that because of Lily. No, I mean just because..." Snape stopped. He was looking out the window of the Shack where they had a view of the area around the Quidditch pitch. "What's happening over there? It looks like more than the storm."

Lupin looked, too. "It's the dementors! They're being drawn to the Quidditch game!"

The two professors raced down the stairs, through the tunnel, and out into the rain as quickly as they could run, Snape ahead of Lupin, who was sick from his impending change. They slowed in the grass and mud at the base of the hill, where footing was less certain because of all the water.

Snape had reached the road that led up the hill when the cold hit him. He knew immediately what it was. Whatever may or may not have happened at the Quidditch game, his and Lupin's presence was now superfluous. The dementors had left the pitch and were returning to the perimeter, and there was at least one of them somewhere in front of him, invisible in the gusting sheets of rain.

Dementors felt and fed on emotions, and Snape began to back away and lock down simultaneously. No occlumens can fool a dementor for any length of time, but this one was far enough away that it might not have sensed him yet. He had no desire to feel its touch ever again in his life. Turning, he moved quickly up the hill, slipping slightly in the mud.

Lupin rushed up, as fast as he could go in the mud and the rain, his wand extended toward the source of the cold. "*Expecto Patro...*" he almost managed to shout, when Snape grabbed his arm, twisting the wand down, and clamped a hand over his mouth.

“Don’t attract their attention!” he hissed.

Lupin glared at him, but did as he asked, the two of them now hurrying up into the castle, both drenched and bedraggled. Noting that Lupin’s skin had a grayish color, and that his breathing was ragged, Snape took him by the arm and pulled him into the office in the dungeon where there was already a fire burning.

Tossing Lupin a couple of towels, Snape went into his bedroom to get a warm blanket. “Get out of that wet robe and dry off. I’ll get you something to take the chill off and perk you up a bit. Then you’d best take a cloak and return to the shack before the change begins.”

Lupin wrapped himself in the blanket and sat huddled by the fire, but when Snape gave him the warm potion he asked, “Why did you stop me? One of them was turning towards you.”

“I was far enough away. It didn’t have a strong feel for me. You’d have drawn it to us.”

“No, it marked you. It was turning. I could see it turn.”

“See? In that rain? I didn’t know your condition improved your eyesight so spectacularly.”

“Stop this!” Lupin snapped, and the tremor in his voice was not from the cold. “I was trying to help you. I wanted to protect you from that thing.”

“I don’t need protection.”

“No? So you’re here because you love to teach?” Lupin took a deep breath. “Severus, I know what you were. I know you changed before the end, and that Dumbledore valued you. I know that if you ever leave here, it’s with a one-way ticket to Azkaban. But that’s history. It’s finished. You and I are colleagues now, can’t we treat each other like colleagues? You made some choices in the past that turned out wrong, but . . .”

Snape had gone icily cold, not the cold of the dementors but the cold that preceded an explosion. “Get out,” he said, struggling to control his voice and his hands. “Get out of my office. Take your things and leave.”

Lupin’s anger was cold, too. “I can’t believe that you’d allow schoolboy grudges to control your life all these years. Grow up, Severus. Let it go. Leave it behind you and grow up!” Then Lupin rose and walked out the door.

Close behind Lupin, Snape shut and locked the office door, his hands trembling as if with palsy. His body was wound so tight now that he was shaking all over. He could smash his fist into the leaded glass on a cabinet door. He could slam himself against the wall. Striding to the side of the room, he instead wrenched open the doors of a cupboard containing jars and beakers.

In one long, fluid motion, he seized a beaker and flung it with deadly precision into the fireplace. Another beaker followed, and another, each shattering against stone with all the energy he could channel through nerve and muscle until the shards of twenty-seven covered the grate.

Drained, he let his legs buckle under him and collapsed beside the drawers at the base of the cupboard. There he sat as evening fell and darkness gathered, leaning against the knobs and drawer pulls, emptying his mind of thought and feeling, floating in a limbo of nervous exhaustion until, in the wee hours of the morning Snape finally dragged himself into the other room and lay on the bed.

That was a mistake, for that was when he drifted into restless sleep.

* * *

He stood on the grass facing Lily — her emerald eyes held him mesmerized — but the eyes were in a different face, and he knew he was in danger. The attack came from behind — he wheeled to face the great dog, the mastiff, with its bloody fangs. Around him a crowd was laughing at the sport — he was the sport — and the wolf with a prefect's badge pinned to its fur lolled on the grass grinning.

Hit from behind again, he spun to face the new threat. But he never could face it because however he turned it was always behind him. He wanted to run, but he was lying on the ground, arms and legs strapped with iron bands. He wanted to scream, "I didn't do anything!" but harsh bristles tore at his tongue, and pink foam frothed in his mouth.

The foam expanded, clogging his nasal passages, filling his throat, burning his lungs. He couldn't breathe — couldn't breathe — he was dying — and the crowd was laughing, for his fear, his pain, his death were all for their amusement...

Then foam was gone, bristles gone, iron bands gone, and Bella stood above him, pushing back the crowd. He crawled to her to lay his head on her feet, where she sat at the table. "Good dog," she crooned, "Good little puppy," as she fastened a collar around his neck, and he lay curled at her feet because that's what good dogs do.

He woke in the dark alone. The collar was gone. Rejoicing in freedom, he went out into the sunlight. But the sun was dark, and the wolf and the mastiff attacked him, tearing at his throat, his limbs, his stomach. "Help!" he screamed, "Please help me!"

"I can't," said Bella. "You're not wearing the collar."

Frantically he searched the room as the mastiff rent his flesh. The collar was in his hands, and he fastened it around his own neck. Then the animals weren't there, only Bella, singing. "Now I can protect you — protect you — protect you —" And he lay at her feet and loved her.

"Come with me," Bella said, fastening a steel chain to his iron collar. He trotted at heel beside her. Around them were wolves, hounds, lions, tigers... but they couldn't touch him if he wore the collar.

In the dark, dark room they faced a hooded spectre. Bella smiled. "I've brought you a pet... a puppy... a servant... a slave..." Red eyes burned into his mind, his heart, his soul, his arm, as the cold voice laughed, "I have a collar, too..."

Eyes suddenly opened wide in the darkness, Snape listened for the rustle of robes in the chamber. In the silence he raised a hand to his throat, expecting to feel the collar. There was no collar, no chamber, no rustle of robes. He was lying in bed, heart still racing from the nightmare.

He groped his way from the bed into the office, where embers glowed in the fireplace. There, in the lingering warmth, Snape stoked the fire and sat in front of it, wrapped in the blanket he'd brought out for Lupin, waiting for dawn and the coming of light.

As soon as it was time, Snape left his office to go to the Great Hall for Sunday breakfast. He was a little dizzy from lack of food, and once again he had a headache.

Lupin wasn't there. *Of course not. He's a wolf lying in the upper room of the Shrieking Shack.* Hagrid was, though, and Hagrid was clearly relieved to see Snape walk into the Hall.

"Where was you last evening?" he muttered. "We was all riled up about the dementors at the Quidditch match, and Harry and all, and come round about ten I says to myself, 'I ain't seen Professor Snape come in for supper,' but then it was too late."

"I was busy. What happened to Potter?"

"He's in the hospital wing, not bad hurt but Madam Pomfrey wants t' keep him there a while. Them dementors came right onto the Quidditch field. Seems they went for Harry most of all, and he fell off his broom about fifty feet up. Dumbledore was already on the field driving off the dementors and managed to slow Harry's fall. Had us all scared there for a bit."

Snape ate as Hagrid talked, asking a question from time to time, though there wasn't much more than that to tell. *Potter has no luck with opening Quidditch games. First one his broom's jinxed, then its bludgers, now its dementors.*

As he finished his breakfast, Snape's attention was drawn to Malfoy at the

Slytherin table. Draco was obviously doing imitations of dementors and of Potter falling off his broom. The little group around him was giggling. *That boy and I are going to have a talk today.*

Breakfast over, Snape went up to the first floor, to the hospital wing. He spoke briefly with Madam Pomfrey, who'd taken Lupin his breakfast. All apparently well with his patient, Snape returned to his own rooms to clean up the broken glass and generally straighten everything from the episode of the evening before.

He was calm, but only because he'd locked everything, including the dream, away.

At midmorning there was a knock on the door.

"Come," Snape called. He was making samples of werewolf potion with different proportions of ingredients.

Dumbledore entered the room. "Ah, Severus," he said. "It is good to see you looking well."

"Did you expect that I wouldn't, Headmaster."

"Why so informal? Why do you not call me Professor, as you usually do?" Dumbledore moved around the table to a position where he could see Snape's eyes, and though Snape carefully avoided contact, Dumbledore soon nodded. "I take it that you and Remus had a . . . difference of opinion."

"Am I that transparent?"

"My boy, there are days when you are the purest of crystal. Others when you are as impenetrable as obsidian. And on the days when you close yourself down this tightly in the privacy of your own office, it is generally because what you are afraid of is inside you. The most obvious trigger for this is poor Remus. How is he doing, by the way?"

"He doesn't react well to the medication. It makes him sick both before and after the change. We're trying to adjust it to smooth out the transitions."

"If anyone can, it is you. Tell me now, what happened with Remus?"

"He wants to be friends."

"Defensive sarcasm, and therefore a slight exaggeration. Today is a crystal day. You see, it is not so hard. I take it Remus wishes to cease being enemies."

"He also wants to protect me from dementors and forgive me all my sins."

"Whose sins do you not want forgiven, his or yours?"

"He is going to forgive me for the wrong choices I made in the past."

Dumbledore's eyes widened slightly. "I am most gratified, Severus, that you have chosen to confide this in me. Things begin to get clearer. So the difference of opinion involved the nature of choices?"

"I would prefer not to talk about it."

"I am a patient man. It has taken me what, twelve years to get this piece of information. I shall treasure it and ponder it..."

"Now you're being sarcastic."

"You are right. I beg your pardon. It troubles me, though, that you are so closed, that there is no one that you can open yourself to. That was what was so wonderful about you and Lily Evans. Just knowing that you had someone to talk to... Severus?"

"It's nothing. I'm all right."

"Do you ever talk to her now?"

"You do watch me!"

"That was not an answer." Dumbledore waited as Snape turned away from him to the potions on the workbench.

"I did. I can't now. There are dementors around the lake."

"Is there any place else where she is?"

"The Astronomy tower."

"No, no. That would not do at all. Not at all." Dumbledore paused. "Remus is a good man, Severus. As are you. He may understand more than you think. It is an option you should consider. You think about it. And I shall see you at lunch."

Dumbledore left Snape to his potions and his thoughts.

* * *

"Malfoy, may I have a word with you?" Teachers and students were leaving the Great Hall after lunch, and Snape took advantage of the opportunity to call the boy aside.

"Certainly, Professor. What can I do for you?"

Malfoy's attitude was a bit cockier than Snape expected. "Perhaps in my office?" he said. Malfoy followed him into the dungeon.

Once inside, Malfoy immediately sat down in the chair next to the desk. "Haven't been here in a long time. Doesn't change much, does it?"

"Not all change is good. How is the arm?"

Malfoy flexed it a little. "Getting better, I think. Madam Pomfrey's been working at the scars. They're almost gone. I'll be happy to see the last of these bandages."

"Your parents are well?"

"They're fine. Father isn't any happier about the condition of this place, though. Thinks it's a disgrace Dumbledore hired that pathetic Lupin to teach Dark Arts. Odd, too, that you and he find so much to talk about. Is it true, Professor, that you were attacked by one of the dementors? Kind of like a tiny taste of what Azkaban is like."

This boy knows something. Is this a threat, or a warning? Whatever he's playing at, power in the hands of a thirteen-year-old is not a pretty sight. "It's of dementors I wished to speak to you. You've been going around imitating them in front of people. Some members of this house have relatives in Azkaban. A couple of people, and yes the rumor about me is true, have been too close to them to find you amusing. One person on staff was in Azkaban for a few days. Your joke is in bad taste."

"They should've kept him in Azkaban. That's another decision of Dumbledore's Father isn't happy about. That oaf's no teacher. They're almost finished with the investigation of his attack on me, though, and that class 'll be history. They may even investigate old Dumbledore for hiring him in the first place. Wouldn't you like a change of headmaster, Professor?" The gleam in Malfoy's eyes was unmistakable gloating.

"What you change to is usually more important than what you change from. Until I know that, I'll reserve my judgment. Keep in mind what I said."

"Sure, Professor." Malfoy left the office.

That was impressive. He's better at this than his father. Now what? Do I take him on, or do I take the hint? If only I had a way to know how serious the threat to Hagrid and Dumbledore is.

* * *

"Severus!" It was Tuesday afternoon, and Lupin was once again back teaching. "Severus, I'd like to talk to you."

"Certainly. Always at your disposal."

"Not here. My office, maybe."

Once inside the office, so much larger and brighter than Snape's, with its grindylow swimming peacefully in the large tank, Lupin turned to face Snape, clearly angry.

"What's this game you're playing with my students?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"Do you think I'm an idiot? You gave them that werewolf assignment to try to expose me. I want to know why."

“Let me see. We have a werewolf with unpredictable reactions to a calming potion sleeping three nights a month in an unguarded shack, and we also have a madman running around with inexplicable access to a barricaded castle in which a friend of his resides. I would hazard a guess that student safety had something . . .”

“I would never! never! do anything to endanger the students!”

“No? Your very presence is a danger. What happens if you get careless?”

“I’m not going to get careless.”

“It only needs once, Lupin. Winter’s on us. Long nights, a werewolf roaming the halls who forgot to take his medicine, unsuspecting children on their way to bed. You’ve never had any close calls?”

Lupin was silent, but the flicker in his eyes was all the answer Snape needed. “Do what you like about the assignment,” he said. “They’ve looked at it. They don’t need to write about it.”

Snape walked out of the office, leaving Lupin standing there in thought.

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

TREADING WATER

Friday third year Potions class was always a torment.

One of these days I'm going to talk to Dumbledore again about changing the master schedule. It's insane to have Slytherin and Gryffindor students in the same classroom together for two hours. If I could just stand in one place and watch them, it would be one thing, but checking one student's progress means turning your back on another. The number of parchment pellets and paper airplanes I get from this class alone... Not to mention the teasing...

Malfoy was being particularly obnoxious, as if he knew he could get away with anything. His bandages had come off a few days earlier, and he was strutting around like a bantam rooster, spoiling for a fight. And he was doing dementor imitations again for the benefit of Potter when Snape's back was turned.

At least he isn't doing it while I'm clearly watching him. Does he think I don't notice, or is he showing me he isn't afraid of me, or is he not thinking about it at all, just teasing out of habit?

Snape walked over to Malfoy's table. The boy looked like a butcher, as did all the students, since he had a long apron over his robes and was holding a large bloody knife to cut up a crocodile heart. Snape leaned close to his ear. "Have you forgotten our conversation?"

Malfoy smiled up at him. Under other circumstances it might have been an angelic smile, if not for the glint in his eyes. "The investigation ends just before Christmas. Did you know, Professor? I'll be interested in what the panel decides."

"As will I. Keep your attention on your assignment."

A few minutes later the whole class was in an uproar, for Weasley 'd thrown a crocodile heart across the room straight into Malfoy's face. Malfoy's cauldron overturned, and there was blood on the floor and on Malfoy's face.

Please let it be just crocodile blood. Millicent Bulstrode was trying to pick up both Malfoy's and Weasley's hearts, but the things were slippery and slithered out of her hands.

Snape pulled Malfoy over to his desk and wiped blood off his face. Malfoy's nose was bleeding as well, so Snape had him tip his head back and gave him a cloth and an ice pack to try to staunch the bleeding. *Why do Gryffindors always overreact? Why do they always overreact with physical violence? Why don't they just think up some creative little hex and get back at him that way? Outside my classroom.*

Turning to Weasley, Snape said coldly, "You attacked and injured a fellow student. Fifty points from Gryffindor."

McGonagall caught Snape at lunch, slipping into Hagrid's seat and generally forcing everyone to move one space down the table. "Fifty points, Severus? A little steep. I understand Malfoy was teasing."

Snape sighed. "It's more complex than that, Minerva. First, yes Malfoy was teasing, but you don't punch someone in the face for clowning around. That heart, well luckily it wasn't a whole one, but the piece he threw weighed about a pound and almost broke Malfoy's nose. In addition to the violence, you know the Board of Governors is going to hear about this. Second, have you any idea how hard it is to get fresh crocodile hearts? Most crocodiles are considered endangered species, so we have to buy them from zoos when the animals die or monitor them in the wild and harvest them from recently deceased specimens, then hold them in biosuspension until we need them for the class..."

"All right, all right. It was more than just a spot of temper." McGonagall was laughing now. "I'll talk to Weasley."

"By the way, have you seen the list of people leaving for the Christmas break?"

"No, is it unusual?"

"Unusual! It's a mass desertion. Everybody is going. The only staff we'll have in the castle are Dumbledore, the heads of houses, Trelawney and... Lupin. Plus Filch and Hagrid. It's worse with the students. I think out of the whole school we have about half a dozen."

"Do you blame them, with dementors stalking the perimeter? If I didn't have to stay as head of Gryffindor, I'd be leaving, too." McGonagall smiled. "I just realized. If we count Dumbledore, the teachers will outnumber the students. That should be fun. Speaking of which, are you going into Hogsmeade for the last weekend before break?"

"Can't. I have some special potions to work on. I'm excused." That weekend was one week before the full moon, and Lupin would have to start taking his calming potion. In a way, Snape would have preferred going into Hogsmeade, despite the supervisory duties. The castle was beginning to feel like a prison.

It turned cold after the beginning of December. The ground was covered in the mornings, not with snow, but with frost. The dungeon rooms turned icy, and for the first time since he started teaching, Snape was bothered by the winter cold. *It can't be me. I'm not thirty-four yet. It's those dementors. Another thing Black's responsible for.* He put in an order for more firewood with Filch, enduring the caretaker's surprised look, because real fires warmed you better than magical ones.

Lupin's potions seemed to be taking up all of his time. They took several days to brew, had to be taken daily for at least a week before the full moon, and were followed up by the secondary potion to get Lupin back on his feet after the cycle was over. It seemed as if half of every month Snape was either brewing or administering the medication.

On the last Saturday before the break, the school had its pre-Christmas Hogsmeade trip. The castle was blessedly quiet as Snape brought the first dose of potion up to Lupin.

Lupin opened his office door at the first knock, his face settling at once into a cold mask that matched Snape's. "Aren't you a day early?" he asked.

"Last month you started feeling ill a day early. I thought we might forestall that by starting the doses early this month."

"You're the expert."

Snape set the small covered goblet on Lupin's desk. "It'd be best if you drank it now, while it's still warm. Then I could take the cup back with me."

Lupin sipped the mixture. "It tastes terrible," he said. "It always has. Does it have to be foul tasting to work properly?"

"I'll take it up personally with the wizard who discovered the potion."

Downing the contents without another word, Lupin handed the goblet back to Snape. "You didn't happen to see Potter on your way up, did you?" he asked as Snape turned to go.

"No. Were you expecting him?"

"After the dementor attack, I promised to work with him on something when the holidays were over. Since he can't go into Hogsmeade, I thought it might be an opportunity..."

"I'll mention it if I see him."

"In a way that dementor attack was a lucky break for you, you know."

"Why would you think that?" Snape's hand was on the door handle, but he paused, puzzled.

"When Potter's broom was blown into the Whomping Willow it was smashed to pieces. They can't repair it. He told me. It's a good thing for Slytherin that he'll be on a Shooting Star instead of that Nimbus when Gryffindor plays against you."

"If you think it makes an ounce of difference to me what sort of broom Potter's flying..."

"Just trying to have a conversation."

Glaring at Lupin, Snape turned and stalked out of the office.

What was that all about? How dare he imply that Slytherin can only beat Gryffindor if Potter is on an inferior broom! Make conversation indeed! Why doesn't he look for Potter himself anyway, or send a message to Gryffindor Tower? What does he think I am, his errand boy?

Snape looked down at the goblet in his hands. *I am an errand boy.*

Supper that evening was pandemonium. The fun of the day at Hogsmeade, coupled with the excitement of knowing that the next morning they would be on the Express back to London, spiced with every kind of joke Zonko's could provide, electrified the students. A food fight even broke out at the Hufflepuff table.

Snape was beginning to tire of having nearly every other teacher come over, wish him a happy holiday, and tell him how glad they were that they didn't have to spend the break at Hogwarts this year. *One student. I'll be here to baby-sit one Slytherin student. Just like Sprout and Flitwick. McGonagall has the hardest job. She has three.* He looked over at the three: Potter, Weasley, and Granger.

Potter seemed withdrawn and upset about something. *Not surprising if he couldn't go into Hogsmeade with the others. I wonder if Lupin ever had that chat with him. Someone else I have to baby-sit. One student and a werewolf.*

After supper, Snape went back to his cold office and room, stoked the fire, and checked Lupin's potion. Everything seemed in order. For some time he sat huddled in front of the fireplace, staring into the flames and wondering if he would ever feel warm again.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1993

Nobody was at breakfast the next morning. That is to say that Sprout and Flitwick were there, and a handful of students, but that was it. Most of the students were rushing to complete the packing for their holiday that they hadn't done the day before because of the Hogsmeade excursion. The teachers who were also leaving were helping supervise the boarding of the train before disappearing themselves. It was going to be a very quiet two weeks.

Snape sat next to Flitwick and started to help himself to eggs and toast.

"You didn't happen to bring the . . . uh . . ." Flitwick whispered.

"Didn't think of it, actually. Did you . . .?" Flitwick nodded so emphatically that Snape got up from his place. "I'll get it now, and we can have a game or two over breakfast." He headed back to the dungeon for the cribbage board.

In the entrance hall, Snape almost ran into McGonagall, who was hurrying in from outside. "Can't stop to chat," she called as she sailed past him. "Owl just came in from the Ministry, and Dumbledore wants to see me."

Wondering what that was all about, Snape retrieved the cribbage board and returned to the Great Hall, where he and Flitwick enjoyed a leisurely breakfast along with the cards.

It was some time later that McGonagall joined them, looking very sober indeed.

"So?" Snape asked, as she started loading a plate with toast and marmalade. Marmalade was a comfort food for McGonagall, and an excess of it tended to signify stress.

"The Ministry has issued its report on the hippogriff case. Dumbledore has just gone down to speak with Hagrid."

That did not sound good at all. Flitwick and Sprout were now both listening. "He hasn't lost his job, has he?" Snape asked, voicing the question that everyone was thinking.

"No, no. But for poor Hagrid it might be worse. They've decided to have a hearing to determine if the hippogriff is a dangerous creature that should be put down."

"That's terrible! When is the hearing to be, do you know?"

"On the twentieth of April next year."

Snape thought for a moment. "That's after the Easter break," he said. "If they really think the beast is so dangerous, why are they delaying the

hearing until then? Why leave a dangerous animal around the students for four months?”

McGonagall looked at Snape shrewdly. “And what game do you think is afoot, Sherlock?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Malfoy Sr. was using this as a hold on Dumbledore for most of the term. I wonder what they want.”

“They?”

“Nobody in particular. The perennially amorphous ‘they.’” Snape got up, backing quickly away from the conversation. He certainly didn’t want McGonagall to start thinking about the Dark Lord and Death Eaters at this time. He had no idea how much she already knew. “I may go down and see Hagrid later today.”

* * *

In fact, he started out to see Hagrid almost immediately. Donning a warm cloak in his office, Snape returned to the entrance hall and went out the great oak doors into the world of frost and ice outside. Once there, however, his footsteps gradually slowed.

From the hill he could see the dark shapes of dementors clearly against the white frost and ice of the lake. They kept to the far shores, but they were hungry. Who knew what might draw them in.

Below, where Hagrid’s hut stood, the Forbidden Forest crept disturbingly close. It, too, was a place where the dementors lurked, and the hut was too close to their threat for comfort.

Snape tried to force himself down the hill, but it was no use. Despising his own fear, he finally had to admit that the very memory of the dementor attack was enough to control his actions. *Am I going to act like a coward for the rest of my life because of one incident on one morning in August? Moody would have a field day with that information.*

Reluctantly Snape reentered the castle and returned to his office. He promised himself that he’d speak to Hagrid later in the day, ashamed of the compromise, but at that moment powerless to do anything else.

One of the amazing things about Hogwarts was that so much preparation could go into a holiday that was shared by so few. Only fifteen people remained in the castle: Dumbledore, seven teachers (including Hagrid), Filch, and six students. Since Trelawney seldom left her tower, Lupin might be ‘sick’

on Christmas, and Filch didn't care, it worked out to one Christmas tree per person. Truly extravagant.

It didn't take Hagrid long to recover from the Ministry's news about Buckbeak the hippogriff. On Monday he was at breakfast, and Snape asked if there was anything he could do.

"Nope, but thanks for the offer. I got me a team working on it already."

The team turned out to be Potter, Weasley, and Granger. *Granger is certainly thorough and intelligent. The other two . . . couldn't do any damage. Might do some good. It will keep them occupied and out of trouble. And it helps Hagrid. Worse could have happened.*

Christmas Day dawned bright and clear. Breakfast was very casual, with food laid out on one table for people to take when they wanted it. Snape went up to check on Lupin, and was disappointed to find that once again he was feeling 'ill' a day earlier than he was supposed to.

"That clearly wasn't the right adjustment to that potion," said Snape, not bothering to hide his puzzlement. "Have you experienced any difficulties once the transformation starts?"

"No, that part's the same. I'm calm, I know who I am, I sleep a lot. Look, don't wear yourself out over this potion. Even with the extra day not feeling good, it's infinitely better than not having it. It isn't your fault I'm allergic to something in it."

Lupin stayed in his rooms, but Snape went down to the Great Hall to join the rest for Christmas lunch. To his surprise, there was only one table — staff and students were expected to dine together.

Dumbledore sat at the head of the table, with McGonagall at his right hand. Snape took the seat next to McGonagall, while Sprout sat on his other side, then Flitwick and Filch. Hagrid wasn't there, and Snape rather suspected he was celebrating Christmas with Buckbeak. The Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff students were already seated on the other side of the table. The three seats across from Snape were empty.

Empty, that is, until the appearance of the Three Musketeers, Potter, Weasley, and Granger, who were forced to sit opposite. *Wonderful. I have to look at them for the next half hour. I sincerely doubt they're pleased with the arrangement either. Let's restrict conversation, eat quickly, and leave.*

It was unfortunate that Dumbledore was in one of his more puckish moods. He insisted in handing out Christmas crackers to everyone and cheering as they popped open to reveal comical hats. Snape rather pointedly didn't take one.

"Come, come, Severus, you must have a hat, too!" cried Dumbledore, laughing, and held out a particularly large silver noisemaker. Left with no choice, Snape took the end proffered to him and pulled. A very large bang, a small puff of smoke, and there on the table lay a pointed witch's hat topped with a vulture.

This fit so perfectly the description Snape and the others had heard of Longbottom's boggart dressed in his grandmother's clothes that McGonagall immediately began fizzing with suppressed laughter. Snape didn't look at Sprout and Flitwick, not wanting to see the glee on their faces. Across from him the three Gryffindor students were trying their best not to giggle and succeeding very badly. Snape turned to the irrepressible Dumbledore, seething internally and pushing the hat toward the Headmaster. *You did that on purpose.*

Dumbledore's eyes flickered in surprise, then he smiled and took the hat, removing his wizard's cap and putting the vulture on his own head. "Dig in!" he commanded, and they all began to eat.

Little happened during lunch except that they were joined by Sibyll Trelawney, an event welcomed by Snape since she and McGonagall never got along, and McGonagall baited the Divination teacher all the way through lunch. Aside from its being highly amusing, it caused everyone else to forget the vulture hat.

The students left as soon as it was polite for them to go, Potter and Weasley being the first. Granger for some reason wanted to confide in McGonagall, and the others drifted off to their rooms to relax. Dumbledore put a hand on Snape's sleeve.

"Stay for a moment, Severus."

"Yes, Professor?"

Dumbledore leaned closer, his elbows resting on the table, chin on hands. "Something happened earlier. Something that has not happened before. You spoke to me and told me that I planned that little hat trick. Which I did, of course, but that is not the point."

"I didn't speak to you. That's what I was thinking, but I didn't..." Snape stopped as the full import hit him.

"I did not 'read' your mind, Severus. You projected. You projected a clear, concisely worded message to me. Not a memory, not an emotional feeling — words. Words intended to tell me something specific."

"I don't know how I could've done that."

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that it can be done. Do not tell anyone

else. I think that the fact that I can communicate silently with one of my teachers is not something that should be public knowledge. It may never be necessary. It is nonetheless good to know that it exists. Another weapon in the arsenal.”

As Snape was leaving the table, McGonagall came over. “Sit down, Severus. We have another mystery that may be a problem. Potter has received a new broom to replace the broken Nimbus.”

“That’s wonderful!” exclaimed Dumbledore. “I had hoped he would still be able to play at top form.”

“Where did he get it from?” was Snape’s reaction. “Clearly it didn’t come from either of you, and my understanding was that his aunt and uncle never bought him anything.”

“That is the problem, and the reason why Granger wanted to talk to me. Potter himself doesn’t know who gave it to him.”

Snape and Dumbledore exchanged a glance. “Quirrell once tried to get rid of Potter through a broom accident. What if Black intends the same? Maybe the broom is cursed,” Snape suggested.

“That is what Granger is afraid of,” replied McGonagall, and Snape’s opinion of Granger went up a little. “I am going up to Gryffindor Tower now to confiscate the broom. I’d prefer to have Madam Hooch look at it, but she isn’t here. Professor Flitwick can check it for charms. Maybe you can look at it, too, Severus.”

“I don’t know anything about brooms.”

“You know as much about dark magic as anyone here. If the broom’s been jinxed, you’d probably know it.”

“Excuse me, Minerva, but Professor Lupin handles Dark Arts,” Dumbledore interjected.

Snape and McGonagall looked at Dumbledore and then at each other. It was clear they agreed on this. “I’d rather not have Remus involved,” said McGonagall. “He was one of Black’s best friends, and it wouldn’t be fair to put him into the position of investigating a friend.”

“Besides,” added Snape, “he’s ill and won’t be available for the next few days.”

“Very well,” conceded Dumbledore. “Have Flitwick look at the broom. If there is any indication that it has been jinxed, then Severus should check it more thoroughly. I am sure, however, that you will find it is in perfect working order.”

The question of the broom brought all of Snape’s suspicions back to the

fore. He was certain the gift came from Sirius Black. *And how might Black have learned that Potter needed a new broom? Lupin told him.* Hadn't Lupin admitted earlier that he'd discussed the broom with Potter? Then he passed the information on to Black, who got Potter exactly what Potter wanted — a new broom, a wonderful broom. And Potter was just the type — his father's type — to take the gift without question, as something he deserved just by virtue of being Harry.

This was something Snape couldn't discuss with Dumbledore. The headmaster had made it abundantly clear that he wanted to hear nothing against Lupin. Lupin and Potter — two perfect people in Dumbledore's eyes. *Why won't he listen? Black escapes from Azkaban, and suddenly Lupin is available for a job at Hogwarts. Someone has gotten Black past the dementors and into the castle. Someone is encouraging Potter to be careless of his own safety. Someone passed a message to Black that Potter would welcome a new broom. Who could it be but Lupin?*

They couldn't find anything wrong with the broom. Both Snape and Flitwick checked it for every charm, hex, jinx, curse, or enchantment they could think of, and the broom turned out clean every time. When the Christmas break ended, and students and teachers returned to Hogwarts, Madam Hooch was given the broom. She intended to strip it down completely and have the two professors individually check each part. She estimated this might take a month to accomplish. Neither Snape nor Flitwick grudged the time and effort.

The first Quidditch game of the year was between Slytherin and Ravenclaw. It was a hard fought battle, but Slytherin won by a narrow margin. At about the same time, news of Potter's new broom filtered through the ranks of the teachers. It was like a replay of the time two years earlier when Snape had asked to referee a Quidditch game in order to find out who was attacking Potter.

"So, you've confiscated Potter's new broomstick, eh," commented Sinistra at supper. "I suppose without that broom Gryffindor's chances of beating you get slimmer and slimmer."

"It wasn't my idea to check the broom," Snape protested. "McGonagall wanted me to go over it. And it's Hooch who's holding it back now, not me."

"Right. It's hard to miss how much it helps out Slytherin, though. I still think..."

"It isn't my fault. I didn't make the decision."

“Professor Sprout! Severus here is trying to tell me that it’s nothing to do with him that Potter can’t use his new broomstick.”

“A likely story, Snape. Anything to keep Slytherin on top, in my opinion.”

Snape knew they were teasing, but he hoped Hooch would be finished with the broom soon.

Mid-February was the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Snape paid little attention during the weeks leading up to it except to note that immediately before the match McGonagall gave Potter back the new broomstick. At breakfast on the Saturday morning of the match, it seemed as if every boy in Gryffindor was escorting Potter to their table. The boy had actually brought the broom with him to breakfast.

Why soon became apparent. Gryffindor was not paying any attention to Ravenclaw. Gryffindor was taunting Slytherin.

After observing the interplay between the two houses for a few minutes, Snape got up and slipped into a seat next to McGonagall. “You know, they might have the courtesy to show some respect to the team they’re actually playing today.”

“Nervous, Severus? How does it feel to know you might soon be toppled off that throne of yours?”

“So that’s where they get this cutthroat competitive streak. Direct from the Head of house herself. I should stop being surprised and go right to the source.”

“You are going down in May. You are going to lose. You should practice living with the idea, laddie, so it’s not so great a shock when it happens.”

“Such an exemplar of kindness and consideration. Not to mention modesty.”

“Do you want to back up your team with a wee wager?”

“Just exactly what do you consider a ‘wee wager?’ I’d hate to end up penniless in the event of a Gryffindor win.”

“Ten galleons.”

“Not on your life. The gesture is purely symbolic in any case. One knut.”

“As I recall, you’ve always been a bit of a penny-pincher. Weren’t you the boy that tucked every sickle he made tutoring into a locked chest and would never even go into Hogsmeade for fear he might be tempted to buy one Jelly Slug?”

“I still haven’t bought that Jelly Slug. One knut, take it or leave it.”

“Deal.”

Snape broke tradition by sitting with McGonagall that day. Flitwick was gracious enough to accept the explanation of the wager, knowing that all of Slytherin was cheering for Ravenclaw in any case. Lupin was in the Gryffindor box as well, sitting behind Snape and McGonagall.

Quidditch as purely a game was not something that Snape was particularly interested in. He'd been a student at Hogwarts for several years before he saw his first match, and that only because Lily'd insisted. He found the game somewhat boring. The better the seeker, the more boring the game. In fact, he had a tendency to cheer for the bludgers.

As the game progressed, even Snape had to admit that the Firebolt broom that Potter was riding was a technical marvel. Some of the dives were spectacular. Then, as both Potter and the Ravenclaw seeker closed in on the snitch, gasps came from the crowd. Three dementors were gliding onto the pitch.

Snape froze, his heart pounding and his breathing suddenly shallow. The spectators around him had risen to their feet, while he remained on the bench. Above the field, Potter suddenly pulled a wand from inside his robes and pointed it at the dementors.

Light sprang from the wand, light in the wispy, uncertain form of a deer. It radiated a powerful glow as it advanced on and struck the dementors, felling them to the ground. Then the stands erupted in wild cheering as Potter caught the snitch and ended the game.

McGonagall was already halfway to the dementors, Lupin not far behind her. Snape sat for a moment in the stands, eyes closed, then rose and joined the throng pouring out onto the pitch. Shakily he made his way to the crowd around McGonagall.

She was in a towering rage. "... cowardly attempt to sabotage the Gryffindor seeker! Detention for all of you, and fifty points from Slytherin..."

Fifty points! Snape suddenly began to push forward. There on the ground were Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Flint, still entangled in the black robes they'd used to impersonate dementors. Snape was furious, but said nothing, leaving the punishment of the four in McGonagall's very capable hands. Now that it was clear there had never been any dementors, he was beginning to calm down and focus on what had happened.

Harry Potter, a thirteen-year-old boy, had just produced a very impressive patronus.

A patronus! The boy can produce a patronus, and a good one. Is that what Lupin has been working with him about? Why? To use against dementors? But there are no dementors in the castle. All right, he was attacked by one on the train, and again at that first Quidditch match, so maybe there's some justification, but isn't it terribly risky as well?

Lily's son is safest when he stays with other people. When he goes off by himself, he's vulnerable, a walking target. One of the things that keeps him from wandering off alone is his fear of the dementors. By giving him a reason not to fear the dementors, you increase the chance that he'll walk right into Black's hands. Now what will keep him inside the castle? Is that what Lupin wants? A reason for Potter not to be afraid of the dementors? Something that will make it easier for Black to reach him undetected?

The whole castle knew that Gryffindor was partying with serious intent. It wasn't the first time that Snape was glad to be as far as possible from Gryffindor Tower. *At least this will ensure that Potter stays where it's safe.*

Shut in the peace and quiet of his dungeon office, Snape pondered every angle of Lupin's possible involvement in the patronus and with Potter. There was no way around it. He found far more in it to worry him than not, and very little comfort.

The alarm jolted Snape out of sleep at two o'clock in the morning. All staff were being asked to report to the Great Hall at once. Dragging himself out of bed and throwing a dressing gown on over his nightclothes, Snape made his way through the dark corridor to the Hall. He was almost the first one there. The others were filtering in from the floors above.

McGonagall was already waiting, in a tartan dressing gown with her hair in a net.

"What's happening?" Snape asked, stifling a yawn.

"He's back. He was in Gryffindor, in the dormitories. In Potter's dormitory."

"Who?"

"Sirius Black. He went after young Weasley with a knife."

All sleepiness, all fatigue was instantly gone. "Is the boy all right? Was anyone injured? When did this happen?"

"Not ten minutes ago. The boys are fine, badly frightened is all. Weasley most of all. Black slashed through his bed curtains, but the boy woke and yelled, and he fled. The others were asleep when it happened."

"Then Black must still be in the castle."

"That's why you've been called out."

By this time the rest of the teachers had gathered. Quickly briefed by McGonagall, they split to search the castle from top to bottom, Snape once again taking the uninhabited towers and the upper floors. Once again the search proved fruitless.

By morning the story had leapt from Gryffindor to Ravenclaw, and from there to Hufflepuff and Slytherin. Everyone knew that Sirius Black had attacked Ron Weasley, and everyone also knew that he'd gotten the Gryffindor passwords from a crib list dropped by Neville Longbottom. Weasley was the hero of the school, and Longbottom the goat, and Snape was totally dissatisfied with the story.

"Listen, it doesn't make sense. You tell me that Longbottom lost the list some time before Friday afternoon. That means he lost it somewhere inside the castle. So for Sirius Black to find it, he would already have to be inside the castle, and no one could have found the list before him. Now, who helped Black into the castle, and where was the list of passwords that no one else found but Black did?"

"Well you know now that you put it that way, it does seem a bit suspicious. Are you saying that you think someone in the castle is helping Black enter, and that person found Longbottom's list on Friday and gave it to Black on Saturday?" McGonagall's face wore a puzzled look.

"Doesn't that fit the facts better? No mystery to that one."

"But who..."

"Severus?" A benignly smiling Dumbledore interrupted the breakfast conversation. "I am sorry to spoil your little chat, Minerva, but I really must speak with Severus for a moment."

Snape followed Dumbledore to a corner of the Hall.

"Severus, you were about to voice to Professor McGonagall your suspicions about Professor Lupin. I really must insist that you do not talk of this with the other teachers."

"Headmaster, someone is helping Black enter the castle and someone gave him that list. The lives of our students are at stake. You have to at least consider the possibility..."

"No, Severus. I am completely confident that no member of this staff is to blame for what happened. I forbid you to carry this any further. You will not speak of your suspicions, and you will not act on your suspicions. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Headmaster." Snape turned away from Dumbledore and strode angrily from the Hall.

Don't talk to the other teachers. Don't talk to the other teachers. I promise you this, Professor High-and-Mighty, I-know-what-everybody's-thinking Dumbledore — when Harry Potter is lying bleeding to death on the floor of the Gryffindor common room, I swear I'm going to mention it to someone!

Furious now at Dumbledore's shortsightedness where Lupin was concerned, Snape decided to start checking and patrolling the whole castle himself. Black had to be getting in somewhere. Snape was going to find out where. All of his free time was now gone. When he was not teaching classes, or correcting papers, or mixing Lupin's potions, Snape was prowling the corridors of Hogwarts trying to find any place where Sirius Black might enter.

Shortly after, the school had another Hogsmeade excursion. Potter, luckily, was still unable to join the rest of the school because his aunt and uncle had not signed the form. In Snape's opinion this was a most sensible way to protect the boy, as long as he was smart enough to stay in the Gryffindor common room. Since the last incident when Black entered the castle, the entrance to Gryffindor was once again held by the Fat Lady, who knew Sirius Black, and she was protected by security trolls. It was unlikely that Black would ever get into Gryffindor again.

It was with some surprise, therefore, that on the morning of the excursion Snape saw both Potter and Longbottom standing together in front of the statue of the humpbacked witch on the third floor, far from Gryffindor, the library, or any place else they might be expected to be.

"And what are you two doing here?" he asked. "An odd place to meet..." Snape suddenly had a feeling that the statue had something to do with Potter's actions. He wasn't certain why or how, but the feeling was there.

Potter was evasive. "We're not — meeting here. We just — met here."

It's still not someplace where you should be with a crazed killer after you. "Indeed? You have a habit of turning up in unexpected places, Potter, and you are very rarely there for no good reason... I suggest the pair of you return to Gryffindor Tower, where you belong." *And where you'll be safe.*

As the boys obeyed, Snape stepped up to the statue of the witch. He touched it tentatively, wondering why he was getting such an odd feeling about it. There seemed to be nothing unusual, however, and he finished his rounds and returned to his office.

The afternoon was not far gone when there was a commotion outside Snape's office and then a banging on his door. Snape opened it to admit an extremely flustered Malfoy, who was babbling something about Potter's head.

Malfoy's own head was spattered with mud. Crabbe and Goyle were in the corridor behind him, and they were muddy, too.

It took several minutes to calm Malfoy down to the point where he was coherent. Then Snape heard the unlikely story of mud hurtling out of empty space, and Potter's disembodied head floating near the Shrieking Shack. Malfoy was hysterical, but to Snape it all made perfect sense.

He has James's invisibility cloak. That little brat has been defying school rules and going into Hogsmeade without permission using that invisibility cloak. How...? Not by the gate, but maybe that's the purpose of the witch. Sending the three Slytherin boys to the common room, Snape raced up the stairs to the third floor.

And there Potter was. Standing next to the witch, trying to hide the fact that he had mud on his hands. There was no sign of the cloak. *And if you can get in and out of the castle that way, Potter, maybe Sirius Black can, too.*

"So. Come with me, Potter." Snape led the way back downstairs to his office in the dungeons, a rather subdued Potter right behind.

"Sit." Potter sat. Snape did not. "Mr. Malfoy has just been to see me with a strange story, Potter. He tells me that he was up by the Shrieking Shack when he ran into Weasley — apparently alone. Mr. Malfoy states that he was standing talking to Weasley, when a large amount of mud hit him in the back of the head. How do you think that could have happened?"

Potter was forced to answer the direct question. "I don't know, Professor," he said, his eyes wide.

"Mr. Malfoy then saw an extraordinary apparition. Can you imagine what it might have been, Potter?"

"No."

"It was your head, Potter. Floating in midair."

Potter tried to pass it off as a joke, but Snape didn't let him finish. "What would your head have been doing in Hogsmeade, Potter? Your head is not allowed in Hogsmeade. No part of your body has permission to be in Hogsmeade."

You think you can brazen your way out of this, don't you? You don't realize that I know about James's cloak. I know you were in Hogsmeade, and I know how you managed it, you and that witch statue. Mocking all our attempts to keep you safe.

"So. Everyone from the Minister of Magic downward has been trying to keep famous Harry Potter safe from Sirius Black. But famous Harry Potter is a law unto himself. Let the ordinary people worry about his safety! Famous

Harry Potter goes where he wants to, with no thought for the consequences. How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter.”

That got a rise. The boy was not pretending innocence anymore. He was angry. Snape pushed it. Angry people say things without thinking. “He too was exceedingly arrogant . . . Strutting around the place with his friends and admirers . . .”

“My dad didn’t strut. And neither do I.”

“Your father didn’t set much store by rules either . . . His head was so swollen . . .”

“SHUT UP!”

“What did you say to me, Potter?”

“I told you to shut up about my dad! I know the truth, all right? He saved your life! Dumbledore told me . . .”

Locking down, shutting off, the cold moment before the volcano erupts. *Bullied, threatened, intimidated, beaten up, nearly killed in front of a crowd of people, lost the only friend I ever had, and driven into Bella’s waiting arms, and all he told you was that James saved my life! Am I nothing that he gives ammunition to this arrogant little imp who thumbs his nose at every rule Hogwarts has!*

“Have you been imagining some act of glorious heroism? Your saintly father and his friends played a highly amusing joke on me that would have resulted in my death if your father hadn’t got cold feet at the last moment. There was nothing brave about what he did. Had their joke succeeded, he would have been expelled from Hogwarts. Turn out your pockets, Potter! Turn out your pockets, or we go straight to the headmaster!”

Potter hesitated, then produced a bag from Zonko’s Joke Shop and a folded up piece of parchment. “Ron gave them to me,” he said lamely.

“And you’ve been carrying them around ever since? How very touching.” Snape took the bag automatically, but his attention was riveted on the parchment. Old parchment. “And what is this?” he said as he pulled it from the boy’s hand, but he didn’t need an answer. He’d seen it before.

This is the map Sirius had the day he tried to jump me outside the library. It’s blank now, but I remember the look, the feel of it. The map Filch confiscated from him. The map they must have gotten back from Filch somehow. The map only Lupin could have given to Potter.

Snape looked at Potter, who was pretending the parchment was unimportant. Moving closer the to fire, Snape said, “Why don’t I just — throw this away?”

“No!” Potter cried.

“Or is it — instructions to get into Hogsmeade without passing the de-mentors?”

The look on Potter’s face was all Snape needed. The boy was using the map. *There is a passage behind the statue of the witch! Idiot child! Sirius Black helped make this map. Black knows where every passageway on it is. Lupin is sending you down where Black might be waiting for you. To kill you. And all you care about is buying tricks at Zonko’s. Your mother died for this?*

Pulling out his wand, Snape unfolded the parchment on his desk and tried a few revealing spells to force the map to show itself. None worked, but the parchment began to form sentences, insulting sentences. Lupin, Potter, Black, and Pettigrew, each in turn taunted him — he could practically hear their voices in the mocking words. Potter looked as if he was going to be sick.

“So,” and Snape’s voice was icy. The cold calm before the nuclear blast. “We’ll see about this . . .” He strode to the fireplace, grabbed a fistful of floo powder, and flung it against the grate. “Lupin,” he hissed, “I want a word!”

Lupin came at once. Stepping out from the hearth, he brushed the floo powder from his clothes. “You called, Severus?” he asked in a voice that oozed innocence.

“I certainly did,” said Snape, barely able to keep his anger under control. “I have just asked Potter to empty his pockets. He was carrying this,” and he pointed to the parchment.

There was no doubt. Lupin tried to control his expression, but Snape knew he recognized the map. “Well?” Snape insisted.

Lupin was silent. He was clearly trying to think of what to say. Snape pressed forward, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Well? This parchment is plainly full of Dark Magic. This is supposed to be your area of expertise, Lupin. Where do you imagine Potter got such a thing?”

Did he just look at Potter? Warning him to be quiet? Warning him not to interrupt?

“Full of Dark Magic? Do you really think so, Severus? It looks to me as though it is merely a piece of parchment that insults anybody who reads it. Childish, but surely not dangerous? I imagine Harry got it from a joke shop —”

Do you think I’m an idiot? Or didn’t Sirius tell you how he lost the map. Do you think I don’t know? “Indeed. You think a joke shop could supply him

with such a thing? You don't think it more likely that he got it directly from the manufacturers?"

Lupin had the gall to pretend he didn't understand. "You mean by Mr. Wormtail or one of these people? Harry, do you know any of these men?"

"No," Potter replied, a little too quickly.

No, I don't mean Mr. Wormtail. I mean Mr. Moony, who's standing right in front of me this very moment pretending butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

"You see, Severus," Lupin continued. "It looks like a Zonko product to me —"

Then, as if part of the plot, Weasley came bursting into the office claiming to have bought everything and given it to Potter. At the sudden distraction, Lupin snatched the map off the desk, folded it, and put it in his robes.

"Well! That seems to clear that up! Severus, I'll take this back, shall I? Harry, Ron, come with me . . ."

Snape stepped forward, but short of wrestling Lupin for the parchment, there was nothing he could do. Seething, his heart pounding and breathing like a winded runner, Snape watched Lupin slip away with Potter, Weasley, and the map.

Less than five minutes later, Hogwarts had lost another seventeen glass potions beakers.

* * *

"There is a passageway to Hogsmeade somewhere around that statue!" Snape knew his voice sounded wild and strident, but he couldn't control it. "Potter's been using it to go to Hogsmeade without permission, and he has his father's old invisibility cloak to hide him while he's there!"

"Severus, Severus, you must calm down. We have checked the statue and found no passageway. And an invisibility cloak, surely not."

"James. Had. An. Invisibility. Cloak. He told me about it himself when he was trying to patch things up with me so that he could have a chance at Lily. That obnoxious, arrogant little piece of owl dung has the cloak, and his disembodied head is appearing all over Hogsmeade! You have to do something about it!"

"We've looked through his things. There was nothing there. No invisibility cloak at all. You are overwrought, Severus, and you need to calm down or we'll be sending you to St. Mungo's in a straitjacket."

“But Lupin is handing Potter to Black on a silver platter.”

“Not silver. Not for a werewolf. And you seem to have forgotten that I told you not to speak of these suspicions. I have complete faith in all my teachers. I assure you that no one on the staff is doing anything to harm the boy.”

The urge to strike Dumbledore was almost overpowering. *The demon. I have to control the demon. So many years, so many years, and it's still there. Waiting to pounce. Waiting to leap out. Why won't he listen? Why won't he pay attention? Why won't he take me seriously?*

“Yes, Headmaster,” was all that Snape said. He left Dumbledore’s office feeling more alone than he’d felt in over twelve years.

And that was where things stood for weeks. Snape’s days were filled with classes, homework, Lupin’s potions, and patrolling the castle. At night he slept badly. He was noticeably even thinner than usual, and he had pretty much stopped talking to anyone. This was principally because there was no one he could talk to about what had become an obsession.

Dumbledore was out of the question, of course. It was Dumbledore who’d muzzled him. Hagrid was understandably preoccupied with Buckbeak and seldom came to the castle for meals anymore. He’d lost the case and was now preparing an appeal against the hippogriff’s execution. Snape missed Hagrid, but he still couldn’t bring himself to go near the forest where the dementors lurked.

Snape still had to see Lupin all the time about the calming potions, but now their conversation, which had never been extensive, was limited to commenting on the potion’s efficacy. Snape was giving Lupin small doses of each ingredient one by one to see if he could isolate the particular herb that Lupin was allergic to. So far he’d had little success.

McGonagall and the others were a different matter. The whole school was talking about the upcoming Quidditch match between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and all McGonagall wanted to discuss were Gryffindor’s chances of beating Slytherin for the Quidditch cup. It was all Flitwick and Sprout wanted to discuss, too, and they sided with McGonagall. *It's apparently a tactical error to have the best Quidditch team every year. It promotes jealousy and ill feeling, especially against me.*

Monitoring the students became a major chore. Both Gryffindor and Slytherin students were harassing and jinxing each other in the corridors and in classrooms. A couple of small fights even broke out between classes. The only good thing about this was that the Gryffindor captain ordered Potter to be

guarded everywhere he went, and the boy was effectively prevented from doing anything stupid because he was constantly surrounded by his teammates and housemates.

The Saturday morning of the match, Snape paused at the Slytherin breakfast table to wish Flint and the others good luck. The hall was packed, and the Gryffindor team chose that moment to enter, clearly playing for maximum effect.

The Great Hall erupted in cheering. Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff all joined in, as did the teachers at the high table, including Dumbledore, who enthusiastically applauded. The Slytherin table was booing and hissing, and Snape made no effort to stop them. He'd completely lost his appetite.

Rather than endure McGonagall's teasing at the teacher's table, Snape stayed with his own house, walking along the table and talking to the students, encouraging the team, and generally waiting until he could gracefully leave the hall, which only happened after the Gryffindor team departed, again to tumultuous applause.

Going back into the dungeon area, Snape was stopped by Marcus Flint. "Begging your pardon, sir, but the whole house is going out to the field together, and we were wondering if . . . well . . ." He pulled a small bundle from under his robes. It was another robe, a green one. Slytherin green with silver trim. "We were wondering if you wanted to be part of it, is all."

Snape took the robe. "I would be proud to be part of it, Mr. Flint," he replied, and took the robe with him to his office, where he exchanged the usual academic black that he always wore for the brave green and silver.

Slytherin came last of all the houses down the hill, chanting their fighting song, emerald banners with their silver serpent waving in the breeze. Three quarters of the school stood against them, but they were not going to give up. Snape eschewed the VIP bleachers, and sat in the stands with his students.

From the beginning, the game went badly. The announcer was so clearly biased that the Slytherin team quickly lost all sense of proportion and concentrated on stopping Gryffindor either legally or by fouls. Gryffindor responded, but Madam Hooch noticed the Slytherin fouls and not those committed by Gryffindor. The score seesawed back and forth. Gryffindor needed a win of more than two hundred points to capture the Quidditch cup, and its team was doing all they could to keep Malfoy away from the Snitch until they were leading by sixty points.

In the end, the game was won by the Firebolt. Malfoy saw the Snitch before Potter did, and it was a race. The Slytherin stands were on their feet,

Snape with them, as the more powerful broom swept down on Malfoy and edged him out. Potter struck Malfoy's arm away from the Snitch and reached for it himself, and the game was over. Gryffindor had won the Quidditch cup.

Snape joined his team on the field, congratulating them on a well-fought game. The green and silver crowd was quiet and dejected. Nobody else came to speak to them, for they were all concentrating on Gryffindor, and the Slytherin team couldn't get close to the Gryffindor team to congratulate them because of the throng. *Not that they particularly want to. It would have been different if Gryffindor had been winning for ten years, and we were the underdog team.* He wasn't in the mood to remember that there'd been a time when that was true.

Depressed and dejected, Snape nonetheless swallowed his own feelings and went over to congratulate McGonagall on her win. "I owe you a knut," he said as they shook hands.

"And I'm going to see that you pay it," she answered. Then they were swept apart by cheering students and teachers, and Slytherin house made its way back up the hill to the castle, leaving the field to the victors.

C H A P T E R F O R T Y - T H R E E

STRUCK FROM BEHIND

By supper time, Snape was a bit more ready to deal with the situation.

"How does it feel not being on top anymore?" Sprout called from halfway across the Great Hall.

"Very comfortable, in fact. Much less like a moving target."

"Bit of a shocker for you today, wasn't it my boy?" commented Flitwick.

"We just couldn't bear to see you lose all that money you bet on Gryffindor. And don't say I never did you a favor."

Hagrid was almost contrite. "I sort of lost my head there, Professor. It's just that me and Harry, we've been like that since I first took him to Diagon Alley. Nothing against you, just that me and Harry, well you know."

"I know, Hagrid. No hard feelings."

Then there were final exams. Nothing special happened except that Potter, contrary to all expectations, was totally unable to pass the practical portion of the exam. His potion was a disaster.

If it weren't for your eyes and your nose I'd refuse to believe you were Lily's son at all. Is there nothing of her in you? You have money, you have fame, you're good at Quidditch, and you're a mediocre student. There is no doubt, even apart from your appearance, who your father was, but does your mother live in you at all? She was good at potions, and at charms, and at many things. Aside from broomsticks, what are you good at? Ah, one thing. Getting yourself out of the trouble that you got yourself into.

Hagrid, too, was reaching crisis. On the Thursday that was the last day of exams in early June, Hagrid's hippogriff Buckbeak was scheduled for his appeal. The appeal was taking place at Hogwarts, and if lost would mean the execution of Buckbeak at sundown of the same day.

The Minister of Magic arrived that day at Hogwarts around noon. He was actually visiting in regard to the search for Sirius Black, but was doing

double duty as a witness at the hippogriff's execution, should it come to that. With him were two representatives of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures.

Snape had been thinking of talking to the Minister, Cornelius Fudge, about Hagrid and the hippogriff, but on arriving in the entrance hall was arrested by the sight of the representatives of the Committee. The older wizard was unknown to him, but the younger was not, and he immediately recognized Snape.

"Well hello there, Snape old boy," he boomed, his black mustache quivering and the axe in his belt bobbing. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Hello yourself, Macnair. It has been ages, hasn't it. What brings you to Hogwarts?"

"Hippogriff to put down. Malfoy's keen on it. Looking forward to it myself. Hard to get a good job these days."

"I heard there was an appeal."

"Don't go placing bets. It's a done deal. When you get down to it, the beast attacked the boy. Enough said. And you don't want to go getting in the way of Lucius Malfoy. Better for me, too. And for you. You ever hear anything really good about a hippogriff? Best to chop 'em all, I say."

"You're probably right. I can't tell you how to do your job."

Macnair lowered his voice to a whisper. "You hear what's on the grapevine? They say he's coming back, that he's shown himself. I'm waiting for the summons. Is it true you saw him here at Hogwarts?"

Snape hesitated. Macnair was one of the more brutal Death Eaters, and Dumbledore considered it imperative that Snape's position regarding the Dark Lord remain ambiguous. "I stood as close to him as I am standing to you right now, but he felt that communication at that time was not wise. He's not yet regained bodily form."

"Lucky man, to have the chance to see and talk to him after all these years. When he returns . . ."

The Minister called to Macnair, "We're ready to go up and see Dumbledore now. Best come along."

Snape watched them go. With Macnair standing by to see and hear everything, there was no way to speak to the Minister about Hagrid. At least Dumbledore would be able to intercede, and after all, Dumbledore's word carried far more weight than his own did.

Hagrid lost the appeal, and the hippogriff was sentenced to be executed at sundown the same day. Since it was June, that was well after dinner. Hagrid,

naturally, was not in the Great Hall that evening, though the three from the Ministry were. Snape had the feeling that Macnair was watching him all during the meal.

There was no question of going to see Hagrid. Aside from the dementors, Macnair would be there. *What has he heard that he's waiting for a summons from the Dark Lord? How many others know? How?* As soon as Dumbledore was finished with the 'visitors,' Snape would have to tell him about Macnair's information.

Potter and his friends were at dinner, which was some relief. Snape had thought they might try to sneak out of the castle to see Hagrid. There was always that dratted invisibility cloak, but it didn't appear that Potter had it with him.

Snape returned to his own rooms after dinner to avoid Macnair. Shortly after sundown (the execution is over now, poor Hagrid), Snape suddenly thought of Lupin. It was an odd full moon that reached its full in the early hours of the morning. Lupin had not been certain whether he would transform that night or the next. He'd wanted to wait in his office rather than the shack, since other than the weakness, he'd had no problems with the potion.

Snape decided to check on him, and to take an extra dose of the calming potion just in case.

The corridors of the castle were deserted as Snape made his way to the second floor with a goblet of potion. He knocked at Lupin's office door, but there was no response. Fearing the transformation had happened, but knowing that Lupin had been taking his medicine, Snape opened the door and went into the office.

Lupin's office was empty. On the desk, untouched, was the goblet of potion that Snape had brought him earlier in the day. *He's done it. He's been careless about his medication. He's going to transform into a full-blown, uncontrollable werewolf as soon as the moon rises.* It was then that Snape noticed the map.

He hated that map. Like the invisibility cloak, it had been used to separate him from Lily's friendship. Lupin was obviously using it to monitor the movements of everyone at Hogwarts because the whole castle was clearly visible with its little moving dots.

Snape paused for a moment in front of the parchment. Dumbledore and the Minister were coming up the hill by the road. Lupin's dot was moving down the hill, not by the road, but straight towards the Whomping Willow.

Snape looked closer. There in the tunnel between the Willow and the Shrieking Shack were Potter and Granger, their dots almost off the edge of the map.

How does Potter know about the tunnel? Is Sirius Black already in the Shack waiting for him? Has Lupin gone to block his retreat? Snape was out of Lupin's office and running down the stairs to the entrance hall as fast as he could go.

Dumbledore and the Minister had not progressed far enough to waste time hailing them. For all Snape knew, Potter was dead already. He followed the path of Lupin's dot, across the summit of the hill and down the side closest to the Willow.

Alarm bells were ringing in Snape's brain. Macnair is coming up the hill — he'll see me and be suspicious. There are dementors in the Forbidden Forest — I'll alert them by my movement. Lupin's about to transform into a werewolf — how do I handle him? Potter's heading for the Shrieking Shack where Black is probably waiting for him — I have to stop him.

Approaching the Willow, Snape sensed two things: the Willow wasn't moving, and there were dementors nearby. He stopped. *Slow down, Severus. How close are the dementors? Maybe they haven't marked you yet.* He had to force himself to take the next step. *How close before they notice and attack? Don't think of that. Think of Lupin turning into a werewolf in the same room as two students. Stop him. Have to stop him.*

Step by forced step he edged closer to the Willow, which was starting to sway. There, on the ground by its roots, was the invisibility cloak. An evil thing. A wicked, filthy thing. And yet there was a homicidal maniac and a werewolf ahead of him. Up there in the Shack with Potter and Granger. *Don't be a fool! You need all the help you can get.* Picking up the horrid, evil thing that had helped destroy his life, Snape put it on, took a deep breath, and entered the tunnel.

It was a long way from the Willow into Hogsmeade. Unable to use a Lumos spell for fear of alerting Lupin or Black, Snape stumbled along in the darkness. The end of the tunnel was not light, but rather a lessening of the dark. There Snape crawled up through the floor and groped his way to the stairs. Voices were coming from the room above.

Snape recognized Granger's voice. "...there have been only seven Animagi this century, and Pettigrew's name wasn't on the list —"

Lupin laughed. "Right again, Hermione! But the Ministry never knew that there used to be three unregistered Animagi running around Hogwarts."

Light began to dawn for Snape. It came nearly twenty years too late, but it was light. *That's how they tracked me! It wasn't just the map!* He edged nearer.

Another voice broke in, a well-hated voice. Sirius Black's voice. "If you're going to tell the story, get a move on Remus. I've waited twelve years, I'm not going to wait much longer."

There is no longer any doubt. *Black and Lupin are working together to kill Potter!*

What am I facing? Lupin must have a wand. Does Black? Are the children free or bound? Do they have their wands? Let Lupin keep talking, let him brag if he wants. It'll give me more time. Snape put his hand on the knob of the door that separated him from the voices. Gently, quietly, he opened it. At the moment he managed to slip into the room, the door creaked, attracting Black's and Lupin's attention, but Snape, under the invisibility cloak, was already inside.

"This place is haunted!"

Snape looked towards the voice. *Why is Weasley here? What's wrong with his leg? Did they attack Weasley to lure Potter in? This complicates things if the boy can't walk. We can't retreat down the tunnel — I have to finish it with both Black and Lupin here. I can't see if they have their wands, but if I move they'll hear me.*

Lupin was telling the students how he became a werewolf and the history of the Shack. *I need to watch him closely. The moon is rising. He may transform any moment. Does he want to attack them as a werewolf? Will Potter and Granger be able to react quickly? If they can, it'll be three to two instead of two to one.* Snape didn't dare shift his position for fear of creaking boards making his presence known. Yet as he listened, he found the focus of his anger changing.

"... Finally, in our fifth year, they managed it. They could each turn into a different animal at will." *In our fifth year they separated me and Lily. They used the map, the cloak, and the shape shifting — two of the most popular boys in the school, surrounded by girls everywhere they went, and she was the only friend I had... That must be how he's been getting by the dementors, too. And into the castle. We were looking for Sirius Black, not an animal.*

"... there were near misses, many of them. We laughed about them..." *Careless. Still careless. Still taking chances with people's lives. Like tonight. Can't be bothered to take his medicine. The most important thing he has to do, and he can't be bothered. Where is the moon? Steady... watch for the change.*

"... felt guilty about betraying Dumbledore's trust... forget my guilty feelings every time we sat down to plan our next month's adventure. And

I haven't changed..." *I know you haven't. Even you admit it. Still deceiving Dumbledore, still more concerned with yourself than the safety of others.*

"... I convinced myself that Sirius was getting into the school using Dark Arts he learned from Voldemort... Snape's been right about me all along." *There! Black was in the service of the Dark Lord! Even Lupin knows about it! He destroyed Lily, and now he wants to kill Lily's son to finish his Lord's work!*

"Snape? What's Snape got to do with it?"

"He's here, Sirius. He's teaching here as well... you see, Sirius here played a trick on him which nearly killed him..."

"It served him right," Black sneered.

Served me right? Served me right! Black still thinks I deserved to be killed because I wouldn't give in to his intimidation and threats? After all these years he still wants me dead! Wants Potter dead. Wants anyone dead who doesn't agree with him. Of course, killing people who get in your way is just second nature to Black. Look what he's doing now.

"... Jealous, I think, of James's talent on the Quidditch field..."

You filthy bastard. How dare you tell Lily's son I cared anything about puffed-up Potter or Quidditch. You know what went on between us, and you dare, you dare to trivialize it by pretending it had anything to do with Quidditch! You petty little sneak. It isn't enough for you to glorify yourself, you have to tear everyone else down. You're going to kill him, and you still can't tell him the truth.

"So that's why Snape doesn't like you, because he thought you were in on the joke?" Potter asked.

Joke? One student tries to kill another and he thinks it's a joke? My death is a joke? Unable to take any more, his voice dripping with sarcasm, Snape hissed, "That's right" as he pulled off the invisibility cloak, his wand pointing straight at Lupin, his attention still partly on the window where he could see the light of the rising moon.

Snape could feel his heart pounding, and his breathing was uneven. He tossed the cloak disdainfully to one side, still hating the sight and feel of it. "I found this at the base of the Whomping Willow. Very useful, Potter, I thank you. You're wondering perhaps how I knew you were here. I've just been to your office, Lupin. You forgot to take your potion tonight, so I took a gobletful along."

He doesn't care. He knows he's going to transform into a wild killer in a few minutes, and he doesn't care. Black doesn't care either, but now I know why. But what is wrong with the children? Don't they realize...? Maybe they don't know tonight is the full moon. But Lupin does.

"Lying on your desk was a certain map. One glance at it told me all I needed to know. I saw you running along this passageway and out of sight. I've told the headmaster again and again that you're helping your old friend Black into the castle, Lupin, and here's the proof."

"Severus, you're making a mistake. You haven't heard everything..."

Don't try to wiggle out of this. If you're helping Black now, maybe you were helping him twelve years ago. Maybe you helped kill Lily. "Two more for Azkaban tonight. I shall be interested to see how Dumbledore takes this..." *Refusing to listen, refusing to even consider the possibility. Insisting Lupin was safe when even now he's trying to buy time to allow the transformation...*

"You fool. Is a schoolboy grudge worth putting an innocent man back into Azkaban?"

You filthy lying toad! Jealous about Quidditch and schoolboy grudges! Do you really not have a clue? Then, suddenly, it was crystal clear. Every piece fell into place. Sirius Black and Bella Black — they were working together all along! Servants of the Dark Lord even in school. *You were pushing me into her hands! You wanted me to be a Death Eater! You gave me to Bella!*

Cords leapt from Snape's wand at his unspoken command, binding the werewolf and pulling him to the floor. Lily's murderer charged, but Snape was faster, his wand now practically touching Black's forehead. Never in his life had he so much wanted to kill someone.

"Give me a reason," whispered Snape, cold fury now icing his voice. "Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will."

A voice behind Snape filtered through his rage. "Professor...?" He didn't hear all the words, but twelve years of Hogwarts took hold, and he found himself shifting into automatic gear. "Miss Granger, you are already facing suspension from this school. You, Potter, and Weasley are out-of-bounds in the company of a convicted murderer and a werewolf. For once in your life, hold your tongue."

She would not, but kept pushing, pushing... and he exploded. "Keep quiet you stupid girl!" *This man will kill both of us given the smallest chance!* "Don't talk about what you don't understand!"

He concentrated on Black again. *You gave me to Bella. Gave me... sent me out to hear a prophecy and set the hunt afoot, then you sold her... sold her...* "Vengeance is very sweet. How I hoped I would be the one to catch you..." *For Lily. Vengeance for Lily.*

"... I'll come quietly..."

So you can go on deceiving Dumbledore. So Dumbledore will let you slip

away again. “Up to the castle? I don’t think we need to go that far. All I have to do is call the dementors once we get out of the Willow . . .” *I can even face dementors for the satisfaction of knowing you’re back in Azkaban.* “Come on, all of you.”

Then, inexplicably, Lily’s son was blocking the way. James was blocking the way. Standing up for his betrayer. Blind to the end. Sacrificing wife, child, to the sham friendship of a psychopathic killer . . .

“Get out of the way, Potter.”

“You’re pathetic! Just because they made a fool of you at school . . .!”

“I will not be spoken to like that!” *Lupin’s lies. Lupin’s lies from Potter’s mouth.* “Like father, like son . . . You’d have died like your father, too arrogant to believe you might be mistaken in Black. Get out of the way!”

They took him the way Potter and Black had always taken him. While he faced one, the other hit him from behind. Snape’s mind registered that Potter raised his wand, but even as the spell struck him, another slammed into his back, and the combined force flung him into the wall like a rag doll thrown by an angry child.

Blackness engulfed Snape before his body touched the floor.

* * *

Consciousness came gradually, and the first thing he was really aware of was a splitting headache. Slowly, Snape opened his eyes. Moonlit dark surrounded him and he was — suspended in midair like a broken marionette. *Must be . . . Mobilicorpus. Wand. No wand. Think. Concentrate.* Snape focused on his invisible bonds, thought the word *Liberacorpus*, and collapsed onto the grass.

His head was spinning. Cautiously lifting his hand to the side of his head, Snape found his hair matted with dried blood. His forehead, when he probed the skin with tentative fingers, felt tender and bruised, as if someone had been beating him on the head with a stick. Who? There were students. And Lupin. And . . .

Adrenaline shot through him. Alert at once, Snape glanced around, but there was no one. No, there was someone. Someone lying on the grass near the Willow, unconscious. He crept to the other’s side. Weasley. Immediately Snape checked the boy’s breathing and pulse. A spell. *Have to get him back to the castle. Madam Pomfrey.*

Snape stood somewhat groggily, shaking his head to clear his mind. He looked around and found three wands, his own, one he recognized as Lupin's, and one that must be Weasley's. He was about to conjure a stretcher when he saw the faint light from the lake. Someone was casting a spell — a patronus spell. Someone needed help. He started toward the lake.

The cold of the dementors was like a barrier. *I can't fight them. I've never been able to produce a strong patronus. It won't do any good.* Still Snape forced himself forward. Potter and Granger were out there somewhere. Black, too, but as an animagus who could escape dementors. Lupin, but he was a werewolf. *Potter and Granger. It must be Potter and Granger.*

Then, from across the water, there came another patronus. A patronus whose light grew and radiated in front of it like a beacon of strength. A patronus that lit the night and paled the moon. Below in the darkness the dementors hesitated, quailed, and at last fled. Snape stood, transfixed at the image of the radiant creature that paused, stamping its hooves, then returned to its creator across the water. *A stag. Potter conjured a stag at the Quidditch match. Was that Potter?*

But it could not have been Potter, for Potter was lying unconscious near Black and Granger there where the dementors had attacked. Snape tried to puzzle it out, but his head was aching and he felt nauseous. Things seemed blurred and uncertain, and he wanted to lie down and sleep.

Instead he returned to Weasley, conjured the stretcher, and lifted Weasley onto it. Moving the stretcher in front of him, he then went down to the lake and conjured three more, one by one lifting Granger, Potter, and Black, the last of whom he bound to the stretcher with magical cords.

Four stretchers were a lot to handle, but Snape managed to maneuver them up the hill, into the castle, and to the hospital wing on the first floor. Madam Pomfrey went into a flurry of activity. She was asking him questions, questions he didn't totally understand because he was so sleepy, and feeling so sick . . .

* * *

"He has a concussion. He's fine now, but it's a good thing he got up here to the infirmary. If he'd fallen asleep there . . ."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey. I shall not keep you from your other patients." There was movement, and then Dumbledore's voice. "Severus? Are you awake?"

"Yes, Professor. I . . . are the students all right?"

"Fine, fine."

"And Black?"

"He's in custody. You are not to fret about this. You have had quite enough trauma to the head this evening."

"Professor, there was someone else out there. Someone who conjured a powerful patronus to drive the dementors away. It looked . . . it looked like the patronus that Potter conjured at the game against Ravenclaw."

"Indeed?"

"Do you know who's out there? Who might have done it?"

"Severus, listen carefully. I do not wish you to speak of this patronus to anyone. Not to anyone. It is very important that this remain a hidden thing. Like the mind speech."

"Yes, Professor."

Footsteps approached and Cornelius Fudge appeared. "Ah, excellent Professor Snape. You're awake and, I trust, well? Do you think, Albus, I might speak with Professor Snape for a few moments? It's about the children's story and this Black business."

"Black?" Snape sat up instantly. "Where's Black?"

"In custody in the West Tower. Interesting thing — the children insist he's innocent."

Dumbledore watched Snape with concern in his eyes. "Are you certain you feel all right, Severus? You do not need to discuss Sirius Black with the Minister right this minute."

"Where is Black?"

"He is in custody. That is what I mean, Cornelius. That is the third time he's asked that question. How does your head feel, Severus?"

"It hurts. Especially on this side." Snape touched the spot where his head had been bleeding.

"Still," said Fudge, "I do have to ask a couple of things. Professor Snape, during the time you were in the Shrieking Shack, did anyone talk about Peter Pettigrew?"

"Pettigrew? Yes, they talked about learning how to become animagi, and Pettigrew was Wormtail."

"Did they say anything about Pettigrew being the Potters' Secret-Keeper?"

"No. I don't think so. Why? Black was the Secret-Keeper." Some parts

of the evening were very clear, others foggy. Snape was relieved the Minister was asking about the clear parts.

"The children are saying that Pettigrew betrayed the Potters to . . . You-Know-Who."

"No, Black was the one. In fact, Lupin said that he assumed Black got into the castle using dark magic he learned from the Dark . . . from You-Know-Who." Snape looked around in sudden agitation. "Where's Lupin? He didn't take his medicine today. He's out there, maybe attacking people."

"Do not worry about Professor Lupin," said Dumbledore quickly. "He will be all right."

"I'm not worried about Lupin!" Snape exploded, jumping to his feet. "You might try thinking of someone else for a change! Like the people in Hogsmeade who could be attacked by a rampaging werewolf. Or muggles in nearby towns. Do you know how far he could travel in a night?"

"Werewolf?" Fudge glanced at Dumbledore, clearly puzzled. "Do we have a werewolf to deal with, too?"

"Now, Cornelius, Severus is suffering from the effects of a blow to the head. I am sure that by tomorrow morning . . ."

"I'm not crazy! Lupin is out there — dangerous to everyone around him — and Black . . ."

"Sirius Black is going back to Azkaban tomorrow, Professor," said Fudge gently. "You captured him, you know."

"I did? No, I don't think . . ."

"Indeed. Captured him and rescued all three children. Brought them up here on stretchers. An amazing piece of work." Fudge smiled benignly. "I think you should be commended. The children are confused. One was stupefied and the other two attacked by dementors. It's enough to confuse anyone."

Dumbledore raised a hand. "Would you be so kind as to stay with Professor Snape for a few minutes, Cornelius? I wish to speak with Black. Maybe you could walk around for a bit. A little air is good for clearing the head." He walked quietly out of the room.

The stroll with Fudge did help clear Snape's head somewhat, and the Minister was kind enough to help him with some of the points where his memory was still fuzzy.

"It's good to have you as a witness to all of this, especially with what the children are saying. After all, it really isn't possible that we would have

incarcerated the wrong person all these years. You did say the children were placed under a Confundus Charm?”

“I did?”

“I’m sure that’s what you said. And Black attacked you.”

“No, I really think that was Potter.”

Fudge changed the subject slightly. “Why was Black there at all?”

The fuzziness was instantly gone. “He was a servant of the Dark Lord. He betrayed the Potters twelve years ago, and came back to Hogwarts to finish the job. He and Lupin together. Lupin was working on Potter, trying to get him to trust . . .”

“You said it was a Confundus Charm. You recognized it at once.”

“I did?”

Slowly, with the Minister’s help, the unclear parts were all coming back, clearer and more focused with each passing moment. Potter, Weasley, and Granger had been confounded by Black and Lupin, tricked into believing Black innocent and blaming the dead Pettigrew. It all made sense.

Only two things didn’t fit. For some reason the Minister thought Black had knocked him out, and that he, Snape, had captured Black in a fight. Snape was fairly sure that wasn’t true, but he wasn’t sure where the truth was.

And of course the — thing — that Dumbledore had told him not to mention.

Someone was approaching from behind. Snape turned to face Macnair, whose black mustache bristled alarmingly. “How did the execution go?” Snape asked, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Macnair looked at him oddly. “Thought you’d heard. Wasn’t one. Minister, did you need me for something?”

“Ah yes, Macnair,” said Fudge. “Get down to the perimeter and bring back one of the dementors. We need a ‘kiss’ performed tonight before we take our prisoner back to Azkaban.”

“Kiss? You’re doing that here? Dumbledore won’t be pleased.” That said, Macnair left on his task.

“Was he serious?” asked Snape. “There was no execution? I understood that the hippogriff lost the appeal.”

“He did,” replied Fudge, “but when we went down there to carry out the sentence, the beast had disappeared.”

“Hagrid let him escape?”

“No, odd thing about that. The beast was chained up when we arrived, the three of us. And Dumbledore. We went into Hagrid’s hut to finish the

paperwork, and when we came out the beast was gone. Hagrid was with us the whole time. No one else was there.”

“Potter,” muttered Snape. “You didn’t see . . . No, of course you didn’t see him. That’s what they were doing down there.”

“Come again?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

“Anyway, it’s been a shocking business . . . shocking . . . miracle none of them died . . . it was lucky you were there, Snape . . .”

“Thank you, Minister.”

“Order of Merlin, Second Class, I’d say. First Class, if I can wangle it.”

For conjuring four stretchers? I’m sure I didn’t . . . “Thank you very much indeed, Minister.”

“That is a nasty cut you’ve got there . . . Black’s work, I suppose?”

We talked about this. I think we talked about this. “As a matter of fact, it was Potter, Weasley, and Granger, Minister.”

“No!”

Now Snape felt more sure of himself. He’d gone over the story with . . . Fudge? “Black had bewitched them. I saw it immediately. A Confundus Charm, to judge by their behavior.”

It was coming back now. Potter was getting too used to having the glory. First with the Stone and Quirrell, then with the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. This year it was going to be the single-handed capture of Sirius Black. He put everybody at risk with his thirst for fame. He needed to remember he was just another student in the school, not the center of the whole universe.

“What amazes me most,” Fudge was saying, “is the behavior of the mentors . . . you’ve really no idea what made them retreat, Snape?”

“No, Minister . . .” *That is most certainly the truth. The only patronus I’ve seen even remotely like that is Potter’s, and he was unconscious. Dumbledore said . . .* “by the time I had come ’round they were heading back to their positions at the entrance . . .”

They talked a moment more, going back over the events that were now well fixed in Snape’s mind. Suddenly there was a yell from inside the ward where the children were. Both men ran to the sound.

Potter was awake and raving that Black was innocent. Raving about seeing Peter Pettigrew. Raving that the Weasleys’ rat — a longtime resident of Hogwarts — was somehow Peter Pettigrew. Snape’s head was beginning to throb again.

Madam Pomfrey was trying to calm Potter with chocolate when Dumbledore returned and asked to speak with Potter in private. "I've just been talking to Sirius Black . . ."

A terrible sense of foreboding was growing in Snape. Dumbledore had the air of a man about to turn the world on its head. "You surely don't believe a word of Black's story?" Snape whispered. He held Dumbledore's gaze. *Don't do this. Don't let him go. He killed her. He'll kill again.*

Dumbledore's voice, faint and clear, sounded in Snape's head. *I do not believe that Sirius is a killer, nor that he deserves the punishment he has received.*

Snape stepped closer to whisper, "Sirius Black showed he was capable of murder at the age of sixteen. You haven't forgotten that, Headmaster? You haven't forgotten that he once tried to kill me?"

"My memory is as good as it ever was, Severus."

It was like being slapped in the face. Raging inside, Snape turned and strode out of the ward, Fudge behind him.

"I don't know that it's good for you to be worked up like this," said Fudge as he caught up to Snape, "considering your injuries and all."

"I'll be fine once this headache goes away. I only hope Dumbledore's not going to make difficulties. The Kiss will be performed immediately?"

"As soon as Macnair returns with the dementors." Fudge rambled on, clearly reveling in the thought of the favorable publicity the Ministry was going to receive for the successful capture of Black.

Dumbledore joined them a few minutes later, as did Macnair, bringing a dementor with him. Snape moved quickly away from them, watching nervously as Fudge, Macnair, and the dementor followed Dumbledore upstairs.

It was almost over. *When Dumbledore told me all those years ago that Black betrayed you, Lily, I promised that if he ever got out of Azkaban I would kill him myself. I didn't keep that promise — you don't kill an unconscious man — but at least we have the next best thing. We can close the book and write 'finished' to the story. Black will never be part of my life again.* Snape walked over to the window and watched the full moon, Lily's moon, waiting for word from above.

Word came sooner than expected. Fudge came hurrying down the stairs, Macnair and Dumbledore behind him, hollering, "An owl! We send an owl to the Ministry at once! Macnair, round up some of the dementors! He can't have gotten far!"

Snape strode forward, blocking the Minister's path. "What happened? Black's escaped!" He looked past Fudge to Dumbledore. The Headmaster's

expression was inscrutable. Things were clicking into place, and the volcano was nearing critical.

An invisibility cloak, an escaped hippogriff, and a prisoner who suddenly vanishes from a tower. “Potter!” Snape hissed, and headed back toward the hospital wing at a run. Fudge and Dumbledore caught up to him and tried to slow him, but Snape was beside himself. “Potter is responsible for this! He won’t get away with it this time!”

Fudge was trying to be reasonable. “He must have disappeared, Severus. We should have left somebody in the room with him. When this gets out . . .”

“He didn’t disappearate! You can’t apparate or disappearate inside this castle! This. Has. Something. To. Do. With. Potter!”

Dumbledore chimed in as they approached the door to the ward. “Severus — be reasonable — Harry has been locked up . . .”

Snape’s wand was out and pointed at the door with murderous fury. It crashed open in front of them to reveal a shocked Madam Pomfrey and the three students. “Out with it, Potter! What did you do?” Snape yelled at the mock-innocent face — James’s face — that watched his approach with such evident satisfaction. “They helped him escape, I know it!” Snape continued in uncontrolled rage as both Madam Pomfrey and the Minister tried vainly to calm him down. “You don’t know Potter! He did it, I know he did it . . .”

Dumbledore’s face was grave. “That will do, Severus. Think about what you are saying. This door has been locked since I left the ward ten minutes ago. Unless you are suggesting that Harry and Hermione are able to be in two places at once, I’m afraid I don’t see any point in troubling them further.”

It was like a bucket of cold water. Snape stared at Dumbledore in shock. *Hermione? I never mentioned Granger. Potter yes, but Granger too? You lying, deceitful old man! You’re laughing at me. The three of you are laughing at me.*

There was no recourse. There was no justice. Snape wheeled and stormed out of the room and down the stairs.

Out the great double doors into the dark, wand still in hand — Snape wasn’t sure where he was going or what he wanted to do until he was halfway to Hagrid’s hut. Then it obsessed him. He left the path and headed straight down the hill toward the Whomping Willow. As he neared the Forbidden Forest, he began to yell.

“Lupin! Lupin! You miserable son of a she-wolf! Come out and face me! For once in your life, face me!”

There was no answer — there couldn’t be an answer. But somewhere in the forest there had to be a werewolf, and Snape had to do something or he

would go insane. Unwary, uncaring of dementors or of anything else, Snape plunged into the forest. “Lupin!” he screamed, “Come on, Lupin! Come and get me, you cowardly cur!”

The pain in his head increased — it was pounding now like a second heart-beat, and Snape staggered a little, clutching at a tree for support. “Lupin!” he shouted again, and a shape loomed up to his left. It wasn’t Lupin. It was Hagrid.

Snape spun at the sound of movement, his wand pointing at Hagrid’s chest. “Don’t stop me!” he hissed at Hagrid. “This has nothing to do with you. Get out. Leave me to my own business.”

“Your business don’t include hunting in the forest. Specially not what you’re hunting. You come along with me now. You need rest and somewhat t’ eat and drink.”

“Stop nursemaiding me! There’s a job to do. Nobody else ’ll do it — nobody else cares — unfinished business — so I have to...” Hagrid took a step closer and Snape screamed, “*Stupefy!*”

The spell bounced off Hagrid’s chest. “Now you know that won’t work ’less ya can concentrate better ’n what ya can now.” Snape stumbled forward, and Hagrid caught him around the waist to support him, taking his wand at the same time. “I ought t’ pick ya up and carry ya, but I doubt ya’d thank me for it. Lets see if ya can walk t’ my place.”

They progressed slowly, and by the time they reached the hut Snape’s breath was coming in gasping sobs. He was utterly exhausted, and the throbbing in his head overrode everything else. Hagrid wrapped him in a blanket and sat him in front of the fire supported by enormous pillows. After a few sips from a cup of warmed mead, Snape fell asleep.

When he woke around daybreak, Dumbledore was sitting at Hagrid’s table drinking tea and chatting. “Ah, Severus. Good to see you awake. How are you feeling?”

“Terrible. Why are you here?”

“Hagrid sent word by Fang that you had turned up with him. I came to make certain you were all right.”

“It’s a little late to start caring, isn’t it?”

“I suppose I deserve that. Now, I want you to consider that you might be wrong about Sirius.”

“I knew you weren’t here because you cared about me.”

“This may end up being more about you than you realize. Tell me why you have trouble believing that Sirius may have been imprisoned unjustly.”

Snape thought for a moment. It helped that he no longer had a headache. "It makes no sense. Not one iota of the story makes sense. First, who in his right mind would ever suggest Peter Pettigrew as a Secret-Keeper for anything? Pettigrew couldn't stand up to a large cat even before he became an animagus. Only someone who wanted a secret revealed would've made Pettigrew its keeper.

"Then there's the explosion that killed him. Black's magic was powerful enough to do that, but Pettigrew's? And why stay a rat for twelve years? A Weasley rat, at that? Who was he afraid of? Black was in prison, everyone else thought him dead, the Dark Lord was gone . . . Why stay a rat at Hogwarts when he could go off and be a wizard in France, or America? Even Pettigrew wasn't that pitiful."

Dumbledore nodded. "All very logical. Yet the children saw Peter."

"And I could make them see a cow jump over the moon. Illusion isn't that hard."

"So you will not be convinced?"

"Headmaster, it isn't believable."

"Then we must leave it at that. I only ask that you keep your mind open to the possibility — in the future, of course — that the illogical and the unreasonable may sometimes be the truth."

Snape did not reply.

"Come then, Severus. It is time to be going. Breakfast will be served soon, and we do not want to be too late."

The three of them walked together up the hill to the Castle.

Cornelius Fudge was at breakfast that morning, seated next to Dumbledore. He came over to speak briefly to Snape during the meal.

"Well it's good to see you looking better than you did last night, Professor. We were worried about that bump on the head. Clearing up now, though? Good. You know, the Headmaster was explaining to me last night after you left us, about Professor Lupin and how he was probably trying to protect the children from Black as well. We're not planning to press charges."

"So the Ministry approves of uncontrolled werewolves roaming the grounds of a school?"

"Werewolf?" exclaimed Professor Flitwick, who couldn't help overhearing. "Is there a werewolf at Hogwarts?" Others nearby were now listening.

Before Dumbledore could stop him, Fudge was explaining. "We're just talking about Professor Lupin is all. Terrible to have a problem like that."

Snape glanced down the table. This time it was Dumbledore who was having trouble controlling his anger. Snape was not sympathetic.

Around noon, Snape took a gobletful of the calming potion up to Lupin, who was shut in his office. "I think I should stay to make sure you actually drink this one."

"Don't treat me like an irresponsible child."

"You were responsible yesterday? I recall that in the Shack both you and I mentioned this potion, and it didn't jog your memory at all that you still needed to take it. How many times have you transformed, Lupin? Well over three hundred, no? How could you not remember it was a full moon?"

"I'm sorry, Severus, that you missed your chance to get the Order of Merlin. I hear Fudge has withdrawn the offer since I'm not guilty and Sirius escaped."

"Typical. You told Potter I was jealous of his father's Quidditch skills. Are you now going to tell him I'm angry because I didn't get a medal? Is it because you're so petty yourself that you assign petty motives to others?"

"I'm not going to quarrel with you."

"I'm still going to wait here until you drink that."

* * *

It was a few more days until the end of the term. It couldn't come quickly enough for Snape. Even though Lupin left early and the dementors were gone, there was nothing at Hogwarts that could make Snape feel anything but depressed and bitter. There was some relief watching the train pull away in the distance — some, but not enough.

Last year this time I was telling myself that things couldn't get any worse. How is it possible to be so wrong? Ever since Potter came to this school, each year is worse than the one before. I hate to imagine what next year will bring.

Dumbledore greeted him when Snape reentered the castle. They were on speaking terms again, though it was an effort for Snape, and he rather imagined it was an effort for the headmaster as well.

"Another year under our belts," said Dumbledore. "I am certain you are pleased to say goodbye to that one."

"Pleased hardly does justice to the feeling."

"What will you do during the summer holidays?"

"Stay as far from here as I can."

“An excellent idea. That way you will be well rested for the autumn term.”
Dumbledore continued upstairs, leaving Snape in the entrance hall.

Do you know what really rankles, Headmaster? There are other prisons besides Azkaban. Other prisoners with life sentences. What really rankles is that Sirius Black escaped his prison. He's free.

Snape walked quietly into the dungeon of the castle, to store his potions ingredients and to lock up his office and his rooms for the coming summer.

C H A P T E R F O R T Y - F O U R

NOT WHAT MEETS THE EYE

MONDAY, AUGUST 1, 1994 (TWO DAYS AFTER THE LAST QUARTER)

Professor Severus Snape apparated just outside the village of Hogsmeade at 9:05 on Monday morning, the first of August 1994. He was beginning his fourteenth year as the Potions instructor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and he was not looking forward to it.

The primary reason he was not looking forward to it was a student by the name of Harry Potter. It would be Potter's fourth year at Hogwarts, and for Professor Snape every year of Potter's presence had gotten progressively worse to the point where the Professor was beginning to doubt whether or not he would survive.

The first one to greet Snape's arrival was Alastor Moody. This was a yearly ritual, since Moody was looking forward to welcoming Snape at Azkaban prison the instant Snape slipped from under the protection of Hogwarts' headmaster, Albus Dumbledore.

"Top o' the morning to you, Snape old boy," Moody called cheerfully from a bench as Snape entered the village on his way to the school gates.

"You're not Irish," was Snape's response.

"And how would you be knowing that, me boyo?"

"If you were Irish, you'd be less careful about what you drank."

Moody drew a hip flask from his pocket and took a swig. "You'd better watch yourself," he winked, "or you'll be up for cultural defamation. Are you dropping by to visit this year? Your room is still ready."

"We caught the show off-Broadway last year. Wouldn't want to overdo a good thing."

"Oh, dear. And the dementors worked up a couple of new routines just for you. They'll be so disappointed."

"Better them than me."

"Dumbledore talk to you yet about Dark Arts?"

Snape was suddenly wary. "I've not had that privilege yet, no."

"At last! I know something you don't know about Hogwarts. Sleep well, Snape. Look for me in the gloamin'."

"You're not Scottish either."

But Moody was gone, and Snape made his way up to the gate where Filch was waiting to let him in. *What could Moody possibly know about the new assignment for Defense Against the Dark Arts? He's just trying to get on my nerves.*

* * *

Snape had to spend the next month with the other teachers getting ready for school to start on September first. In his case the work was light, for Snape always ended a school year with his accounts in order and his materials on hand. There were a few perishables that had to be ordered last minute, but basically everything was in place.

Apart from his own classroom, however, Snape found things at the school very much not in order.

The first concern was the announcement at the first staff meeting of the first day that Hogwarts was going to hold the first Triwizard Tournament in a few hundred years. This meant the hosting of representatives from both Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, the canceling of the Quidditch matches, and the disruption of classes.

Equally momentous and equally disruptive was the Quidditch World Cup final game that was to be held on August twenty-second. Snape himself had little use for Quidditch, though as the head of Slytherin house he had to support the Slytherin team, and he was a touch impatient with the other instructors for being so immersed in everything to do with the World Cup. It made for very boring mealtime conversations.

The last concern, the one that would grow to override all the others, started out small about a week before the World Cup game.

* * *

They were having a party. Wilkes wanted him to play the piano because Avery was dancing with a lampshade on his head. 'I don't know how to play,' he answered, but it didn't matter since the piano could play itself. Everybody was slightly drunk and laughing very loudly. He was happy and enjoying the party, except the corner of the room was dark. In the darkness there was a small brazier where they all got their tattoos. He was pleased with his tattoo — the snake was green and silver with red eyes. The snake couldn't sit still, though, and every time it twisted its body, his left arm itched. 'Stop wiggling,' he told it — and woke up.

Lying there in the darkness in his bedroom, Snape realized he was rubbing his left arm because it was itching. He picked up the wand that lay by his bedside and said, "*Lumos*." In the faint green light he examined the arm. The tattoo of a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth appeared no different than it ever did, but for some reason the skin where the snake was tattooed itched slightly. Snape rubbed it thoughtfully.

Why would it do that when it hasn't bothered me for nearly thirteen years? Not even when the Dark Lord was watching me from the back of Quirrell's head did it affect the Mark in any way. What's happening now?

Breakfast without the students to watch was much less formal than during the school year. Snape wished the others good morning, and went straight to Dumbledore.

"May I speak with you privately when you're finished?"

"Certainly. Lately, I must say, I am pleased when you wish to speak to me at all."

"This might be important."

"Pity. I was rather hoping it would be social. Ah well, I take what I can get."

Up in Dumbledore's tower office, the headmaster examined Snape's arm carefully. "It does not look any different to me."

"Nor to me, but it's never itched before. When he calls us, it burns. I don't know what this means."

"I think we need to take it very seriously, even though the last I heard Riddle was in Albania. One never knows. Things could develop slowly and take years to reach a crisis, or they could engulf us overnight."

"What should I do?"

Dumbledore regarded his potions master with a touch of sadness. "I had hoped, after all these years, that I would never again need to require you to put yourself in danger for me. Now I must ask you to prepare yourself for the possibility."

“Wasn’t that why you always wanted me to keep my opinions . . . ambiguous?”

“Well, yes. One never throws a useful tool away when even the smallest chance still exists that it might come in handy. Nonetheless, I would have been more pleased if the eventuality had never arisen.”

“So, what do I do?”

“If you were to ever come face to face with your old master, would it help to have prepared yourself mentally for the ordeal, or does that just happen instinctively?”

Snape studied his hands for a moment. “I think it would help to have memories and images at the forefront of my mind. It’s been a long time. He’d want to know about the whole thirteen years. I’m not sure I have enough to convince him I’m not holding anything back.”

“Would it help if I yelled at you — humiliated you in front of the rest of the staff — treated you like scum?” Dumbledore was smiling, but the import of his words was not a laughing matter. Memories handed to a skilled legimens could not be fabricated out of thin air. They had to be actual memories.

“It may come to that. Let me see what I have of my own first, though. I’d hate to shock McGonagall at the breakfast table.”

Back in his own rooms, Snape began a thorough and methodical ordering of the rooms and boxes of his mind. Images of Dumbledore, of the other teachers, of students, of visitors, of his home. There were things that could be used in multiple ways, and things that he could never let the Dark Lord even glimpse. It amazed him sometimes how much the human mind could store.

After a couple of hours of careful meditation, it was clear that the process would take weeks, months to do right. *Keep your eyes open and wits about you, Severus. Who knows what images might pop up that you could store for the benefit of the Dark Lord?*

The whole of the next week seemed to center on Quidditch. It was Ireland this, and Bulgaria that, and what a great seeker Krum was, even if he couldn’t hold a candle to Eunice Murray in her prime and, of course, odds and betting. Snape was completely bored by the whole thing until Flitwick and Sprout got into a screaming match the Friday before the World Cup. Sticking his fingers in his ears, Snape realized that he had some wonderful mental images of angry Hogwarts teachers with no clue of what they were saying.

For the next three days Snape turned into the worst sort of argument starter — one who gets two other people at it, then sits back and watches.

“Minerva, weren’t you saying that the Pride of Portree were the best team in Britain, because Poppy told me yesterday it was the Montrose Magpies.”

“No, I’m sure it was Pomona who mentioned that the Chudley Cannons never won a championship where they didn’t cheat at least twice in the game.”

“Puddlemere had a winning season last year? Then Filius must have been joking when he said that hadn’t happened since 1372.”

By the day of the World Cup match, Snape had stored away scores of choice images of discord at Hogwarts for the potential future delectation of the Dark Lord.

The evening of the actual game, however, Snape chose to spend reading in his own rooms, Professor McGonagall having acquired a radio, which was set up in the Great Hall where the other teachers listened avidly to the broadcast from the stadium.

* * *

“Severus! Severus! Have you heard what happened? How unutterably awful!”

Snape paused to listen to Professor Sinistra’s news, which turned out to be more disturbing than he would have imagined.

“Death Eaters! Death Eaters torturing innocent muggles and setting the Dark Mark in the sky! And the Ministry absolutely powerless to do anything to stop it. So horrible!”

That was indeed a horrible piece of news, and Snape hurried over to Professor McGonagall, who was buried in the Daily Prophet.

“Spill. What happened?” he said as he sat beside her and reached for toast, sausages, and eggs.

“Disgusting spectacle, that’s all I have to say about it. A crowd of masked wizards attacked a family of muggles after the game last night and tormented them, holding them suspended upside down in the air and bouncing them around. Two of them were children. They must have been terrified.”

Snape froze, his toast halfway to his mouth. “Upside down? Up in the air?” *Oh, no. That sounds like my spell. The one I invented that James Potter stole in fifth year and taught to the entire school.*

“Like sacks of grain. Not only that, someone set the Dark Mark up over the woods, and there was whole-scale panic in the crowd. It’s lucky people

weren't trampled to death. Ministry wallahs all over the place, and no one under arrest. It's shameful!"

"Wallahs?"

"Ach, I'm showing my age. An expression from when we were still an empire. The Raj, you know. Officials — officials all over the place and no one under arrest."

"The Dark Mark's set up when someone's killed. Was anyone . . . ?"

"No. No, thank goodness. Just scared. But who would think there was such a large crowd of you-know-who's supporters still around and willing to risk exposure with a prank like that? And then get away with it?"

"It's a sad world we live in, Minerva."

Dumbledore entered the Great Hall then, glanced around, and raised his eyebrows in Snape's direction.

"Excuse me, Minerva," Snape said as he rose from his unfinished breakfast. "I think the Headmaster wants to see me."

"Better you than me," replied McGonagall, who went back to reading the newspaper.

As Snape and Dumbledore met at the entrance to the Hall, Dumbledore said quietly, "I assume you have heard."

"Yes, sir," Snape answered.

"Let us go to my office then. This news disturbs me greatly. Especially coming on top of what you told me last week."

"I don't think the Dark Lord was behind it." Snape was sitting in a comfortable chair by the fire in Dumbledore's office, drinking a cup of Turkish coffee. "It was far too amateurish. And he always wanted the Dark Mark to mean something specific, terrifying — not an empty threat, but a deed already accomplished."

"And yet we have followers of . . . Riddle . . . who are no longer afraid to show themselves openly. Have they felt what you have felt?"

"It's very probable. I've no special link to the Dark Lord. They may sense he's nearer and let their close proximity at the World Cup get the better of their judgment. We have no proof the Dark Lord . . . Riddle, would even have approved."

"Who might have been involved?"

"How would I know?" At this, Dumbledore had such a hangdog look of disappointment that Snape relented. A little. "Of those that I personally know are still around and not in Azkaban — Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Avery,

Macnair, Nott . . . but he never let any of us know the extent of the organization. We knew our contacts — that was all. I was London and the south. Silly, really, because I was born in Lancashire. Those who might have come from the Midlands, Anglia, the Marches, the North . . . I really don't know."

"Another reason for eliminating as many Death Eaters as possible. Not only does it reduce Riddle's following, it forces the different regions of his organization to communicate with each other and to learn who the others are."

Snape eyed Dumbledore thoughtfully. "You're probably right but I, as a Death Eater, would still be intimidated from revealing myself to other parts of the organization. You get punished a lot less for inactivity than for the wrong kind of activity."

"A serious flaw. And a good piece of information to know." Dumbledore waited a moment, but Snape didn't elaborate. Finally Dumbledore voiced the thought. "He will not think that you have been engaged in the wrong kind of activity, will he?"

"I don't know. I won't know 'til I face him."

"When it is too late to back out."

"That's the game."

"How can I help?"

"Think of questions he'll ask that I can prepare answers to that mustn't sound prepared when I give them."

"Such a tangled web."

"One thing you can do right now."

"Which is . . . ?"

"Try to read me. Be angry with me and try to read me. No joke, no games, really try."

"I do not think your idea will work. What I will do to read you and what Riddle will do are so completely different . . ."

"Your managerial style leaves a lot to be desired, you know." Snape stood to provoke Dumbledore, letting his voice drip with sarcasm. "You play your cards so close that one wonders if you really do have an idea or you're just bluffing so we'll think you're clever. Maybe that's why you play favorites so shamelessly. Half-baked plans turn out wrong, so you coddle the victims to assuage your own guilt. What a fraud you are. If you knew my real opinion of you . . ."

As Snape spoke, Dumbledore slowly turned to face him, eyes glinting with rising anger, and advanced until his blue eyes locked with Snape's black

ones. Snape could feel the probes enter his brain, seeking, searching, examining. He began to close down, shutting thoughts and images into corners and nooks, setting up other images as blinds to conceal the doors, and still Dumbledore bored into him, forcing him to use every trick he knew to block without appearing to block, to hide without seeming to hide, to escape the grasping tentacles that were trying to rip his thoughts from him . . .

Then, quite suddenly, Dumbledore blinked and turned away. "You are very good," he said, smiling gently. "Do you think that will be enough to fool Riddle, or shall we do it a few more times, maybe in different places, to give you more images?"

"Not right away, certainly. It isn't my most pleasurable experience." Snape sat again, resting his head on his hands. "Though different images would help. He needs to know that you tried, and to know that you didn't succeed."

"I can do that. Just let me know whenever you are ready to give it another go."

"I will. Thank you, Professor." Snape left the office and went back to the Great Hall to see if any breakfast was left.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1994 (THREE DAYS AFTER THE LAST QUARTER)

"Has it ever actually rained for forty days and forty nights?" Snape asked of no one in particular as he watched the downpour from the windows of the Great Hall. It had been raining most of the week, and now on the morning of the first day of the autumn term it looked like the primeval deluge.

Professor Vector, the Arithmancy teacher, was the only one who appeared interested in the question. "I understand the number forty was just used to express 'a very long time,' ancient Hebrew being a language that dealt in specifics rather than generalities."

Snape's eyes widened. "Do you know Hebrew?" he asked.

"Cabalistic numerology is a major part of my subject. I thought you realized that." Vector grinned. "Hey, McGonagall! I just found out that I know something Snape doesn't!"

McGonagall joined them at the window. "I know lots of things Snape doesn't, but I can't tell him what they are because then he'd know them, too, and I'd lose my advantage."

"Well how do you know I don't know them then?"

"Tidbits gleaned from casual conversation. Every now and then you let something slip. I treasure those moments and store them in the recesses of my mind to pull out and hit you with if the opportunity ever arises."

"Has the opportunity ever arisen?"

"Alas, no. But my luck is bound to change."

Dumbledore joined them. "Are we all picking on Severus again? We have to be careful about that or people are going to think we do not like him."

"But Headmaster," exclaimed Vector, "he twitches so nicely when we score a hit."

"I do not twitch."

"See! Just like that!"

"Changing the subject," interposed Dumbledore, "our new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor will not be arriving until this evening. He had a little trouble with an intruder at his home last night and now has to do the paperwork at the Ministry."

"Who is it, Headmaster?" Snape asked. "Considering our luck with the last two, I would prefer some time to set my affairs in order."

"Now, now. All in good time. He has asked to be seated next to you at dinner tonight, so you will learn all you need to learn then." Dumbledore nodded 'good morning' to the teachers and swept majestically out of the Hall.

"Well!" said McGonagall, "Is that a good or a bad omen?"

"I don't know." Snape was thoughtful. "At my annual get-together with Alastor Moody, he intimated that there was something interesting about the new person, but refused to tell me what it was."

"There, you see!" McGonagall was triumphant. "He doesn't want to lose his advantage either."

The rain continued into the night. Fortunately there was neither wind nor lightning yet, or the arrival of the first years by boat would have been rendered impossible. As it was, most of the students were drenched either by the downpour or by the antics of the poltergeist Peeves, who seemed to have recently discovered water balloons and was trying to initiate the entire school into their use.

The older students were seated at the long tables in the Great Hall, and at last Professor McGonagall led the procession of first years forward for the ceremony of sorting. Snape was generally only interested in the Sorting if the son or daughter of one of his old Death Eater colleagues was entering Hogwarts. Otherwise the children were total unknowns whose personalities

would only emerge over time. And nothing now could surpass the Sorting of three years earlier, when Draco Malfoy, Neville Longbottom, and Harry Potter had all been sorted at the same time.

Sorting over, the feast began. Here again, there was nothing unusual except the weather. The electrical storm finally arrived — flashes of lightning and peals of thunder punctuated the meal. No longer at the far end of the table, Snape talked with Professor Sinistra on his right about the Magellan probe of Venus and about the comet Shoemaker-Levy, and from time to time leaned across the empty seat on his left to exchange a word with Dumbledore.

While the students were finishing dessert, Dumbledore rose to make announcements. All was pro forma, boring really, until he mentioned the canceling of the Quidditch matches. Dismayed cries arose from all four houses. Dumbledore was about to explain about the Triwizard Tournament when thunder crashed overhead and, as if on cue, the doors of the Great Hall flew open and the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher strode into their midst. Looking up at the sudden sound, Snape stared at the newcomer in utter shock.

It was Alastor Moody.

Moody's presence stunned the Hall into silence. Snape was used to Moody's appearance, having been greeted by the former auror on the first of August every year for well over a decade, but now he had a chance to look at Moody from a fresh point of view, through the students' eyes. It was truly amazing how ugly Moody was.

Moody approached the high table and shook Dumbledore's hand, the two of them murmuring a greeting that not even Snape, as close as he was, could hear well. Then Moody sat down. Sat down in the seat reserved for him next to Dumbledore. Sat down where he had requested Snape to be at his right hand. *Sneaky old coot. If he thinks I'm going to partner him at every meal for the whole year...*

"So this is what you meant," Snape said quietly as Moody pulled a plate of food toward himself and began to eat, while Dumbledore rose to introduce him.

The plump sausage paused halfway to his mouth, and Moody turned to fix Snape with his enchanted eye. There was an instant, just an instant of contact, then Snape was shutting down, locking, and covering everything in his mind. He jerked his head away to break the link and stared at his own plate. Around him the Hall was silent, only Dumbledore and Hagrid clapping to welcome Moody, so Snape's own silence went unnoticed. Then

Dumbledore began to explain the Triwizard Tournament, and Moody was forgotten in the rising excitement.

Not forgotten by Snape, though. *He knows. That blasted blue enchanted eye knows. He can read me.*

It was only a short time until the feast was ended and students and teachers went to their dormitories and rooms for the night, but to Snape it seemed an eternity.

Once alone, Snape paced his office until past midnight.

It wasn't really that Moody could read him at will — Snape knew he could block the legilimency. But Moody would know that he was blocking it. Rather, that cursed eye would know he was blocking it. It was a frightening thought, for Snape's future safety depended on the Dark Lord's belief that he saw everything there was to see. *Dumbledore knows I can deceive him, but Dumbledore won't kill me for it.*

Why didn't I ever notice this about Moody's eye before? Because he never tried to read me before. All those August meetings at Hogsmeade, and he never tried. What's changed since the beginning of August? The appearance of the Dark Mark. The fact that mine is itching. Maybe the prisoners in Azkaban feel it, too. Moody knows something's happening and he's watching me.

What other enchanted items am I powerless to deceive? Sneakoscopes? Foe-glasses? Pensieves? Items I don't even know exist? What if the Dark Lord uses one of these against me? No. No, he's too confident of his own powers to stoop to relying on gadgets. But one of the others might carry something that'll give me away.

I knew this was going to be a terrible year.

It was about to get worse.

The following day was the first of classes, and Snape spent most of his time in his dungeon classroom setting up the evaluatory labs and cleaning up the inevitable messes that occur when unprepared or out-of-practice wizards attempt a potion a touch too complex for them.

The final class of the day was finished, and Snape had set up for the next day's lessons. He was locking the classroom — a required precaution since there were poisonous materials inside — when he sensed a commotion from the entrance hall. Something was exciting the students.

As he made his way up from the dungeons, Snape heard McGonagall's voice ringing out. "We give detentions, Moody! Or speak to the offender's Head of house!"

Snape hurried forward, and had reached the entrance hall in time to catch

Moody saying, "Now, your Head of house 'll be Snape, will it?" and Malfoy's affirmative response. "Another old friend," Moody continued. "I've been looking forward to a chat with old Snape . . . Come on, you . . ."

They met at the steps leading to the dungeon, Moody clutching Malfoy's arm as he dragged the boy along. Snape immediately averted his gaze to avoid the eye, and Moody laughed unpleasantly.

"I've got a matter to take up with you about this sneaking little coward," said Moody, shaking Malfoy just a bit, "and then I thought you and I might catch up on old times."

There was no way out of the encounter, so Snape led the way back to the dungeon office, Moody and Malfoy right behind him.

As soon as Snape's office door was unlocked, the burly Moody elbowed his way past the slender potions master, pulling Malfoy behind him. If the move was intended to intimidate Snape, it was successful, for he'd had far too many experiences of being bullied by larger classmates to be able to ignore physical pressure.

Moody shoved Malfoy into the chair next to the desk while he himself slouched into the more comfortable chair by the fireplace, lounging with his feet spread before the flames. "You've got some obnoxious, cowardly little beasts in your house, Head of Slytherin," he growled.

"What's Malfoy done now?" Snape stayed near the door, in a position where it would not be easy for Moody to establish eye contact without turning around.

"Attacked another student with a spell from behind. Tried to get him in the back. A lot like his father, this one. He's a back-stabber, too, Lucius is."

"Who did he attack?"

"Should it matter? Harry Potter."

"So is that why McGonagall was upset?"

"She didn't approve of my disciplinary techniques."

"Which were?"

"I turned him into a ferret and bounced him around the entrance hall a bit."

Snape glanced at Malfoy, who managed to look angry and shamefaced at the same time. "No wonder McGonagall was angry. I'll thank you not to manhandle my students in the future. I'll have to take this up with the Headmaster . . ."

"Will you? Will you indeed?" Moody rose in a surprisingly fluid motion for such a large man and advanced on Snape, staring him straight in the face.

Snape backed a step and glanced to the side to avoid eye contact. "Wouldn't it be better to accept that as punishment in lieu of detention and let it go at that? We wouldn't want a confrontation between you and me and Dumbledore, would we, Cursemaster?"

It was Rabastan Lestrangle's old nickname for Snape from their school days. *How does Moody know that? Rabastan's in Azkaban. Maybe he's told them other things about me. I don't know how much Moody knows.*

Snape looked away from Moody toward Malfoy. "Are you all right, Draco?" he asked. The boy nodded. "Go back to Slytherin house, then, or to dinner if you're feeling well enough. I'll call for you if I need you further. 'Professor' Moody has said there's no detention."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Malfoy escaped from the office without a word of protest.

"That's better," said Moody once Malfoy was gone. "I got what I needed from him anyway. Sit down."

"You don't order me around in my own office."

"No? We can change. A nice little cell in Azkaban with a dementor or two. You'll be jumping to obey my orders like a trained dog. I'll come out of retirement just for the pleasure of holding your leash."

As he talked, Moody advanced and Snape retreated until Snape was backed against the counter work station. "Dumbledore . . . spoke for me . . ." Snape said, too nervous to notice that his childhood stutter was returning.

"I believe he did. Something about . . ." Moody leaned forward, breathing in Snape's face and gripping Snape's jaw with a hand, forcing brief eye contact. "Something about changing sides . . . about selling out your old master . . . Well, Dumbledore has a trusting heart. Not like me. You're a cagy old leopard, Snape, and I don't see any change in your spots. Just a bit of camouflage."

Releasing Snape, Moody strode quickly over to the door, opened it, and turned back with a twisted smile. "I got what I needed here, too. I'm going to enjoy teaching at Hogwarts, Snape. I may ask Dumbledore to extend my contract. Then you and I can share loads of good times." Laughing, he left the office, closing the door behind him.

Where did I ever get the idea all these years that Moody might be a decent human being? I let him fool me with a few minutes of cheerful banter once a year, but it was all sham. He's as black hearted as the worst of them, and he's not going to rest until I'm in Azkaban for good. I have to talk to Dumbledore about this. That man is dangerous.

Snape sat at his desk for a moment, his head in his hands, collecting his thoughts and calming his nerves. *I have to go to dinner. I have to face him at dinner and let him know I'm not cowed by his threats. He'll know anyway because I can't look at him. But I won't run. Besides, if I'm not there, Hagrid will ask, and Moody will joke about it, and everyone will know.* Snape left his office and reached the Great Hall while the last of the students were filtering in for dinner.

Pausing first to exchange pleasantries with Flitwick and Sprout, Snape eased into his seat between Sinistra and Moody. Moody seemed surprised to see him, Snape thought with some satisfaction. *He really was trying to scare me away. He said he'd gotten what he needed. I wonder what his game is.*

The two didn't talk over dinner. Snape chatted with Sinistra, and Moody with Dumbledore. When Dumbledore left the table for a moment to speak to Filch, however, Moody began to rumble a low song, clearly meant only for Snape's ears.

*Oh the walls of Azkaban
Are too high for any man,
And the servants of the Dark Lord shut up there
Wail and whimper through the night,
Quail and cower in their fright,
While dementors leave them twisted with despair.*

*But the Dark Lord's greatest slave,
A cunning, sly old knave
And one of those who managed to escape
Sits at Dumbledore's right hand
And obeys his least command —
The skinny black-eyed stooge, Professor...*

"You might at least find something that's decent poetry," snapped Snape, and Moody broke off his doggerel to laugh.

"It was the best I could do on the spur of the moment. Catchy tune, though. I'd bet the students could pick it up like a shot if I was to start teaching it."

Snape pretended to be interested in his food, but Moody was not to be put off now that conversation had started.

"It's the lot of you that never had to pay that riles me. Said they never really did anything, or claimed to be under Imperius curses, or turned on their mates and sold them to the Ministry to cover their own deeds. That's what riles me. Got more respect for the ones that stayed loyal and took their punishment like men instead of finding the nearest rock to crawl under and hide like sniveling cowards."

Snape moved to rise, but Moody laid a hand on his arm to restrain him. "Do you want the whole school to know I can get under your skin any time I want to, and that you'll run from me when I do? Didn't you come out here to dinner just to show me that you weren't going to run? Sit. Keep me company."

Snape sat. Like a trained dog. Dumbledore returned as well, so Moody was distracted for the rest of the meal. When dinner ended, Snape retreated to his rooms, there to brood over the snare he found himself trapped in.

From that day on, Snape was in a foul mood that exploded into rage or vicious sarcasm at the slightest provocation. Every meal next to Moody was torment, and even patrolling the corridors was an exercise in dread because he never knew where he might run into Moody. Snape asked to speak to Dumbledore, but Dumbledore was occupied with planning the upcoming Tournament, and busy with the Ministry and the two other schools. He requested, if it was not urgent, that Snape wait until the following week.

The first Potions class with the fourth years went more smoothly than usual, probably because Malfoy was still suffering the ill effects of being a ferret and therefore abnormally quiet. Snape actually had the temerity to dare believe the session would end without any problems until Longbottom, perennially incompetent Longbottom, managed to melt his sixth cauldron in just over three years, sending across the floor a viscous, evil-smelling ooze that was supposed to remove warts if done properly, but since it had been prepared by Longbottom...

Students jumped onto chairs and tables in panic, several other cauldrons were in danger of overturning, and Snape was yelling at the cowering Longbottom. "You blithering fool! Where does it say newt's tongue? I didn't even set out newt's tongue! You had to make a special trip to a cabinet to get newt's tongue! You will stay during dinner on detention!"

Which turned out to serve two purposes, since Snape now had an excuse not to go to dinner and sit next to Moody.

Snape's next morning class needed horned toad intestines, so Snape gave Longbottom the task of disemboweling a cask of pickled horned toads to

save the other students the time. Longbottom was so nervous that he made a horrible mess. *Too bad you can't dress me in your grandmother's clothes and say 'Riddikulus.'*

That was when Snape realized that Longbottom's fear could help save his own life. An image of a frightened auror's child to show the Dark Lord. *Not a situation I would've created for that purpose, but since I have it, why not use it?*

"He hates me." It was the next week, and Snape was in Dumbledore's office where the headmaster finally had some time to spare. "He called me a sniveling little coward and said Hogwarts was a rock I crawled under to hide."

"Sniveling? Interesting choice of words." Dumbledore was brewing a pot of tea.

"I don't think it was intentional. He wasn't at school with us." Snape drummed nervously with his fingers on the arm of the chair. "He wants me punished. He keeps talking about what it's going to be like in Azkaban. And he can read me."

There was no response, but Dumbledore paused in his preparations and waited.

"It's that enchanted eye. He can tell that I'm concealing things from him. He can't see the hidden thoughts, but he knows they're there. He knows when I'm lying."

"That is disturbing news. Do you think Riddle would employ such a device?"

"The old Riddle — no. But it's been thirteen years. Who knows?"

"How are you planning to handle it?"

"Compartmentalizing. I have a whole section just for you. Another on students and so forth. If Riddle sees I'm hiding things, but he thinks I'm doing it to conceal them from you, I may get away with it."

"And if you don't?"

"I don't want to think about it." Snape studied his hands, then went back to the drumming. "I mean, no one ever left him. After he was gone, of course, it was every man for himself, but no one ever left him while he was in power."

"Except..."

"Me."

"I shall tell Moody to ease up a bit. You have quite enough to worry about without having to deal with him, too." Dumbledore handed Snape a cup of tea, and Snape sipped it absentmindedly while staring into the fire.

Word filtered out through the students that Moody was demonstrating the Unforgivable Curses to fourth years and above. Snape went again to Dumbledore, who confirmed that it was on his instructions and with his full consent. The reasoning was sound, but it nonetheless resulted in Snape's overhearing some rather disturbing conversations.

"Whoa, did you see how that spider's legs just collapsed under and it kept just twitching and twitching on its back?"

"I didn't know a spider could twist its legs like that. I thought it was going to tie them into knots."

"Do spiders scream, do you think? I bet if that was a person..."

Having watched people being tortured by the Dark Lord with the Cruciatus curse, Snape could have confirmed some of the students' speculations, but he really did not want to think about it.

And so September melted into October. Snape had his fourth year students researching the antidotes to various poisons. This class had been, from the beginning, one of the least competent he'd ever taught. About the middle of October, however, Snape found a way to get them to study harder.

"You never know, Weasley, when an antidote may prove useful. I mean, it would be a shame to miss the Christmas break just for the want of a good, effective antidote."

"C-Christmas break, sir?"

"Well, maybe not you. Maybe Longbottom, or Finnegan. Or Potter. You never know who you may be called upon to assist in an emergency. I wouldn't worry over much, though. A good student could learn enough by then to deal with just about anything. You never know."

"No, sir. I guess you don't."

Madam Pince in the library said she'd seldom seen students knuckle down and work so diligently on a subject.

And Dumbledore was true to his word about talking to Moody. For a while Moody stopped trying to intimidate Snape. Things were looking up.

At the end of October, the representatives from the other two schools arrived to start the Triwizard Tournament.

One of the surprises of the whole Triwizard affair was that Dumbledore asked Snape to be involved in the administration of the tournament.

"Why me? I hate competitions. I'm hardly the congenial sort to make people feel welcome. None of the other houses will welcome Slytherin being in a position above them..."

"But consider, Severus, who else could it be? Minerva and I are already

involved. Surely you do not want the Tournament supervised by Professor Trelawney? Or Professor Binns?”

“What about Sprout or Flitwick? Or . . . or . . .”

“Hagrid? He would want to turn the challenges into pets. Sinistra? She would be up all night and asleep during the competitions. Hooch? An excellent coach, but hardly an administrator on a grand scale. You must face facts, Severus, we are short of talent in this area. You are not only organized, but you have that wonderful muggle sense of practicality that purebloods never seem to master.”

“In other words, I have no choice.”

“Not a shred. There is an added attraction. An old . . . colleague of yours is heading the Durmstrang delegation.”

“The only old ‘colleagues’ I have are . . .”

“Igor Karkaroff.”

“Joy unbounded. The knell is sounded of grief and woe.”

“Ah, the advantages of a classical education. Rogers and Hart?”

“Gilbert and Sullivan.”

“There you have it. Back to Karkaroff. I thought you might want to discuss any recent phenomena he may be noticing. Easier if there is a reason why you two have to be together.”

“Understood, sir. Try to keep Moody away from us.”

“Thank you, Severus.”

Luckily, none of Snape’s duties involved preparing the castle itself. That was one of the advantages of having a hundred house-elves managing the household. Windows were washed, and walls and floors scrubbed. Armor was polished and tapestries beaten. Hearths were swept out and new wood laid, and sections of the fifth and sixth floors were made into temporary dormitories for the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students, dormitories with stunning views of the lake and hills.

On the thirtieth of October, Snape was, for once, quite relaxed. He’d had the distinct pleasure of being able to dismiss his dreaded fourth year potions class a half hour early, and none of the evening’s festivities were his responsibility. He had only to shepherd Karkaroff around and sit next to him at dinner. But since Dumbledore was on Karkaroff’s other side, Snape knew that little of the chore of conversation would fall to him.

At six o’clock in the evening, everything was ready. The four houses lined

up in their hundreds to welcome the guests, with the four heads at Dumbledore's side. It was expected that the two continental wizarding schools would try to make a dramatic entrance, and they did not disappoint.

Beauxbatons arrived first, an enormous pale blue carriage pulled by a dozen great winged steeds came swooping over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest. It landed on the lawn in front of the entrance stairs, and Dumbledore welcomed the majestic Madame Maxime and her twelve boys and girls from what clearly must have been sunny France, for all were lightly dressed in silk, and shivered in the cold highland autumn of northern Scotland. *Note to self: Get the house-elves to sew up some warm cloaks. Fashionable warm cloaks in... royal blue.*

Durmstrang arrived by boat, its great pirate hulk rising from a submarine passage under the lake, and docking at the foot of Hogwarts hill. These students, all boys, were warmly dressed in fur cloaks, obviously used to northern climes. At their head came a tall thin wizard with sleek silver hair and a goatee. As he greeted Dumbledore, Snape assessed him from his own place a little to the rear.

Hardly changed at all, I would say. Probably still far more concerned with himself and his own welfare than with the school. Bit more of a dandy than before. How has your arm been feeling lately, Igor? I hear a good number of our former comrades are in Azkaban because of you. I'd have been one of them if not for Dumbledore. You gave my name to the Ministry, too, I heard. No hard feelings, of course, since I'd already sold you out.

Then one more flurry of true excitement rustled through the Hogwarts students as the Durmstrang delegation entered the school. With Karkaroff, a student among other students, was a hefty, coarse-looking young man who drew everyone's attention.

"Who's that?" Snape asked McGonagall.

"You are hopeless! That's Bulgaria's Seeker. That's Viktor Krum."

The students were now filing into the school and the Great Hall for the welcoming feast. The Hogwarts teachers would follow, and then Dumbledore with his guests. Dumbledore called McGonagall and Snape over as the others were straightening out the order of their entrance.

"Madame Maxime, Professor Karkaroff, I should like to present the Deputy Headmistress, Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor house, and our potions master, Professor Snape, head of Slytherin house, who will be assisting her in making your stay enjoyable."

"Enchantée, delighted," they replied, and Karkaroff bent to kiss McGonagall's fingertips, then shook Snape's hand.

"I didn't realize you were here," Karkaroff muttered. "I'm glad of it, though. There's something I'd like to talk over with you when we have a private moment."

"I'm at your disposal," Snape answered, equally quietly.

Dumbledore spoke, and their attention shifted to him. "Minerva, Severus, there has been a slight change of plans. We shall be adding two places at the high table as we shall be joined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman, representing the Ministry. Mr. Crouch will be seated between Madam Maxime and Professor McGonagall, and Mr. Bagman between Professor Karkaroff and Professor Snape."

And Moody will be salivating in a corner. Three former Death Eaters in a row, all out of his reach.

"I do hope that arrangement is acceptable, Minerva — Severus."

"Oh, eminently, Headmaster," Snape replied. *So much better being next to Bagman than Crouch. Think how awkward it would be to place two avoiders of Azkaban on either side of someone who let his own son die there. Real conversation killer, that combination.*

Karkaroff intruded on Snape's thoughts. "Which is your house? Green and silver it seems."

"Yes, Slytherin is green and silver, with the serpent."

Karkaroff turned and spoke briefly with one of his own students, then returned to Snape. "I've told them to sit with Slytherin house. If our students are friendly, we have more reason to talk without alerting suspicion."

"Excellent idea," said Snape, then took his place in the opening procession.

With the students all in place, the teachers entered two by two, those on the outside of the high table first, and the center group last. Snape noted that the Durmstrang students had joined Slytherin while the Beauxbatons students chose Ravenclaw. *Probably because Ravenclaw's color is blue.* Snape took his place at his own chair, leaving two places between himself and Dumbledore's center seat. Karkaroff left an empty seat between them. Snape noted that the Beauxbatons students stood at the entrance of Madame Maxime, and did not resume their seats until their headmistress was seated. *A little continental formality wouldn't hurt Hogwarts at all. Quite refreshing, really.*

Dumbledore made no formal speech of welcome, merely expressing his

wish that the guests be comfortable and announcing the beginning of the tournament at the end of the feast. Then all were seated and the feast began.

The menu selection was wonderful. Escargot à la Bourguignon, paté de foie gras, bouillabaisse, and a risotto with truffles. Zakuski, Polish borscht, chicken Kiev, and a real Stroganov on straw potatoes. *We need to do this at least once a year just for the food!*

A minor spot of activity around the Gryffindor table attracted Snape's attention. One of the Beauxbatons students had risen and seemed to be interested in a tureen on the Gryffindor table. Snape glanced at her, looked away, glanced back, and was riveted.

The first thought that entered his head was 'Narcissa.' This vision of silver and blue was his snow-queen, the ice princess who'd captured his thirteen-year-old heart in the Black's London townhouse so many years ago.

Only a few moments later did Snape realize he was staring practically openmouthed at the girl, and a glance around told him he was not the only one. Nearly every male in the Great Hall, except Dumbledore, had the same stupid, dumbfounded expression that Snape knew was on his own face. He leaned across the empty seat towards Karkaroff.

"What is she?" Snape whispered.

"A veela," was Karkaroff's response.

Oh. Well. That — explains everything. You've gone all . . . weak in the knees because of some . . . highly evolved, pheromone-producing, mutant — glorious goddess. Nothing at all to be concerned about in that. Except she's a student. — Out of bounds. Students are out of bounds. Even Madame Maxime's gorgeous veela students are . . . out of . . . bounds . . .

Fortunately, Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman chose that moment to enter the Great Hall and be seated, thereby distracting Snape from a highly . . . moving . . . experience.

Ludo Bagman was the stereotype of a former athlete gone to seed. He was paunchy and out of shape, yet seemed to think that if he dressed like a young man, no one would notice. His tight clothing and loud style merely underlined his rotundity, which would not have been so bad if his mind had reflected his chronological instead of his emotional age. As it was, dinner conversation with Ludo Bagman was about the most boring experience of Snape's life.

Snape tried to enliven the evening by imagining Moody's face as he watched the three together. It was a sore disappointment that the one time

Snape actually wanted to look at Moody, Moody was down the table to Snape's right, and looking at him would be far too obvious.

Still, the thought of the three of them together must be galling Moody. Karkaroff spent some time in Azkaban, but not for want of trying. He'd spilled every name he could think of to the Wizards' Council, and it was just his bad luck that they'd all been captured or killed. *Except me, but I'd already been handed to Dumbledore on good behavior. Poor Karkaroff, not one decent name left to buy his freedom with. Wonder what Moody thinks of him. Took his punishment, but not like a man. He was searching desperately for that rock.*

Bagman had supplied information to the Death Eaters, but had never been one. His plea of ignorance and stupidity had been accepted without murmur by the Council, since he had long had the reputation of being both ignorant and stupid, and no one really expected him to understand the politics of the situation. *But does Moody accept that too obvious defense? Is there a possibility that Bagman isn't as dumb as we think he is?*

And then there's me. How would Moody take it, I wonder, if I sat down with him and told him about needing Bella's protection in school, and Nana's death, and that idiot Trelawney's prophecy, and Lily? Or if I described the powerful intensity of existence, walking into Headquarters knowing I'd already drawn up my own death warrant, and living on a razor's edge for love of something I could finally believe in? No, he'd never accept that story. It doesn't fit into his world view.

The conversation had turned to the upcoming Triwizard Tournament, and Bagman was explaining the rules. Snape became suddenly interested at learning that only wizards of legal age would be allowed to compete.

Well, well. For once precious Potter will not be the center of everyone's attention. Three other people will come first in the public eye by right. Wonder how he'll take it. Will he just accept it and take a back seat to the school champions, or will he try to do something that'll make everyone pay attention to him? Fake a kidnapping, for example, or introduce another troll into the dungeons. I'm actually interested in seeing how he reacts.

Then the feasting was over, and Dumbledore rose to explain the conditions of the tournament. It said something about the Hogwarts students that there was widespread disapproval of the age limitation. Snape was particularly amused at the passions aroused by the announcement. *If the Sorting Hat had witnessed the level of ambition expressed in this hall tonight, every one of the them would have been placed in Slytherin house. Imagine me being head of house for Fred or George Weasley. The mind boggles.*

In the end, Potter was not to be denied. Despite being on the other side of the Hall, he managed to place himself strategically in the path of the Durmstrang students as they made their way out to their dormitories. With Potter's hair swept aside to reveal the lightning-shaped scar, it was impossible for Karkaroff not to notice him. Karkaroff stopped, pointed Potter out to all the Durmstrang students, and Potter again had his moment of fame.

Some day someone is going to shoot that boy down, and the crash of his landing will be glorious.

Potter's glory was short-lived, however, for Moody, unable to contain himself, intervened to intimidate Karkaroff. *That man is obsessed. This is going far beyond what would be required of an auror. Dumbledore has got to rein him in.*

The next day was highly entertaining. First of all the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students, all of whom were of age, placed their names into the judging goblet with great dignity and sense of history. A few of the Hogwarts students did the same, but for the remainder it was a free-for-all. Snape heard about it and started inventing excuses to be in the Great Hall just to watch. He was there for the hilarious debacle of the Weasley twins, which in and of itself made the entire semester.

Snape also stored up as ammunition for later the fact that most of the would-be cheaters were Gryffindor students. The other houses, particularly Slytherin, seemed more willing to accept and abide by the rules. Snape was not going to let McGonagall forget this for a long time.

Hour by hour and minute by minute the clock ticked down to supper time and the moment when the enchanted goblet would announce the school champions, the competitors in the Triwizard Tournament. For once, even Snape was excited.

The Great Hall was decorated in its usual Halloween finery for the feast and the selection of champions. Snape entered a bit early to be sure everything was going well. The Goblet of Fire, the magical cup that chose the champions, was in front of Dumbledore's place, having received the names of all the qualified students who wished to enter the competition.

"Who do you think it will be from your school?" said Karkaroff's voice behind him, and Snape turned.

"Good evening, Igor," Snape replied. "I haven't a clue. I'm not even certain who's put their name in. Who'll it be from your school?"

"We are all expecting Krum to be chosen, but one never knows." There

was a moment of silence, then Karkaroff cleared his throat. "Severus, have you noticed anything . . . different . . . recently?"

"Different?" said Snape innocently. "Why, what do you mean?"

"A sense of . . . constant irritation. An itching."

It would be disingenuous to pretend he didn't know what Karkaroff was talking about. "Yes. It started in the middle of August."

"Mine as well. Do you think . . . ? What do you think it means?"

"Have you heard that he's come back?"

"We got a rumor to that effect. I was not sure if it was true."

"It was true. He — or what's left of him — was here at Hogwarts two years ago. He was inhabiting another teacher. I sat next to him without realizing it."

Karkaroff stared at Snape with horror and pity. "How awful for you! What do you think he knows now?"

"I'm not sure. I can't remember every conversation I ever had with that professor, after all. With luck, it was all noncommittal or ambiguous. Quirrell and I weren't friends, luckily. Hardly even friendly." He looked at the nervous expression on Karkaroff's face. "Don't worry. I am sure that I never once mentioned or even thought about you."

Maybe Karkaroff really did miss the sarcasm in Snape's voice because he seemed relieved. "Look, we are almost ready. The tables are full. But who in the world is that?"

Snape looked, then looked quickly away, trying to control the expression on his face. Madame Maxime had just entered the Great Hall accompanied by Hagrid. But it was not a Hagrid that Snape would have recognized by anything except size, for this Hagrid was wearing a suit and tie, and had slicked his hair down with grease. Most British wizards had alarming senses of style, and Hagrid was no exception, looking like a sore thumb next to the fashionable Madame Maxime.

Then Dumbledore entered with Crouch and Bagman, and all took their places for the feast.

Two feasts in two days was a lot of food. Snape had nowhere near the appetite this Halloween that he'd had the evening before. He was not alone. Whether it was too much of a good thing, or everyone was too excited about the naming of the contestants to be hungry, the feast was over in relatively short order. In front of Dumbledore, the Goblet prepared its selections.

Dumbledore rose just before the fateful moment to instruct the named contestants to proceed directly to a room off the high end of the Great Hall,

and then with dramatic flair extinguished all but the jack o' lanterns to highlight the blue fire of the Goblet.

The Goblet's flames turned red and it sent a piece of parchment spinning into the air. Dumbledore caught it and read, "Viktor Krum!" As this was no surprise to anyone, the applause was hearty and affectionate.

The second piece of parchment flew into the air, and Dumbledore read, "Fleur Delacour!" This, apparently, was a surprise, for several Beauxbatons students were clearly disappointed in the Goblet's choice. Snape noted that the student in question was the veela girl, and also noted that with the element of the unexpected gone, she had less effect on himself and the other males than she'd had the evening before. *Thank goodness.*

Then it was Hogwarts' turn, and the Hufflepuff table went wild when Cedric Diggory's name was called. The other tables were less enthusiastic, but that was only to be expected. Snape leaned back, looked down the teachers' table, and gave Professor Sprout a 'thumbs up.' It was, after all, about time that Hufflepuff was in the limelight.

As one of the school administrators of the Tournament, Snape was supposed to go with the contestants and their school heads, so he rose to follow Diggory into the side room. It was then that the Goblet turned red again and tossed up a fourth name.

That's impossible! There can only be one contestant per school. The entire Hall was silent as a clearly shocked Dumbledore stared at the piece of parchment. Then, in a strange, hesitant voice, he read, "Harry Potter."

Astoundingly, Potter didn't seem to want to join the others in the side room. He sat stubbornly at the Gryffindor table shaking his head as his house mates plied him with questions. But Snape couldn't think about Potter for long because a quite different situation was nearing critical at his side.

"What kind of base trickery is this?" growled Karkaroff next to him. "Does Dumbledore take me for a fool?"

At exactly the same moment, the mark on Snape's arm gave him a sudden twinge. Snape looked around in surprise, but no one was watching him except Moody. If Karkaroff's arm had felt the same twinge, Karkaroff did not seem to notice. He was too upset.

Small as it was, however, the twinge brought a remarkable clarity of purpose to Snape. Any thought he might have remotely entertained about solving mysteries, or about truth, justice, or fair play, vanished immediately.

The only thing in his mind was the image of Karkaroff kneeling to the Dark Lord. *And when you cower there before him, your soul naked and exposed,*

and your mind spread open like a gutted fish, what will you show him of me? So whom now do I support? What course the least likely to enrage the Dark Lord?

"It can't be Dumbledore," Snape said soothingly to Karkaroff. "His reputation is too much on the line. He wouldn't do anything to damage that. It's the Potter boy who's responsible. He must have gotten someone else to put his name into the Goblet. He wants everyone to notice him. It's been like that since the first day he came to this school."

Karkaroff didn't answer. He was on his feet and trying to get Dumbledore's attention even as Potter, on the Headmaster's orders, came up the aisle and went into the side room. Snape kept trying to deflect Karkaroff away from Dumbledore, especially here in public. "Igor, it can't be his fault. He has nothing to gain by such a transparent ploy. It has to be Potter's doing."

Then they were in the side room with the — could it be possible — four champions. Everyone wanted to talk at once.

"Madame Maxime! Zey are saying zat zis little boy . . ."

"What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dore?"

"Two Hogwarts champions? I don't remember anyone telling me the host school . . ."

"Ogwarts cannot 'ave two champions!"

"We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out . . ."

Snape tried to catch Karkaroff's attention. "It's no one's fault but Potter's. Don't go blaming Dumbledore for Potter's determination to break rules. He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here . . ."

"Thank you, Severus," said Dumbledore suddenly, and Snape was as suddenly quiet. *Resentment. I resent his slapping me down, the meddling old fool. Remember that feeling.*

Dumbledore began questioning Potter, and Snape allowed himself several vocal expressions of disbelief, including sighs and one soft snort. He could tell that Dumbledore was not pleased, but he'd explain later. *Besides, isn't it obvious that Potter really is concealing something?*

McGonagall was beside herself. The concept that a Gryffindor student might cheat at sports was so counterintuitive to her that the mere suggestion of it threatened her very sense of self worth. *Odd that the thought that one might cheat academically does not have quite the same effect.*

"Really," she sputtered, "what nonsense! Harry could not . . . and as Professor Dumbledore believes . . . I'm sure that should be good enough for ev-

everybody else!” Snape could tell from her glare that the two of them were on the outs again.

Karkaroff appealed to Bagman, who reluctantly confirmed that whomever the Goblet named was bound to compete. Since the Goblet had gone out, not to be ignited again until the next tournament, the ranting and raving of the principles was irrelevant. They had four champions, and that was it.

At this pronouncement, Karkaroff was livid. “I have half a mind to leave now!” he exclaimed, only to be stopped by a new, lionine voice.

“Empty threat, Karkaroff! You can’t leave your champion now. He’s got to compete. They’ve all got to compete. Binding magical contract, like Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?” It was Moody, who’d pushed his way into the room.

Then Moody, amid protests from Madame Maxime and Karkaroff, advanced the theory that Potter’s name had been submitted by someone who wanted Potter dead.

And that was when Snape began to quietly panic. He could feel — feel! the blood drain from his face, and his joints tense with the need to run. *For the only one he knew who would want Potter dead was the Dark Lord, and this meant a servant of the Dark Lord was in the castle.*

And Snape didn’t know who he was.

Madame Maxime and Karkaroff continued to protest, but to no avail. A student whose name came out of the Goblet had to compete, and that was that. Taking Miss Delacour and Krum, they left the room, still offended by the evening’s events. Ludo Bagman announced that he was staying at Hogwarts for the whole tournament, while Mr. Crouch bade everyone goodbye and returned to his duties at the Ministry. They exited the chamber together, leaving Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, and Moody.

McGonagall looked over at Dumbledore. “You don’t really think someone will try to kill Potter, do you?”

“It’s the only explanation that fits.” Moody laughed, the only person Snape had ever heard who could make a laugh sound sour. “You could tell from the boy’s face he wasn’t expecting it, didn’t want it, and would like to be rid of it.”

“There,” McGonagall said to Snape. “No student could have done that by himself. Potter was the victim. Moody understands the situation. You might try adopting some of his viewpoints.”

“Are you honestly telling me that you would support Malfoy if his name came out of the hat?”

McGonagall's furious glare was priceless, and Snape immediately filed it with the other images of bad relations with the rest of the staff. *Stay a few minutes longer, and I can get several more.*

Dumbledore, however, was ready to break up the meeting. "Severus, I should like to speak with you for a few minutes in my office. Minerva, Alastor, it has been a long, tiring evening. I suggest we all turn in for the night. Tomorrow will be another exciting day."

The look on Moody's face as he watched Snape follow Dumbledore out of the room was not calculated to make Snape feel comfortable.

In his office, Dumbledore poured them both a glass of mead, and they settled into the comfortable chairs in front of the fire.

"One of these days," Snape said reflectively, "our glaring contradictions are going to catch up to us and we'll have to pay. You are lucky, you know, that it's the Dursleys."

"Come again?"

"Think of the inconsistency. We insist on the signed permission of a parent or guardian to let Potter go on a school sponsored outing to Hogsmeade, but we require him to compete in a life-threatening tournament, also school sponsored, without even notifying the same parent or guardian of its existence. Granted the Dursleys don't care what happens to Potter, but it might occur to them that they could sue you. I would. Wrongful death, or loss of affection. Could be worth a lot of money."

"Am I to take it, then, that after you retire from teaching Potions you are planning on becoming legal counsel to Hogwarts parents?"

"Think how rich I could be! Here I am killing myself trying to cope with hundreds of hormone crazy preteens and adolescents, when I could be living on the proceeds of a few lucrative cases. Think of life without homework!"

"Uh-hem. I had been intending to talk about Karkaroff."

"Oh, right. I just got caught up in the moment there. Karkaroff's been feeling the same thing I have. His mark's been itching, too. It started at the same time. I am presuming that every single one of us has felt it. It may be one of the things that inspired the unfortunate 'demonstration' at the Quidditch World Cup. I mean, they all felt that the Dark Lord is coming back."

"I am equally concerned that Alastor is correct, that someone is using the Triwizard Tournament to kill Potter. Maybe as a result of knowing that... Riddle... is coming back."

"Who? Tell me that. Who? Because I've been trying to think of an answer ever since Moody proposed the idea. It had to be someone in the castle in the

last twenty-four hours. We know everyone who was here. Which of them are you suggesting is the one?"

"We do not know everyone who might have been here. Just last year we found that we had harbored three unregistered animagi for several years. For all we know, someone has slipped in that we would never recognize as an agent."

"Problem with that idea. This required a powerful spell to confuse the Goblet. I agree with Moody on that. Someone coming in as an animagus wouldn't be able to use a wand without transforming, and the Goblet was being watched. I don't know any — maybe one or two — wizards who could do that kind of magic wandless."

"Do you prefer the idea that someone, someone we know, in the castle is a strong supporter of Riddle?"

Snape looked bleakly up at Dumbledore. "I can't ever let down my guard, can I?"

The tension in the school was palpable. Gryffindor was strongly behind Potter, but despite all McGonagall's efforts, none of the other houses would support him. Snape was, in spite of all his other worries, ecstatic.

It wasn't just that it was us. It was that we were the winners! While Slytherin was winning, the rest of the school would support anyone trying to bring us down. Now that Gryffindor is ahead, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw resent their ascendancy, too. The world is an orderly and predictable place, and more fair than I had been daring to imagine.

Much of the animosity was directed against Potter personally. This was not unexpected, given the number of times he'd been allowed to be the hero. It was a form of comeuppance. Despite the clear unfairness of this shift in public opinion, Snape was not at all averse to taking advantage of it. After all, there were more important things at stake, and any image he had of disliking Potter, or vice versa, would shield Snape from some of the Dark Lord's wrath.

It was nearly two weeks later when another opportunity presented itself.

That day, Snape did not join the other teachers for lunch. He had a problem to sort out and plan for, and needed some extended quiet time in his own office.

The problem was Potter. Or rather, the problem was how to explain Potter to the Dark Lord, for an explanation would be demanded. *If I live that long.*

Thank goodness I don't like the boy and he doesn't like me. There's nothing I

have to hide, and no false situations I have to create. Just plenty of good, honest images and emotions, except... The exception was the time Snape had prevented the Dark Lord from killing Potter.

Luckily, I didn't know at the time that the Dark Lord was involved. Unfortunately, at the time I didn't know it was Quirrell either. Just that it was very powerful dark magic. How do I explain taking action to prevent an event that would avenge my master's destruction? To keep in good standing with Dumbledore? But why, if I believed the Dark Lord to be dead? And how to explain not recognizing the source of the power behind that spell on Potter's broom?

The great bell sounding the beginning of afternoon classes rang throughout Hogwarts, and Snape was startled out of his reverie. *There'll be students already waiting in the corridor.* He quickly left his office for the classroom.

There was a sudden panicky scramble of students in Snape's path, a pause, and the unmistakable hiss and sparkle of spell casting. *A fight! In front of my classroom!* Snape pushed his way forward to find Malfoy and Potter both armed with wands, Goyle and Granger obviously victims of some spell, and pandemonium among the rest of the students. Intimidation was the only course of action.

"And what is all this noise about?" Snape said in a soft voice, more deadly than any yelling could be. Pointing at Malfoy, he ordered, "Explain."

"Potter attacked me, sir —"

Potter interrupted at full volume. "We attacked each other at the same time!" *He didn't accuse Malfoy of starting it. Potter must have pulled out his wand first.*

"— and he hit Goyle — look —"

Snape examined Goyle. No real problem except that the boils on his face were ugly and probably itched. "Hospital wing, Goyle," he said quietly.

Then Weasley spoke up. "Malfoy got Hermione! Look!"

The poor girl had been hit by a tooth-growing spell. Her already large front teeth had grown to the point where she looked like a beaver. Snape opened his mouth to say 'Hospital wing' when the image of himself kneeling to the Dark Lord interposed. Without pausing to reflect, he said, "I see no difference," and as the shocked, tearful girl ran crying towards the entrance hall, both Potter and Weasley began yelling names at Snape that he was surprised two fourteen-year-olds would know.

Perfect. Pure hatred from both of you. It couldn't be better if I'd planned it. "Let's see. Fifty points from Gryffindor and a detention each for Potter and

Weasley. Now get inside, or it'll be a week's worth of detentions." At no point had Snape raised his voice.

The students entered the room, which was when Snape noticed the 'POTTER STINKS' badges. He collected images while pretending not to notice. He was about to pull more anger from Potter when Creevey came into the class and informed him that Potter was needed for Tournament business. Snape had no choice but to let the boy go.

Do you see, Lord? Do you see how I favor the children of Death Eaters, and how I treat mudbloods, mongrels, and blood traitors? Please let him look at my evidence before . . . But that was the part that Snape didn't want to think about.

The week before the first task of the Triwizard Tournament, Snape was in the Potions classroom, setting up for his first afternoon class before he went to lunch. Light from the corridor dimmed suddenly, and Snape looked up, then quickly down again. Moody stood framed in the doorway.

"Mind if I come in? Just for a chat."

"I'm on my way out," Snape replied, deciding to leave the rest of the setting up until after lunch. He moved quickly to the door, but Moody blocked his path.

"You shouldn't make it so obvious that you're trying to avoid me. It hurts my feelings. Then I get angry and lose my temper, and start bouncing things off the walls. Like ferrets, for example. You ever been a ferret, Snape?"

Snape bristled. "Are you another one that goes around shooting people in the back? Because that's the only way you're going to transform me into anything."

"You think I can't take you?"

"I know you can't take me. Not face to face."

"Then why are you scared of me?"

"There are things one is wise to be wary of. Rabid dogs, for instance."

Moody barked a loud laugh. "So now I'm 'Mad Dog' Moody! Well, sonny, watch your back. Someday I may decide to take you, and I always heed warnings. But that wasn't what I came about today."

"So you're going to let me leave my classroom now, right?"

"Chat first. Then you can go. You're helping administer this Tournament. I need to know if all the safeguards are in place for the first task."

Snape's antennae were out immediately. "Shouldn't you be asking that question of Professor Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore has a lot on his plate now, so I'm asking you."

"You're asking the wrong person. I'm not involved in the tasks."

"They don't trust you with information, eh? Can't say as I blame them. I wouldn't trust you myself."

"I notice that you're the one asking the question. I guess they don't trust you either."

"Touchy, Snape. Touchy."

"I think you mean touché. Now if you have nothing else to pump me about, I'm going to lunch."

Moody stepped aside and allowed Snape to pass through the door, then accompanied him to the Great Hall for lunch, where the two sat next to each other through the meal without exchanging another word.

That weekend was the first Hogsmeade excursion for the third years and above, joined this time by the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students. Snape was one of the teachers assigned to supervise, and he managed to slip out the gate a good half hour ahead of the hordes so that he could find a small nook, preferably in a quiet corner of the Three Broomsticks, before things got too crowded. The table he chose was hidden from the door by part of the counter, and while Snape couldn't see the whole room from his table, neither could they see him. Which was, of course, the point.

Nothing, however, could hide Hagrid from anyone. When the game-keeper's bulk crossed the threshold, Snape knew it. He huddled down closer to the table, hoping that even from his great height Hagrid wouldn't be able to see him over the counter. Snape was in no mood to talk, not even to Hagrid.

He needn't have worried. Hagrid wasn't alone. Behind him stumped Moody, and the two sat together in the middle of the room talking like old friends. Some of what they were discussing appeared to be confidential, for Hagrid bent his head down near to Moody's ear and was obviously whispering.

And you, Severus, are obviously spying. What difference does it make to you what Hagrid and Moody are talking about? But curiosity was not to be denied, and Snape continued to watch.

The two rose after a while and went to another table where Granger was sitting by herself. *By herself? Must be Potter and his invisibility cloak. Maybe he doesn't want to deal with the teasing.* Moody bent down to talk to thin air, a jolting reminder to Snape that his enchanted eye wasn't fooled by magical tricks or items. *He can see through the cloak!* Then Moody and Hagrid left the Three Broomsticks.

**
*

NOT WHAT MEETS THE EYE

**
*

Note to self. Find out what Moody was talking to Hagrid about. This could be interesting.

C H A P T E R F O R T Y - F I V E

THE TASKS BEGIN

Snape didn't follow Hagrid and Moody. If he had, Granger and the invisible Potter would have seen him and probably told either Hagrid, or Moody, or both. While he wasn't worried about Hagrid, Snape had no desire to let Moody know he'd witnessed the conversation in the Three Broomsticks.

At dinner that evening, Snape kept an eye on Hagrid, who was clearly keeping an eye on Madame Maxime. It didn't surprise Snape at all, for romantic possibilities were rare to nonexistent for Hagrid, and he imagined for Maxime, too. As soon as Hagrid made movements indicating he was about to rise from the table, Snape got up and quickly left the Great Hall. One cannot be accused of following another if one is first, after all.

In fact, Snape left the castle altogether and went out onto the lawn. The moon had not yet risen, since it was halfway between full and last quarter and the stars were glittering in a clear sky. Snape sincerely hoped that Hagrid and Madame Maxime were not intending to go strolling on the grounds because it would be awkward to interrupt such a tête-à-tête.

Fortunately, when Hagrid appeared he was alone.

Snape pretended he was walking back into the castle, stopped, and said, "Good evening, Hagrid. How are you enjoying all the excitement about the Tournament?"

"It's grand, Professor. And even better being smack in the middle of it."

"Smack in the middle? How is that?"

"Well, I'm gamekeeper. Magical creatures. They'd have to work with me, now wouldn't they?"

This was going much smoother than Snape had anticipated. He always preferred short conversations. "I imagine loads of people would like your viewpoint on what's happening."

"That's what Professor Moody was saying just this afternoon. Something about my 'unique perspective.' I told him there weren't nothing unique about

it, just a talent for handling dragons, but he went on like it were something special.”

“So Moody knows about the dragons, too?”

“Well odd about that. I got the feeling at first that maybe he didn’t, but nothing I said were no surprise to him, so I guess Dumbledore told him. Good thing, too, ’cause he warned me that something were afoot.”

“Afoot? You shock me Hagrid. What could go wrong?”

“You wouldn’t believe it to look at him, but seems Professor Karkaroff ain’t above tipping the scales in his favor. Moody says he’s planning to come down tonight to watch the shipment arrive. That’d give that Durmstrang school a big advantage. I thought I’d take Madame Maxime for a stroll.”

“So you’re planning to balance things out.”

“Just leveling the playing field, Professor. Just leveling the playing field.”

“Had you thought about leveling it Hogwarts’ way?”

“Got that covered, too, Professor.”

“I don’t want to hear about it, Hagrid. I have an official position to protect.”

“Mum’s the word, sir.”

Snape pondered this as he reentered the castle. On a whim he checked to see if Karkaroff was still in the Great Hall. Peeking in, he was surprised to see Karkaroff talking to Moody in a clearly animated fashion. Snape backed away and waited until Karkaroff came out.

“Good evening, Igor. You seem in quite a rush tonight.”

“And why not? I have just found out about your little plot to shut Durmstrang out of the competition.” He advanced on Snape, hands clenched into fists at his sides. “I thought we were friends as well as colleagues. I thought you would support me in this. But now I see where your loyalties lie. You abandon me when most I need help.”

It was a godsend. Better than Snape could ever have planned. Thinking fast, he replied, “You know I’d help you in almost anything else, but I’ve been waiting and hoping for this for nearly a decade and a half, and you’re not going to take it away from me. Don’t count on my support. Not in this.”

Karkaroff stopped dead, and stared at Snape as if he were a madman. “Are we talking about the same thing?”

“Maybe not,” Snape said, and walked past him into the dungeons.

On the day of the first task of the tournament, it was impossible to get any work done. The morning classes were basically useless, and the afternoon classes were canceled. The four champions were taken away from the castle

to a special holding area, and after lunch the rest of the school trooped down to a stadium area with a huge barrier fence that had been created during the night just for the competition.

Snape was not certain he wanted to attend. He was now one of only a few teachers (Hagrid and Moody being two others) who knew that the task involved dragons. Snape had never seen a dragon in his life, and honestly had no desire to. Once again the incongruity struck him that the weekend excursion to Hogsmeade required permission, but sitting only yards away from a dragon in an open air stadium did not. *I need to study law and work on negligence suits. It would pay better.*

In the end, Snape had to go. Dumbledore asked the whole staff to be present, partly as a show of school spirit, and partly to have extra adults on hand to supervise in case of problems.

The competition turned out to be quite exciting, which was no more than Snape expected, and interesting as well. Diggory, Delacour, and Krum all tried various spells against their dragons, with various levels of success. Potter's trial, the last of the day, was different. Potter used his wand to summon his broomstick, and suddenly it was a match between a Seeker trying to catch a Golden Egg, and the biggest, baddest Bludger the world had ever seen.

Flitwick was sitting near Snape, and from the moment Potter cried, "*Accio Firebolt!*" he was bouncing up and down in his seat trying to see. "A summoning charm! Potter used a summoning charm! I've been trying to teach him summoning charms since the semester started, and he finally got it!"

Spectators rose spontaneously to their feet as Potter and the dragon matched wits and flying speeds, until suddenly Potter had the egg, and the competition was over. Potter had the fastest time of any of the contestants.

The crowd in the stands began to break up. Snape noticed that Moody joined McGonagall in seeing that Potter was whisked off to the nurse to tend a few cuts. Everyone around him was discussing the last task, some even reenacting Potter's flight with arms and hands. Snape and the other teachers tried to keep the crowd orderly and steer everyone back to the castle for supper.

As he himself was finally walking up the hill back to the castle, part of a rearguard shepherding the students, Snape looked back and saw Moody heading for the gate into Hogsmeade.

A few minutes later, as he was going toward his dungeon office, Snape felt pain stab through his left arm. Frightened, he hurried into the office and

locked the door, then rolled up the sleeve of his robe to check the Dark Mark. The pain was subsiding, but the mark was more clearly etched on his skin than it had been before.

Not a summons. Thank goodness, not a summons. I'm not ready yet. An urgent summons from the Dark Lord would have caused the mark to burn black with a fiery pain, and this was nowhere close to that. It was bad enough, however, that it forced Snape to consider something he'd been trying to avoid, to ignore since August. It could be ignored no longer, and Snape left his office to find Dumbledore.

That took a while to do. Dumbledore was busy with Crouch and Bagman, with Madame Maxime and Karkaroff, with a horde of other visitors and with the press. Clearly it would be a couple of hours before he was free. Karkaroff saw Snape and waved to get his attention, then pointed to his arm. Snape nodded to confirm he'd felt it, too, but the two of them didn't talk.

Not until long after dinner, when most of the dignitaries had left and the students were in their common rooms, did Dumbledore receive Snape in his office.

Snape's request was an odd one. "I want you to cast a Cruciatus curse on me."

Dumbledore paused, a glass of mead held out in his hand for Snape. "I beg your pardon?"

"I want — no, I need — you to cast a Cruciatus curse on me."

"Severus, I have never cast a Cruciatus curse in my life. I have no intention of doing what you ask."

"I've never cast one either, though I've watched while others did. More important, I've never felt one."

"Why would you want to?"

Snape showed Dumbledore the mark on his arm, clear and bright now where before it had been faint. "It hurt. It made me think of the pain. Then I thought of what's going to happen when I face him. All this work preparing for his legilimency — what if it's all in vain because I'm not strong enough to stand up to the pain?"

"Severus, the casting of an Unforgivable curse . . ."

"You let Moody use the Imperius curse on the students."

"That was in a controlled situation, with their consent . . ."

"This would be a controlled situation."

"Let me consult Moody . . ."

"No! I don't want Moody to know anything about this!"

Dumbledore gazed at Snape for a long moment. "All right, Severus. Let me think about it. I shall let you know when I have decided."

The following Saturday, Dumbledore asked Snape to come up to his office.

"Sit down, Severus, make yourself comfortable. Mead?"

"I'm not sure. This doesn't sound like good news." Snape didn't sit down.

"Am I so easy to read, then? Very well. I have thought long and hard, and I do not think that I can accede to your request. The Unforgivable curses harm both caster and victim in ways that no other spells can, and I fear..."

"You want me to face him cold. Unprepared. No defenses at all."

"That is not what I said. I want to protect you from the effects of the Unforgivable..."

"Who's going to protect me from the effects of his curses?" Snape started to pace, highly agitated now. "Will you be there with a shielding spell? Are you going to give me armor he can't detect? When I face him, I'll be alone in a circle of Death Eaters. I'm going to need all the preparation I can get. Why won't you help me?"

"I will give you all the help I can, but the Unforgivable curses are beyond the pale. You cannot ask me..."

"No, but you can ask me. You can ask me to walk blindfolded into a mine field. Isn't it true the curses only hurt the caster if done with malice? This isn't malice, this is charity — *caritas*."

"Severus..."

"Headmaster, please!"

They faced each other across the silence, and it was Dumbledore who gave in. "Come tomorrow at lunch, Severus. I shall study until then on the best way to proceed in order to achieve the maximum benefit with the minimum damage."

"Thank you, Professor."

The first session was awkward in the extreme, since neither Snape nor Dumbledore had any idea what they were getting into.

"We do not need to recreate the whole experience, do we? Surely something of lesser intensity would serve equally."

"When you say the Cruciatus spell, you're supposed to mean it. It doesn't have the same effect if you don't mean it. It doesn't sound as if you..."

"Well, it is very hard to mean to hurt someone you are trying to help. Excuse me if my heart is not in it. Now, where should you be for this? Sitting? Standing? Lying down?"

They settled on Snape sitting in the chair before the fireplace. Dumbledore stood a bit behind him and to the side, so that Snape couldn't see him. "I'd best start with something mild," Dumbledore said.

"It's hard to picture you doing anything else."

"Are you ready?"

"No, but go ahead anyway." Even so, it was a surprise.

"*Crucio!*" cried Dumbledore, pointing his wand at Snape.

Pain that could not be ignored washed through every fiber of Snape's being. It wasn't that he could say, 'My hand hurts' or 'My stomach hurts' for he wasn't aware of hand or stomach or any other part of his body. It was as if his brain was disconnected from the rest of him, floating in a sea of pain, and that sea permeated everything, so that around him and in him and through him there was only pain. He had no sense of time or place, no sense of who was near, no memory of why this was happening. Only pain.

Then the pain was gone, and Dumbledore was sitting next to him, offering Snape a goblet of mead. "What happened?" Dumbledore asked.

Snape's hand trembled as he reached for the glass, then he shivered, took the mead, and drained the goblet. "I'm not sure. I thought this was going to be mild."

"I thought it was."

"Either you don't know your own strength, or this is going to be harder than I thought . . . But there was something wrong." Snape waited for his head to clear a bit more. "When the Dark Lord uses this spell, he talks to the one being punished. Questions are asked and answered. I wasn't aware of you at all. Why not?"

"I do not know," said Dumbledore.

They thought to try at least once more that afternoon. This time Dumbledore would stand in front of Snape and attempt to establish eye contact, even ask questions. It was a good half hour before Snape was ready, but he agreed that if he couldn't do it in Dumbledore's office, then he couldn't do it anywhere.

"*Crucio!*" cried Dumbledore again.

Again Snape's body vanished and he floated in the sea of pain, but this time he was aware of Dumbledore's eyes. The eyes promised release, and he longed for them to free him. A thought formed between his consciousness and the pain. 'What is your name?' the thought said, and he knew release came with the answer.

"Severus," Snape gasped. "Severus Snape."

The pain was gone, and Dumbledore sat beside him. "Eye contact seems to be a key," Dumbledore said, and Snape agreed.

"Next," Snape said, "I have to try not to answer."

"Are you sure that is wise?"

"If I can't control it, then everything we're doing is useless."

Snape refused another glass of mead, wanting to be sharp and aware. Dumbledore spoke the Cruciopell spell, and the pain and eyes returned. 'What is your name?' the eyes asked, and this time Snape clenched his whole being into one obstinate lump and withheld the answer. Pain washed him, but it didn't increase in intensity. 'What is your name?' pressed into his brain more insistently this time, but still he fought the pain, and still the pain was static, unchanging. 'What is your name?' came a third time, and this time Snape thought a conscious, independent thought. 'Why are you doing this?' the thought said, and Snape answered, "Severus, Severus Snape."

"Now you have to tell me what happened," Dumbledore said in Snape's ear.

"The longer I held out, the more my own thoughts were able to come through," Snape panted, trying to control breath and heartbeat, both of which were racing. "The pain remained the same, but I was beginning to think again."

"That," said Dumbledore, "is a major piece of information."

They agreed to work on weekends, and the first half of December, as the school prepared for the Yule Ball, Snape and Dumbledore practiced with the Cruciopell curse. The second Sunday, Dumbledore increased the intensity of his curse, and Snape was dazzled with the pain, but by the third try, gasping and struggling with the agony of it, he was able to endure until his own thoughts began to break through. It seemed progress was being made.

The third Sunday, as Snape settled into the chair before the fire, he suddenly began to cry. "I can't do this," he wept. "I can't do this anymore."

Dumbledore couldn't hide the concern in his expression. "What will happen on that day if you can't do it anymore?"

"I'll tell him everything I know."

"What will he do then?"

Snape watched Dumbledore with tired eyes. "He'll punish me."

"Will he kill you?"

"Not for a long time."

"Then I cannot send you to him. It is too much to ask. I cannot do this to you."

"No, it's worse than that. I have to go. If I don't go when he summons me, then he'll hunt me down and kill me. You don't leave the Dark Lord's service."

They sat for a while, then Dumbledore said, "Shall we try it again? I shall keep it gentle."

Snape nodded and waited for the Crucio spell. Through the pain he felt the question 'What is your name?' With all his strength he tried to resist, but knew he was weakening. Then, suddenly, there was a new question, or rather a new command.

'Tell me about Lily.'

The effect was electric. Every door in Snape's psyche began to shut down, and adrenaline poured into his system. He was alert, in terrible pain, but alert. Nothing about Lily, not the tiniest shred of information, was coming through. The probe came again, 'Tell me about Lily,' and Snape's mind began to respond, "I don't know Lily. I know nothing about Lily. Who is Lily?"

The pain stopped, and Dumbledore was smiling. "That was the problem," he said. "We were just asking the wrong question."

The Sunday before Christmas was the last session. Neither Snape nor Dumbledore had any desire to continue beyond that. As Snape sat before the fire in Dumbledore's office, Dumbledore toyed with his wand.

"Are you sure you want to do this again?"

"Something different this time. I have to know it works."

"Very well. What do I do?"

"Read me. The first time, try to find if I'm hiding anything. Try hard."

The curse was cast, and Snape let the pain sweep through him. He had more control over it now, though he didn't know what would happen if it intensified further. He felt the legilimency probe enter his mind and registered that the pain made it harder to resist. *I need to adjust, maybe through several stages.* Then Dumbledore backed away.

"Nothing. Clear, open, and honest. Where do you hide all the skeletons?"

"Professional secret. Now, try again."

"Are we expecting a different result?"

"Maybe."

The second time lasted longer, and when the pain stopped and Dumbledore stood, there was a curious expression on his face.

"I found a locked door. You're hiding something from me. Is that what you wanted?"

"Yes. If something like Moody's eye can see them, I want the Dark Lord to think he can find them, too. Unaided. Was it difficult?"

"A little. It was well hidden. Camouflaged behind something else."

"Perfect. Now, last time. Count how many doors you find, and try to open one."

Again the mind probe entered his brain, and Snape didn't resist until Dumbledore selected a group of thoughts and tried to force his way in. Then without warning the pain spiked, and Snape cried out with the agony of it. Dumbledore stopped immediately. When Snape could focus again, he found Dumbledore sitting beside him with a goblet of mead.

"Three. I found three doors, nothing else. What happened?"

"Three is good. Three is what I wanted you to find. But when you tried to break through, the pain got worse. It's a good thing I want to let him see what's in those boxes. What scares me is if he finds the ones I don't want him to see."

In the entrance hall on the way to Sunday supper, Snape ran into Moody.

"Good to see you back on solid ground, Snape old boy. That rarified atmosphere up in Dumbledore's office must make you giddy."

"Are you monitoring my movements?"

"I like to know where all my little Death Eaters are at any given moment. It makes me feel safer."

"I make Alastor Moody feel unsafe. I must be doing something right."

"Got a date for the Yule Ball? Or is it hard for an old man like yourself to find a date?"

"You must have one foot in the grave, Moody. You never used to fixate on my age before. You've been calling me 'old man' and 'old boy' since you got here. Maybe it's because you're in your second childhood now."

To Snape's great surprise, Moody didn't respond. Instead he stared at Snape for a few seconds, then turned and stumped in to supper. Snape watched him speculatively before following him into the Great Hall. They sat at the high table in silence, and all through supper Snape wondered what he'd said that shut Moody up so completely. He rather wanted to be able to repeat it.

The evening of the Yule Ball arrived, and all the students were making their way to the Great Hall dressed in their finest robes. The Hall was decorated in frosty white with green garlands, and instead of the long medieval tables with their benches, there were round banquet tables.

Snape was not wearing dress robes, nor did he take a seat in the Hall

for the feast. The moon was in its last quarter again and wouldn't rise until midnight, the weather was surprisingly balmy, and Snape had managed to finagle the job of patrolling the grounds. He considered this a prize position since his student contact was minimal, he could stay out of the way of Moody and Karkaroff, and he didn't have to listen to the music of the Weird Sisters.

Instead, he stopped off at the kitchens to pick up a plate of food and, passing Professor Vector, who was on duty in the entrance hall, took it out onto the stairs to eat. The stars glittered overhead, and the world seemed at perfect peace. Snape felt Lily's presence, but that evening he had no need to talk to her. They had often sat by the lake as children, not talking but content just to be together and watch the sky.

From inside the castle, Snape could hear the music start and the beginning of the dancing. That meant that his own job was about to start, too. Not all of the students were interested in dancing, and it was Snape's duty to show them the error of their ways.

After the second dance, the first couple appeared on the steps, a seventh year boy and a sixth year girl. Both started when they saw Snape, then said, "Good evening, Professor." They were, they said, just going to stroll for a while to get away from the noise and the heat of the hall. Snape let them go, but noted the direction they'd gone.

A few minutes later, Karkaroff came out.

"Here you are, Severus. I need to talk to you someplace private. Come." He took Snape's arm and steered him across the lawn away from the light shining out from the castle. "I want to know what you're planning to do."

"Planning to do about what?"

"About what? About this!" And Karkaroff quickly touched his left arm.

I'm not talking to Karkaroff. I'm talking to the Dark Lord. Nothing I say to Karkaroff can be hidden. He'll want to see it all. Snape look out across the lawn so that Karkaroff wouldn't be able to see his eyes. "Not everyone is panicked by this, Igor. A lot of people are waiting for it. You don't have to panic either."

Karkaroff stared at him. "You know what I did to get out of Azkaban. You know how many of our colleagues want me dead. I can't go back. And you! Go back? You betrayed them all before the Dark Lord fell. You were selling them out to Dumbledore while you were still training them in London. What they'll do to me is nothing compared to what they'll do to you. I heard Dumbledore say so in front of the tribunal. You sold them out before the Dark Lord's downfall, and you were Dumbledore's spy among us."

"I was where the Dark Lord told me to be, doing what the Dark Lord told me to do. Fooling Dumbledore was part of that. I have nothing to fear."

"No? Well maybe you have something to fear from Dumbledore, then. Or from Moody. Shall I tell them of this conversation? I spent time in Azkaban — maybe now it's your turn."

"Go ahead. Tell them. Dumbledore won't believe you, and Moody can't do anything." Snape turned back to Karkaroff. "I have a job to do out here. If you want to talk, you have to come with me." He headed for the garden area with Karkaroff in tow. "You aren't the only one he'll be angry with. He isn't going to kill everyone who tried to save his own skin. Besides, you might be reading the signs wrong. Do we know for certain he's coming back now?"

They reached the gardens and Snape listened carefully. Teenagers in the throes of a hormonal rush were seldom discreet. He pointed his wand at a tree and whispered, "*Petrificus Totalus*," then lit a Lumos spell. A second later he said, "*Liberacorpus*," and the two embarrassed students clambered to their feet. "I know, Hancock," Snape drawled sarcastically, "she fainted and you were giving her mouth-to-mouth-resuscitation. Ten points each from Slytherin. Get back into the Hall where you belong."

Karkaroff was still there. "I don't see how you can make light of this."

Snape continued through the garden. "I think you're overreacting. I really don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor."

"Severus, you cannot pretend this isn't happening! It's been getting clearer and clearer for months. I am becoming seriously concerned. I can't deny it . . ."

"Then flee. Flee . . ." Snape waved towards the castle. "I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts." He spotted another couple and sent a blast into the rosebush they were hiding behind, deducting ten points each from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff as the students scurried to shelter. *No real harm. The roses have to be pruned in January anyway.*

Potter and Weasley were in the garden, too, interestingly enough without their dates. Snape impatiently shooed them along. After a few more minutes of fruitless conversation, Igor returned to the castle and Snape to his job of frustrating adolescent love.

In the week between the Yule Ball and the beginning of the next term, Dumbledore asked Snape to come to his office again.

"Any news? Any change?"

Snape sighed. "Only what we expected would change. The mark is changing. It's becoming darker and clearer. Karkaroff's too. He's getting very wor-

ried about it, and I don't really blame him. I can find ways to justify the last thirteen years. He can't. He didn't just claim to be under an Imperius curse or to be coerced into the Death Eaters. He named names and sold people out. If we ever do get a summons, I'm afraid he's going to run."

"Ah, but where to? There are not a large number of safe places to go."

"I really think that's his main reason for keeping the location of Durmstrang a secret. I think he wants to be able to go there first. If no one knows where the school is, it'll give him time to get somewhere safer."

"No lion's den for Karkaroff, then." Dumbledore fingered his beard for a moment. "I did want to talk to you about something else. Have you been working on your Patronus?"

The question surprised Snape. "Not really. With the dementors gone, I didn't see the need."

"I hope you recall that I asked you to learn the Patronus charm before we had any dementors at Hogwarts. I hope you do not think I anticipated that little invasion."

"That's right. It was the year before, wasn't it? Why do you think I need it now? I'm not summoning a Patronus against the Dark Lord. I'm not that foolhardy."

"You can do other things with a Patronus that are very useful, such as send virtually undetectable messages."

"I didn't know you could project a Patronus to any distance."

"Oh, quite long distances. I have done it from here to London on many occasions. The Patronus does not allow itself to be intercepted, and cannot be overheard or detected like floo powder can."

"What situations are you envisioning here?"

"Well, I hate to bring it up, but the time might come when you need to get into Hogwarts very quickly. Let us say a situation involving hot pursuit. If you send the Patronus ahead, we can be at the gates to admit you and close them in the face of pursuers."

"Hot pursuit!" Snape rose from his chair and sloshed tea out of his cup before he managed to set it down. "Hunted down like a criminal! Like an animal! What kind of scenarios are you preparing for me?"

"Easy, Severus, easy. It is a worst-case scenario, but better to plan for any eventuality. Better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it."

In the end, Snape agreed that Dumbledore had a point and began working on the Patronus. He was out of practice, and was therefore pleasantly surprised to find that the misty little fox with the sharp nose and black eyes

was easy to conjure. Getting it to move from place to place on command was more difficult, but Snape persevered, working mostly in the evenings, and soon was able to send the Patronus to a specific spot along the lake bank at will.

A major obstacle was Moody, who continued to be fascinated by Snape's every movement. Most often Snape pretended to be working in his office, and slipped past Moody that way. Occasionally Dumbledore distracted Moody to enable Snape to escape undetected from the castle. One of the most intriguing things about the situation was the degree to which Dumbledore seemed to sympathize with Snape's desire to keep Moody entirely out of the picture.

Other things were happening to disrupt the routine at Hogwarts, however. One of the biggest came from outside in the form of an article in the Daily Prophet. It seemed a particularly obnoxious reporter by the name of Rita Skeeter had discovered a long concealed secret about Hogwarts. About Hogwarts, and about Hagrid.

It was shortly after the beginning of the term that several things seemed to happen at once. Returning to his office after practicing with the Patronus, Snape had a sudden sense that things were not quite right. Maybe it was the feel of the door as it opened, or an almost unnoticeable change in the air, but Snape knew that someone had been there. Since Snape's office was always locked with fairly strong spells, it had to be one of the teachers, or an unusually powerful student. Snape rather fancied he knew which.

Snape began a slow, methodical search of the office, checking his inventory lists against the vials and jars on the shelves. What was missing was powdered bicorn horn and shredded boomslang skin. *Someone is making Polyjuice potion. The last time this happened was two years ago when Granger was in hospital, having semi-transformed herself into a cat.*

The problem was that Snape was reasonably sure this wasn't a student. He remembered all too well the incident of the firecracker in the cauldron that was the cover for the one who sneaked into the office for the potion ingredients. He really didn't believe that even Granger was capable of opening his office doors when they were locked.

Which left a short list of suspects. Why would Moody need Polyjuice potion? Who is he planning to transform himself into?

The next day before breakfast, Snape was in Dumbledore's office.

"Polyjuice potion. The two ingredients are used together only for Polyjuice potion. Which means that whoever took them is planning to transform

himself into someone else for an hour. How am I even supposed to know at this moment that you are you?”

Dumbledore did not seem concerned. “Because Polyjuice potion does not transfer memories, and anyone transforming himself — or herself — into me would still not know how to get into the office without the password. And I know that you are you because I can look into your eyes and see the Severus I have known these past two and a half decades. So we are reasonably sure of each other. Why do you suspect Moody?”

“Who else could it be? The only students are a couple of sixth and seventh years that I know quite well, and who wouldn’t do it, and Granger for the pre-OWL crowd, but I don’t think even she is that good. This happened between supper and ten o’clock, so that rather precludes outsiders, and who among the ‘regular’ staff would you suspect? The only ringer is Moody. By the way, what’s my patronus, and what major medical problem did I have as a child?”

“A fox, and you are assuming Hagrid told me, but it was rickets. You might want to know that I prefer raspberry jam.”

They looked at each other for a moment. “Have you ever heard of James Bond?” Snape asked.

At breakfast, Snape could see from some distance that McGonagall was reading *The Daily Prophet* and fuming. Not everyone had yet come down, so Snape slipped into the seat on her left.

“What’s happening in the wide world?” he asked.

“Murder, if I can get my hands on her,” replied McGonagall. She handed him the newspaper. There, under the byline ‘Rita Skeeter’ was a story exposing the fact that Hagrid was half giant and speculating on the potential danger he posed for the students at Hogwarts and the wizarding world at large.

“The ugly old bat!” exclaimed Snape. Then he saw McGonagall’s expression and backpedaled furiously. “You, on the other hand, are neither ugly nor a bat. And I can’t help my age. Who does this ‘Skeeter’ person think she is, anyway?”

“For your heart being in the right place, you’re forgiven. Someone’s got to talk to Hagrid.”

The problem was that Hagrid wouldn’t talk to anyone else. He’d already informed Dumbledore that he was sick and called in a substitute, a rather competent instructor named Grubbly-Plank. She was, in fact, far better at the

professor business than Hagrid, and had only sentiment against her. Hagrid locked himself in his hut.

This presented a quandary for Snape. He had an enormous quantity of images of Hagrid that had to be sealed, double sealed, and triple blocked from the Dark Lord. At the same time, he wanted to let Hagrid know of his support. Dumbledore solved the problem by assuring Snape that he would pass along any messages to Hagrid.

It wasn't as if Hagrid didn't understand Snape's problem. After all, it was to Hagrid that Snape had gone for his defection. In terms of understanding the stakes, Hagrid came third. Right after Dumbledore and Snape himself.

The next Hogsmeade excursion was Saturday, January 14. This time Snape was excused any supervisory duty. Moody, on the other hand was assigned to keep an eye on the students and had to spend the entire day off the grounds. The reason for this arrangement became apparent after the older students left.

"Come with me, Severus. We are going out to the forest to practice something new. This should, quite frankly, be much easier for you than for most people, or I shall be very surprised."

They went only a little way in, more to be out of sight than anything. Then, with a flick of his wand, Dumbledore called "*Expecto Patronum!*" Before Snape's astounded eyes there appeared a snow-white phoenix, a spectral bird of mist and ice. It was beautiful.

"Now this is the tricky part," Dumbledore was saying. "You are going to learn to send a message by Patronus. First get it to pause, like this, and be sure you know what you want to say. Then say, 'Mitto nuntium' and tell it the message. I suppose you could project it nonverbally, but not everyone can do that. Then you tell it 'Nuntius estis ad...' and the name of the person you are sending the message to. Like owls, Patronuses always know where the person is."

"How do you receive the message?"

"Why do you not go across the clearing, and I shall send one to you. You try to send one in response."

Snape did as he was told, repeating over and over to himself Mitto nuntium and Nuntius estis ad..., and wondering, not for the first time, why Latin wasn't taught as a subject at Hogwarts. When he was in position, he faced Dumbledore and waited.

Dumbledore spoke to his Patronus, then dispatched it towards Snape. It crossed the clearing in a microsecond, hovered before Snape, and suddenly

his mind was receiving the words, *Is this not easier than floo powder?* Immediately thereafter, the Patronus vanished.

Why can't it all be nonverbal? On a sudden whim, Snape raised his own wand and summoned little Renard soundlessly. He was pleased to see that the fox was looking more and more cunning with each appearance. Silently Snape projected the words *Mitto nuntium, Is there a limit to length?*, and *Nuntius estis ad Dumbledore*.

The fox went instantly to Dumbledore, who conjured his phoenix and replied, *I do not know. I have never tried to send War and Peace.*

Dumbledore returned to his office, and Snape practiced sending messages to him there for about an hour. It was clear from the first, however, that this was something Snape could do well. Very little practice was needed.

Later that afternoon, Dumbledore went to see Hagrid. Snape wasn't privy to that conversation, though he knew that Dumbledore carried with him a stack of letters from parents who had been students at Hogwarts and from the staff. All of them expressed confidence in Hagrid, and requested that Dumbledore keep Hagrid on. The meeting must have been successful, since Hagrid appeared at Monday morning breakfast and took up his classes again.

Things remained calm until the following Thursday night. To be more precise, it was one o'clock in the morning of Friday the twentieth.

That evening, Snape had stayed up reading until eleven, when he'd undressed for bed (it was cold, and a gray flannel nightshirt was in order) and, after some tossing and turning, fallen asleep. At about one in the morning, he was awakened by the most horrible shrieking and caterwauling he'd ever heard coming from the entrance hall.

Snape was awake immediately, and the first thing he noticed was a faint glow under the door to his office. Wand at the ready, he approached and opened the door. No one was there, though a torch had clearly been lit on the opposite wall to give light to whomever had been sneaking around.

Is this one mystery, or two? Did the shrieking that woke me have something to do with the person who broke into my office, or did it interrupt him in the middle of his search?

Quickly throwing a dressing gown over his nightshirt, Snape made his way to the entrance hall. The disturbance, however, was farther up, and Snape climbed the stairs to the second floor where he could hear Filch raving:

"Hiding are you? I'm coming to get you, Peeves... You've gone and

stolen a Triwizard clue, Peeves . . . Dumbledore'll have you out of here for this, you filthy, pilfering poltergeist . . ."

Stepping out onto the second floor, Snape said, "Filch? What's going on?"

"It's Peeves, Professor. He threw this egg down the stairs." For some reason, Filch thought it necessary to whisper, even though they were nowhere near any dormitories or private rooms. Except Moody's.

Snape went further up to be able to talk to Filch without making any more noise. He looked at the egg curiously. It was from the first Triwizard task, and was supposed to contain clues to the second task. "Peeves? But Peeves couldn't get into my office."

Filch didn't understand what the egg had to do with Snape's office, but confirmed that the wailing and banging that awakened Snape had come from the egg. Snape alerted Filch to the fact that someone had been in his office.

"But Peeves couldn't . . ."

"I know he couldn't. I seal my office with a spell none but a wizard could break!" Snape thought again of Moody and looked up the stairs and around the corridor, wondering why Moody hadn't come out to investigate the noise. *It isn't as if he has a reputation for sleeping through odd occurrences, quite the contrary.* "I want you to come and help me search for the intruder, Filch."

Filch had other plans. He wanted to go to Dumbledore about the incident and get Peeves thrown from the castle once and for all.

"Filch," replied Snape, now exasperated, "I don't give a damn about that wretched poltergeist; it's my office that's . . ." Then he heard the unmistakable sound of Moody's wooden leg and stopped. *If there's anything I don't want, it's for Moody to hear this.*

But it was impossible to stop Filch. He immediately began telling Moody about the egg. "... and then Professor Snape discovered that someone had broken into his off . . ."

"Shut up!" Snape hissed, but the damage was done.

Moody moved closer and scanned Snape with his enchanted eye, then paused, mouth open in mock surprise at what he 'found.' "Did I hear that correctly, Snape? Someone broke into your office?"

"It is unimportant." *And since it was probably you, your little act is fooling no one.*

"On the contrary, it is very important. Who'd want to break into your office?" Moody was gazing into Snape's face with the enchanted eye.

He's trying to read me. Let's see you read a brick wall, you bastard. And Snape closed off every part of his mind to the probe, something he'd only

done before in dueling situations. "A student, I dare say. It has happened before. Potion ingredients . . . students attempting illicit mixtures, no doubt . . ."

"Not hiding anything else in your office, are you?"

Only the presence of Filch was now keeping the exchange from turning into a fight. Snape wanted nothing more than to wipe the ugly grin off Moody's face. "You know I'm hiding nothing, as you've searched my office pretty thoroughly yourself."

"Auror's privilege, Snape. Dumbledore told me to keep an eye . . ."

The baldness of the man's lie was breathtaking. "Dumbledore happens to trust me. I refuse to believe that he gave you orders to search my office!" *Give me an excuse. Go for your wand and give me a reason . . .*

A strange glint had come into Moody's real eye, as if he'd found something he'd been seeking for a long time. "Course Dumbledore trusts you. He's a trusting man, isn't he? Believes in second chances. But me—I say there are spots that don't come off, Snape. Spots that never come off, d' you know what I mean?"

The stab of fire through the mark on Snape's left forearm was blinding. Snape gripped the arm in sudden, uncontrollable pain that was as instantly gone. Shocked to the core of his being, Snape stared at Moody. *How did he do that? How could he do that? Aurors can't control the Dark Mark. Only the Dark Lord and his lieutenants . . . Did he learn that from prisoners in Azkaban? Or . . .*

Moody seemed quite pleased with the results of his action. He grinned. "Get back to bed, Snape," he said, like a parent commanding an errant child.

"You don't have the authority to send me anywhere! I have as much right to prowl this school after dark as you do!" That didn't come out quite the way Snape had intended, but he was so angry now that he was talking without thinking. Moody would get the gist of it.

Moody, in fact, seemed quite amused. "Prowl away. I look forward to meeting you in a dark corridor some time . . ." The threat was implicit, and Snape was about to reply when Moody pointed past him. "You've dropped something, by the way . . ."

Snape turned to look at the step Moody pointed to. He recognized the thing immediately. It was James and Sirius's map. The map he'd last seen in the possession of Lupin. The map that somehow still remained at Hogwarts . . . And it was functioning, with the names of people moving over it! Snape reached for it only to have it fly past his fingers as Moody cried . . .

"*Accio Parchment!*" Then Moody grinned like a satyr. "My mistake. It's mine — must've dropped it earlier."

But now everything was clear. Moody had been working all the previous term to get Potter's confidence, starting with that little episode with the ferret. That was what Moody'd meant about 'getting what he wanted.' What he wanted was Potter helping him. "Potter," Snape muttered aloud.

Moody's attention was drawn to the sound. "What's that?"

"Potter! That egg is Potter's egg. That piece of parchment belongs to Potter. I have seen it before, I recognize it! Potter is here! Potter, in his Invisibility Cloak!" *On the stairs. He must be on the stairs, and Moody can see him with that damned eye.* Snape stretched out his hands and began moving upwards.

Clearly that was not what Moody wanted, for he snapped, "There's nothing there, Snape! But I'll be happy to tell the headmaster how quickly your mind jumped to Harry Potter!"

"Meaning what?" Snape's head turned to look down the stairs at Moody.

"Meaning that Dumbledore's very interested to know who's got it in for that boy! And so am I, Snape . . . very interested . . ." Moody moved closer as he spoke, demanding eye contact.

The image that entered Snape's mind was of the Dark Lord as he'd been fourteen years earlier, and himself kneeling to his lord in a circle of Death Eaters. A memory, perhaps, wrenched from the mind of a Death Eater in Azkaban and now brought forward to intimidate Snape. Placed in a pensieve for the perusal of Cornelius Fudge, it was damning. Snape began to retreat.

"I merely thought that if Potter was wandering around after hours again . . . it's an unfortunate habit of his . . . he should be stopped. For . . . for his own safety."

"Ah, I see. Got Potter's best interests at heart, have you?"

"I think I will go back to bed," It was the order Moody had given him only minutes before. It was defeat. It was surrender. *At least for now, until I have a chance to talk to Dumbledore and figure out what this all means.*

"Best idea you've had all night." As Snape passed him going down the stairs, Moody stopped him with a hand on his arm and whispered, too low for Filch to hear, "You and I may be having our little chat earlier than expected, and not in Azkaban."

Snape swept past Moody, along the corridor and down the stairs to the entrance hall without looking back. Once in his own office, however, he realized that he was near collapse. The disturbingly accurate image, the threats,

the knowledge that the Marauder's map was now in Moody's possession and that he would never be alone — all of this was having a profound effect on the already distraught Snape's nerves.

I have to see Dumbledore tomorrow. He has to rein Moody in. I can't live like this.

The next morning Snape was waiting for Dumbledore outside the latter's griffin statue staircase well before breakfast. "You have to talk to him! You have to do something about him! You have to make him leave me alone!"

"Let me see, Severus. 'He' could be so many people. Are we discussing Professor Flitwick?"

Snape closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Moody!" he spat out. "Keep him away from me!"

"Come, Severus. I am hungry. Could you entertain me at breakfast with what Alastor has done now?"

"You're not taking this seriously." Snape stopped in the corridor and waited until Dumbledore also stopped and turned to look at him.

"You must admit, Severus, that so far your charges against Professor Moody have been highly vague. Do you think you might calm down enough to explain in more detail what has upset you so?"

"He's been searching my office. I believe he's taken things. And he says he's doing it on your orders."

"My orders? Not my orders. No. Come, Severus, let us go to my office now. We can have breakfast there in private."

"He'll know."

"And how will he know?"

"He has the map. He can watch all of us from the comfort of his own rooms, and he'll know we're talking."

"And what map, pray tell, is this?"

"James's map. The one Filch took from Sirius. But Potter had it, and then Lupin took it from me. But I found it in Lupin's room, except when they knocked me out, I don't know what happened to it, but now Potter had it, and Moody's got it."

"I see. You really must come and have breakfast in my office, Severus. You will feel better. It is a blood sugar thing. What exactly does this map do besides show direction?"

"It shows where every person in Hogwarts is at any given moment."

"Do you mean it shows you and me talking together in this corridor?"

"It does. The first time I saw it was back in the old days. Sirius was using it to ambush me outside the library, but someone snitched and I caught him instead. I told Filch, who confiscated it. The next thing I know is it's about fifteen years later and Potter has the map. Except Lupin insisted on taking it — Dark Arts teacher and all. Last night Potter had it again, but Moody summoned it and now he's got it. He can monitor everything I do. Everything."

By this time Dumbledore had lured Snape up the spiral staircase, and they were in his office. Dumbledore contacted the kitchen, and breakfast was magically sent up for the both of them. Snape was, in fact, quite hungry, and began to eat automatically as he and Dumbledore discussed the situation.

"Now, the first complaint you have is that Alastor is in possession of an enchanted artifact that will allow him to monitor your movements every moment. What is your next complaint?"

"He's been searching my office. Someone broke into my office last night. When I accused him of it, instead of denying it he told me that you'd given him permission — no, orders — to keep an eye on me."

"You know that is not true."

"That's what I told him. I told him you trusted me, and you wouldn't allow it. Then he said you were a trusting person who believed in second chances, but he knew a leopard couldn't change its spots, and that's when he made the mark hurt."

"Tell me that again."

"The mark on my arm. He made it hurt. He made it burn almost as if I were being summoned. He enjoyed it, too. I could tell by the look on his face."

"Did he say anything else?"

"Well he's always talked about interrogating me in Azkaban, but last night he said we'd have our 'little chat' soon, and not in Azkaban. I took it as a threat. That's what it felt like."

"I think I need to talk to Alastor. Thank you for advising me of all of this."

The next few weeks leading up to the second task in the Triwizard Tournament were a foretaste of eternal damnation. Moody was everywhere, ostentatiously letting Snape know that his movements were a matter of public record. Moody managed to meet Snape at the entrance to the Great Hall for every meal, to greet him and walk with him to the teachers' table. Moody popped out into the corridor at odd moments to almost bump into Snape and then, smiling, ask Snape's pardon for nearly running into him.

Snape was even unable to continue working with his Patronus. He went down to the lake shore one evening, only to glance up and see Moody watching him from the top of the hill. *I can't do this with him as a spectator.* Snape reluctantly returned to his own rooms.

"Do something!" Snape screamed at Dumbledore midway through February. "That man is driving me crazy! Take that map away from him!"

"He denies that he has it. He denies any knowledge of it."

"He's lying. Read him — you'll see he's lying."

"You know I cannot read him without his permission. I do not read you without yours."

"Ask Potter. You don't have to read Potter. That boy's face is an open book."

"I would prefer not bothering Potter while he is immersed in preparing for the second task."

Snape examined his hands, his fingernails, then looked around at the walls, the ceiling, anywhere but at Dumbledore. He was trying to think of something to say that he hadn't already said.

It was Dumbledore who spoke first. "Maybe there is something I can do. The next time you wish to work with the Patronus, send it first to me. I shall come down."

That evening Snape summoned the Patronus in his own room and sent it with a message to Dumbledore. Going down the hill to the lake, he glanced behind him and saw Moody leave the castle. By the time Snape reached the lake shore, Moody was on the overlooking cliff, staring down at him. Snape waited.

A moment later Dumbledore appeared and greeted Moody on the cliff. They spoke for a few minutes, then Dumbledore took Moody's arm and steered him back toward the castle, talking in an animated fashion all the while.

Things got better after that, as Moody came to realize that Dumbledore was monitoring him with the same tenacity that he was monitoring Snape. Snape began to get some of his privacy back.

In the week before the second task, Snape was descending from the library using the stairway between the fourth and second floors, the same staircase where he'd encountered Moody before. Moody suddenly strode along the corridor, stopped at the foot of the stairs, and looked up.

"I'd like to see you in my office for a minute, Snape," he said curtly, then turned and walked away.

Don't kill him. Don't kill him. At least not here. Somewhere where it'll be harder to find the body, maybe.

Following behind, Snape saw Moody enter his office. He arrived at the door a moment later and put his hand to the latch. It opened quietly. As Snape entered, he saw Moody step away from the wall. Moody was covering something that hung there, something that might be a mirror or a painting.

Curious. Why would he do that?

"Hello, Snape. What can I do for you?"

"You just asked me to come here."

"I did? Odd. I can't imagine why I'd do that. Are you sure?"

Furious, but not knowing what to do short of physical violence, Snape turned and left, slamming Moody's door behind him. *What was that all about? Why would he want me to come to his office just to dismiss me? And what was the thing on the wall that he was covering?*

By the time Snape got used to the fact that Moody was no longer hounding him, the second task of the Triwizard Tournament was on them. The morning of February 24, Snape stood on the hill looking down as the spectator stands were set up on the far side of the lake. He had absolutely no interest in the competition whatsoever.

What he did realize, had realized for several days, was that he hadn't done a thorough inventory of his office since before the last break-in. He didn't even know what Moody had taken. *That's what happens when you let yourself be intimidated and manipulated by someone like Moody. And if Dumbledore had asked, you wouldn't have had an answer for him.*

Almost the whole school was now in the stands, the champions of the three schools were being briefed, and Snape left the cliff top to go back into the castle. At which point, he was nearly knocked down by a panicky Harry Potter, who shot out of the door of the castle and pelted downhill at full speed. The boy hadn't even noticed Snape.

Why is he late? You'd think he didn't care. Snape reentered the castle and went directly to his office in the dungeon.

Boomslang skin and gillyweed? Who would possibly want both boomslang skin and gillyweed? The boomslang could be for more Polyjuice potion, and tie into the robbery at the beginning of the term. But gillyweed? Then Snape made the connection and could have slapped himself for being so obtuse. *The task today! It's underwater. One of the champions stole the gillyweed. Three guesses who!*

Snape settled himself to think it through. *Potter was out the night that*

someone was in my office. And he was also on the staircase. But why didn't he just continue up to Gryffindor Tower? Why stop there? Filch wouldn't have known. I wouldn't have known. He probably wanted the egg back. But why have the egg with him to begin with?

Then a thought occurred that almost made Snape laugh. What if high and mighty Potter got his foot stuck in the step that only catches first years? Made him drop his egg... Probably not, though it's a sweet thought. Still doesn't explain why he had the egg with him, though.

Or why Moody didn't come out right away. He should've been there before me, maybe before Filch. Perhaps he knew Potter was going after the gillyweed and wanted to stay clear in case of trouble. Does that mean Potter stole the Boomslang skin for Moody? Or is Potter planning his own little transformation?

One thing's for certain. Moody 'd never seen the map before. Otherwise he wouldn't have drawn attention to it. But Moody kept it. Kept it to use against me. That must've upset Potter. What does Moody have over Potter to get Potter to give in like that? Of course, with a fourteen-year-old it doesn't take much.

Noise in the corridor informed Snape that the competition was long over. He went out to mingle and hear what had happened. Potter, it seemed, had won and was now tied overall with Diggory. Good news for Hogwarts. What was far more interesting was that Potter'd been able to swim underwater because he managed to grow gills.

Did he now? That part's confirmed. Potter took the gillyweed. Next Potions class I'm going to have to find a way to talk to Potter and put the fear of God into him. How to do that?

As Potions master, Snape was required to keep certain things on hand. Things like Veritaserum. Dumbledore had never used it, but since it took a month to make, it had to be ready for use at any time. Snape filled a tiny vial with the clear liquid and carried it with him for the next several days.

Snape got his opportunity during the next class with the fourth year Slytherins and Gryffindors. That horrid busybody Rita Skeeter had written a scathing indictment of Granger in the latest copy of Witch Weekly, and Granger had the misfortune to be reading it after the lesson started. To make matters worse — though for Snape at that moment it was better — the three musketeers were discussing the article as well. In audible voices. Snape crept up on them.

"Fascinating though your social life undoubtedly is, Miss Granger, I must ask you not to discuss it in my class." The sight of all three of them, Granger,

Potter, and Weasley, jumping at the sound of his quiet voice was rather gratifying to Snape.

"Ah . . . reading magazines under the table as well?" As he spoke it occurred to Snape that Potter, knowing nothing of legilimency or occlumency, would project thoughts much better if he were angry. "Oh, but of course . . . Potter has to keep up with his press cuttings . . ."

Now there is something about reading an article, any article, with a clinical tone lightly tinged with disbelief that renders that article highly amusing to the listeners and embarrassing to the subject. Snape picked up the magazine and started, "Harry Potter's Secret Heartache . . ." and watched the faces of the trio grow more flushed and emotional as he continued to the end. "How very touching."

Then Snape separated the three, taking advantage of the opportunity to place Potter next to his own desk, where he could talk to the boy more privately.

Snape walked back to his desk, and Potter followed. As he watched Potter unload his cauldron and then sit, sullenly pounding his scarab beetles, Snape was able to focus on the fact that he absolutely loathed the boy.

You arrogant, puffed up little popularity hound. You don't care how many people you could injure in your desperate quest for fame and attention. You wouldn't confide in McGonagall, so instead of facing four adult wizards trained in combat, the weakened Dark Lord had to deal only with an eleven-year-old and was able to escape, and your friend Weasley's life was put in danger. Then, when you should have gone to Dumbledore with a suspicious enchanted object, you chose to play with it instead, and nearly got Miss Weasley and yourself killed. You walked starry-eyed into the trap of a killer and a werewolf because you chose to trust the judgment of a man who couldn't remember what phase of the moon it was. And now the hubris that brought you to tricking your way into a competition beyond your skills has got your sticky little fingers pawing through my office and my belongings.

The rest of the class had quieted down and was concentrating on the assignment, and Snape leaned forward, whispering so that only Potter could hear. "All this press attention seems to have inflated your already overlarge head, Potter. You might be laboring under the delusion that the entire wizarding world is impressed with you, but I don't care how many times your picture appears in the papers. To me, Potter, you are nothing but a nasty little boy who considers rules to be beneath him."

Potter pretended not to hear, but the scarab beetles he was so obstinately

pounding had long since turned to powder. Snape continued. "So I give you fair warning, Potter — pint-sized celebrity or not — if I catch you breaking into my office one more time . . ."

Potter lashed out then. "I haven't been anywhere near your office!"

Snape and Potter sat, face to face and eye to eye. *If I were a better legilimens, I'd try to read him.* "Don't lie to me. Boomslang skin. Gillyweed. Both come from my private stores, and I know who stole them." The flicker of guilt in Potter's eyes was unmistakable. *Even if you didn't take the ingredients, you know who did, you sneaking little thief.*

Then Potter lied outright. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You were out of bed on the night my office was broken into! I know it, Potter! Now, Mad-Eye Moody might have joined your fan club, but I will not tolerate your behavior! One more nighttime stroll into my office, Potter, and you will pay!"

Snape brought out the little vial he'd filled earlier. "Do you know what this is, Potter? It is Veritaserum — a Truth Potion so powerful that three drops would have you spilling your innermost secrets for this entire class to hear. Now, the use of this potion is controlled by very strict Ministry guidelines. But unless you watch your step, you might just find that my hand slips right over your evening pumpkin juice. And then, Potter . . . then we'll find out whether you've been in my office or not."

Potter didn't respond. He couldn't look at Snape, but turned back to his class assignment and worked cutting up the second ingredient, ginger roots. The boy clearly had a lot to hide.

There was a knock on the door, and Snape called "Enter" automatically. The one who entered, to Snape's great annoyance, was Karkaroff. The man was twitching like a dog with fleas and talking through clenched teeth. *Right, Igor. Let's hide from the whole school the fact that you're nervous as a cat on a hot griddle.*

"We need to talk," Karkaroff said.

It would never occur to this idiot that half of these students are children of Death Eaters. "I'll talk to you after my lesson, Karkaroff."

"I want to talk now, while you can't slip off, Severus. You've been avoiding me."

And you have just illustrated why. Do you see Potter sitting right next to this desk? "After the lesson!"

But Karkaroff wouldn't leave. He hovered like a bat behind Snape's chair,

a subject of intense curiosity for every student in the room. Snape wanted to hit the man. At last the class was over and the students filed out.

Rising and turning to face Karkaroff, Snape demanded, "What's so urgent?"

"This." And Karkaroff rolled up his sleeve to show Snape the mark on his arm. "Well? Do you see? It's never been this clear, never since . . ."

Snape was horrified. Here, in an open, unsecured classroom, Karkaroff was talking about the Dark Lord and uncovering the mark. "Put it away!" he snapped, and looked around to see who might be watching. That was when Snape saw that Potter was still in the room, huddled on the floor listening.

"But you must have noticed . . ."

"We can talk later, Karkaroff! Potter! What are you doing?"

Then Potter was talking about armadillo bile, and Karkaroff was stomping out of the room, and a furious Snape was trying to cope with the knowledge that Potter — arrogant, indiscreet, self-centered, undisciplined Potter — might now have something he could threaten Snape with.

The following Saturday was a Hogsmeade excursion, and this time Snape was on supervisory duty. Concerned about what Potter might guess after overhearing his conversation with Karkaroff, Snape planned to keep an eye on the boy. Potter, Weasley, and Granger left the castle together after lunch on a surprisingly warm day for the time of year, and they were carrying Potter's book bag filled with — Snape didn't know what it was filled with, but it filled him with curiosity.

He managed to keep an eye on the trio as far as Gladrag's Wizardwear, which the three entered, then Snape was suddenly distracted by Karkaroff.

"We have to talk!" Karkaroff hissed.

"Are you following me? You know, the more you keep tagging after and accosting me in odd places, the more people are going to get the idea that you have a problem." Both were speaking quietly.

"You can't ignore this. You can't pretend it isn't happening. Look at your own mark. I swear it must be . . ."

"If you think I'm rolling up my sleeve in the center of Hogsmeade, you're a bigger idiot than I imagined. What makes you think I'm ignoring it or pretending anything? You decide for yourself, Igor, and I decide for me. If you're going to run, I can't help you. And I'm certainly not joining you."

"Severus, you can't . . ."

"Well, look who's here!" Moody's booming voice called from across the street. He walked over to Snape and Karkaroff, who were now silent, and

lowered his voice. "Class reunion for the graduates of Death Eater secondary school? Aren't you being a bit obvious? Might as well hang up a sign as stand together in the middle of Hogsmeade."

"Not meaning to be rude or anything," replied Snape, "but I was just leaving. I need to step inside for a breath of fresher air." He walked back in the direction of the Hogwarts gate. After a moment, looking back, he saw Karkaroff leave Moody as well, and Moody went into the Three Broomsticks.

Snape returned as quickly as he could to the spot outside Gladrags, but the three students were gone. He didn't see them again until after four o'clock as they returned to Hogwarts. The book bag was now clearly empty.

The next morning after breakfast Snape went out onto the lawn. Glancing up by chance, he happened to see two owls leave the owlery together. They were carrying something heavy between them and flying in the direction of Hogsmeade. *I wonder what that's about.*

Work increased as the Easter break approached and the spring term neared its end. Then they were in the summer term, and the year was flying quickly by. *Funny how the beginning of the year seems to move so slowly and the end so fast.* Snape was busy with his own preparations.

Images were now in place, most openly accessible, others carefully placed behind hidden doors, others buried down so deep that Snape himself had trouble pulling them out. He was getting quite proficient with the Patronus as well. He now controlled it sufficiently so that he didn't need to summon it independently. Dumbledore showed him how to conjure it nonverbally as a messenger, complete with message, and the Patronus would shoot out of the end of his wand on its way, misty and distorted, but still recognizable to Snape as a fox. Finally, he'd figured out and practiced his story lines. He was fairly sure he had an answer for every question the Dark Lord might ask.

The only remaining problem was at Hogwarts, and the frustration of it was maddening. How had Moody caused the Dark Mark to burn? Why had he stolen ingredients for Polyjuice potion and who had he transformed himself into? Why had he summoned Snape into his office that day and then pretended he hadn't? Why was he now so vindictive when all those years before he'd seemed almost . . . friendly?

It was nearing the end of May, and Snape still had no answers to these questions.

C H A P T E R F O R T Y - S I X

M A S K S A N D U N M A S K I N G S

It was dark . . . dark . . . and the floor beneath his knees was cold. Hooded figures stood around him, hemming him in, menacing . . . Red eyes bored into his own, dead eyes, eyes that steal your soul.

"Read him!" the red eyes cried, and Moody stepped forward, grinning lasciviously. The blue enchanted eye began to rotate like a drill. "You be sure to tell me if you ever decide to retire. The guest room's been ready for some time," the eye sneered at him as it drilled into his brain. Then the eye grinned and bared its teeth. He looked to the Dark Lord for help, but the Dark Lord was aging, growing a beard, becoming Dumbledore, who shrank and got younger and became Potter, and it was Potter drilling into his brain.

"Tea?" Potter said, and handed him a cup, but Bella held the cup, and they were sitting in a comfortable room with soft chairs and a fire.

An angry young man with blond hair and freckles sat opposite him. "Whoever is giving them information should be punished. Whoever tries to leave . . . punished. Whoever isn't punished . . . punished." The young man leered at him. "I thought I might interest you in that vacation I'm always on about. Right now it's a bargain."

He looked at his tea, which was a gray-colored sludge. "I can't drink this," he said.

"Of course you can, dear," said Bella, "we got it from your office. You can be Potter."

"I don't want to be Potter. I want to be me."

"Don't be silly. Everyone knows you have to be Potter."

They gave him a huge water skin full of the gray sludge, and he had to drag it around with him, drinking from it all the time to stay Potter. Moody held the neck of the skin to his mouth, cackling "You never know. You never know. Look for me in the gloamin'."

Then he was looking — in a mirror. Potter's face looked back at him. "Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who does the Dark Lord fear most of all?" Potter's face began to narrow, and hair to grow, and he was looking at himself in the mirror. The Dark Lord watched him from behind, saying, "He will be killed, of course."

* * *

Snape's eyes opened wide in the darkness. Killed . . . of course. He listened for sounds of them coming for him, hearing nothing but silence. Slowly he remembered. *I'm in bed. In my own room. It was a dream.*

It was about four o'clock. Unable to go back to sleep, Snape got up and fixed a cup of tea, then sat in his office by the fire. It wasn't a real fire, since it was getting too warm during the day to have one, but staring into flames, even magical ones, now helped Snape think. He was trying to recall the ephemeral, wispy strands of the dream that had wakened him.

Potter was in it. I had to be Potter by drinking. . . Pieces began to click into place. What if all my problems with Moody are caused by the fact that it isn't Moody? Maybe he doesn't need Polyjuice potion to turn into someone else. Maybe he needs it to stay Moody! Moody was attacked the night before he was supposed to come here. What if the attack was successful?

Of course, that raised two more problems. Where was the real Moody, and who was impersonating him? *Who's been missing since before Christmas? Who went missing just before someone started stealing boomslang skin and bicorn horn from me? Bartemius Crouch.* Except that Crouch and Moody had both been at the ceremony welcoming Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, and choosing the champions. *Okay, so there are holes in the theory.*

Still, it explained so much. Crouch had always been a fanatic hunter of Death Eaters. He'd sent many to Azkaban without trial including, now that Snape thought about it, Sirius Black. He'd gotten Karkaroff, but Karkaroff managed to be released shortly after. He'd tried to get Snape, but Dumbledore had stood in his way. He did get his own son, who died in Azkaban, and he'd been more than a little disturbed ever since.

What if the Death Eater demonstration at the Quidditch World Cup pushed him too far? Didn't Percy Weasley say at the Yule Ball that he hadn't been right since then? What if he finally went off the deep end, knowing the Dark Lord is getting stronger, and Karkaroff and I would be in the same place at the same time? That would mean 'Moody's' threats aren't idle — he really is after us.

It still left the problem of Crouch and Moody being in the Great Hall together for the Goblet of Fire's decision, and later in November for the first task. Crouch and Moody had both been there for the first task. *But if Crouch can become Moody, so can someone else. Maybe someone else became 'Moody' at the beginning, and Crouch took over later. Which means instead of accounting for the actions of one crazy person, I have to explain two. More holes — can this theory really fly?*

I need to talk to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore was not at breakfast, and the reason was soon apparent. Preparations were going forward for the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Ludo Bagman was in and out between Hogwarts and the Ministry of Magic, and he seemed always to be closeted with Dumbledore during those times when Snape didn't have classes to teach. As the day wore on, Snape became more and more frustrated.

One of the problems was that he couldn't pin down his new theory. At times it seemed so clear and obvious that he couldn't imagine why he hadn't thought of it before. At other times he could see nothing but the holes and contradictions, and started to wonder if he should even mention it to Dumbledore. Snape was becoming so obsessed with the idea that Moody was Bartemius Crouch that he was having trouble concentrating on his classes.

Moody wasn't at breakfast, and Snape wondered if he was with Dumbledore and Bagman. He did show up just before lunch, and Snape on a sudden whim greeted him, "Top o' the morning to you, Moody me boy."

"You're cheerful today."

"It's a nice day."

"I've seen worse and will again. So will you."

"Pleasant thought. It just cheers a body up to talk to you."

Moody stared at Snape thoughtfully. "Insanity doesn't keep you out of Azkaban."

"Nor does innocence I understand. Have a nice lunch."

"You're not staying?"

"Not this time. But I'll be looking for you in the gloamin'."

Moody didn't reply. Shaking his head, he stumped off toward the high table.

Now, does that mean that he just doesn't remember, or that he doesn't want to banter, or that he's not the same person I had that conversation with back in August? Would Moody forget calling me 'boyo'? There was no definitive answer to that question

After supper, Bagman disappeared with a work crew from the Ministry in the direction of the Quidditch field. They were preparing something there for the Tournament. At that point, Snape started trying to see Dumbledore in earnest. He had no success whatsoever, since he kept running into Moody.

Going from the Great Hall upstairs, Snape was hailed from behind. "Aren't you going in the wrong direction?" Moody was grinning on the steps below him.

"It depends on where I'm going," Snape replied, and on the first floor turned towards the hospital wing. Once Moody continued upstairs to his office, Snape took another staircase, only to be met at the landing.

"We do seem to be running into each other tonight," Moody chuckled.

"Interesting coincidence," Snape answered.

Snape returned downstairs to think for a while then, around nine o'clock, started back up to the headmaster's tower. Moody wasn't waiting for him. *Odd for him to give up so easily. Unless he was just trying to irritate me, or has something more important to do.*

The interview with Dumbledore didn't go well.

"I understand your concern, Severus, but really the only evidence you have is a dream, and the fact that a retired auror doesn't remember snippets of a casual conversation you had ten months ago. It is hardly a case. And since both Moody and Crouch were here together twice, you need to account for that. If you cannot, I can hardly accuse anyone based on what you have so far."

"But Headmaster, what about the missing ingredients? What about his sudden change in behavior towards me?"

"All explainable in less . . . unusual ways."

"What about his ability to control the dark mark?"

"I will admit that is disturbing, but might be explained in some other fashion. Now if you will excuse me, I am busy with another matter."

Exasperated and deeply disappointed, Snape went to the door. As his hand touched the latch, he turned back to Dumbledore. Dumbledore stood in front of a black cabinet. Snape glimpsed the edge of what looked like a shallow stone basin, then left the office.

At the foot of the staircase, the hidden door slid open just in time to let Snape see Potter running hard in the other direction.

"Potter!" he shouted, and the boy skidded to a halt, then faced him. "What are you doing here, Potter?"

Potter came running back. "I need to see Professor Dumbledore! It's Mr. Crouch . . . he's just turned up . . . he's in the forest . . . he's asking . . ."

How does he know about Crouch? Can he . . . ? "What is this rubbish? What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Crouch! From the Ministry! He's ill or something — he's in the forest, he wants to see Dumbledore!"

The information, if true, shattered Snape's own theory. If Crouch were in the forest, ill, looking for Dumbledore, then he couldn't be Moody. Snape suddenly wanted the chance to check this before Dumbledore found out.

"The headmaster is busy, Potter."

Potter's voice rose to a scream, "I've got to tell Dumbledore!"

"Didn't you hear me, Potter?"

The boy was beside himself. "Look, Crouch isn't right . . . he's . . . he's out of his mind . . . he says he wants to warn . . ."

Behind Snape the door to the hidden staircase slid open, and Dumbledore stood watching the two. "Is there a problem?" he asked.

Potter immediately blurted out his story, and Dumbledore exchanged a quick, sharp glance with Snape. Snape looked down.

"Lead the way," Dumbledore told Potter, and the two were gone.

Snape was furious. Furious at Potter, furious at Dumbledore, furious at himself for being such a fool, and furious at fate for delivering Crouch to Hogwarts's doorstep at precisely this moment. Then, as he made his way down the staircases, Snape suddenly had another thought.

Was that why Moody didn't follow me that last time? Maybe something went wrong with the Polyjuice potion and he turned back into Crouch. Maybe that's Moody and Crouch out there in the forest, half crazy.

Snape ran down the rest of the stairs and out onto the lawn. It was dark. There was no moon, and the stars were half obscured by clouds. Snape looked down from the top of the hill toward the forest. He had no idea where Potter and Dumbledore had gone. Then suddenly a streak of silver light left the trees and sped straight towards Hagrid's hut.

They've found something. That was Dumbledore's patronus. Whatever it is, they need Hagrid's help.

Snape debated with himself a moment, then returned to the castle. It was too dark to see anything, and he couldn't go down. After their heated conversation earlier, he was sure Dumbledore would get the wrong impression if it appeared Snape was trying to interfere. *If he wants or needs me, he can send for me.*

The next morning it was as if nothing had happened. Moody was at breakfast, Karkaroff and Madam Maxime were angry about something, and there was no sign of the mysterious Crouch. It was as if the previous night hadn't happened.

Snape was going toward his classroom after breakfast when Dumbledore came from behind and walked with him.

"I understand you had a conversation with Moody last night after I left with Potter."

Snape stopped to stare at Dumbledore, but Dumbledore took his elbow and steered him across the entrance hall toward the dungeon. "I take it that comes as a complete surprise to you."

"I didn't see Moody at all, and I certainly didn't speak to him."

"He met us down in the forest. Crouch had been there — both Potter and Krum saw him — but he has now vanished. Moody arrived very quickly after, and said you had told him about Crouch being in the forest. Now why would he say that if it was not true?"

"Headmaster, I have no idea."

"Thank you, Severus. All of the events of last night have given me quite a bit to think about."

Whether it was Dumbledore's doing, or mere coincidence, or nothing more than Snape's subjective perception, but the next few weeks went very smoothly and quietly. To begin with, of course, everyone was preparing for exams. Teachers were racing through the curriculum, students were studying frantically, and the whole school was like a string of racehorses in the stretch. *Interesting how frantic intensity can have a pacifying effect.*

The second element contributing to calm was that Dumbledore seemed to have replaced Snape with Moody in the Triwizard Tournament. Snape was no longer called in on planning sessions, but Moody seemed to be spending large parts of his free time in Dumbledore's office.

Snape did not mind this in the least. Firstly, it gave him more time for his classes and the upcoming exams. Secondly, it was an indication that Dumbledore wanted to keep Moody on a close leash. The missing Crouch had not yet turned up, and Snape was pleased to see that Dumbledore was not going to let Moody prowl around on his own.

The third thing was quite unexpected. For reasons unknown to Snape, Potter decided to spend the last weeks virtually locked inside the castle and surrounded by friends who doubled as guards. The vast difference between this and his behavior the year before made Snape almost believe that the

transition through puberty actually brought a minutely measurable increase in common sense. Almost.

All through June, the Quidditch field was changing. Hedges planted there at the end of May towered yards above the head by the time of the third challenge. Snape was at a loss to understand why the maze had to be so tall, unless it was meant to keep the spectators from seeing anything of the progress of the champions within.

That's even more boring than a game of Quidditch with a good seeker. At least the suspense will last longer.

Hogwarts had been invaded by Ministry types over the Crouch business, and now, exams over and at the very end of the term, they were back for the third task of the Tournament. The families of the champions were invited to the school for the event. Snape was looking forward to meeting the Dursleys until he found out that the Weasleys had substituted for Potter's family instead. Though he did not know them well, he had considerable respect for any parents that had managed to survive Bill, Charlie, Fred, George, and Ron. Still, he wasn't sure they would have anything in common for the conducting of a conversation.

The dinner at the start of the third task was a gala banquet. Many of the teachers gave up their seats at the high table to accommodate dignitaries and families, and Snape was one of them. Sitting at Slytherin's table, it took Snape a half hour to realize that Moody was not in the hall.

Snape looked around, started eating, lost track, looked again a half hour later, and Moody was there at the Gryffindor table as if he'd been there all evening. *When did he come in? I should have brickbats dropped on my head for a month of Sundays for not noticing!*

* * *

Potter and Diggory entered the maze. Then Krum, and then Delacour. The suspense was . . . boring. Not for everyone, of course. Family members who watched the seconds tick endlessly by on a clock, while they were reduced to staring at an overgrown hedge, might nonetheless feel the tension, but Snape sincerely wished he were elsewhere. He rather thought a large number of the spectators agreed. Minutes grew into a quarter of an hour with no change.

Then there were muffled shrieks, the Beauxbatons girl crying out, and sparks in the air. Wizards went into the maze to assist her. A little later,

another voice that sounded like Diggory, but the wizards that followed the sparks brought out Krum instead. And then for a long while there was nothing.

Suddenly, with the terrible fury of a bolt of lightning, Snape was summoned! From ease to searing pain, from calm to mind-numbing panic, was but an instant of time. The mark on his arm flamed with the intensity of volcanic lava. *I must go! I must go! I must go to the Dark Lord... I must surrender myself to him... I must leave... now... NOW!*

The knowledge of his other duties stopped Snape and, pain notwithstanding, he hunkered down to wait. A glance at Karkaroff across the stands told him instantly that Igor had felt the beckoning, too. *Run, Igor! Run now! Safety comes only with a strong heart and a good story. You have neither. I hope to God I have at least one of the two. I wish you all the luck I can spare.*

It was then, and only then, that the drama of the maze touched Snape. For it was then that he realized how the maze was the center of everything. It was then that he realized why Potter's name had been drawn from the Goblet of Fire. *The Dark Lord is summoning Potter — has summoned Potter — Potter is with the Dark Lord and we are all, all of us, in danger.*

Snape staggered to his feet in the face of the blinding pain and tried to find Dumbledore.

Around Snape the eager spectators were still waiting for the outcome of the competition, and few even noticed him as he groped his way past them. Dumbledore knew, however, that something was wrong. He was already moving in Snape's direction.

"What has happened?" he whispered urgently as he helped support Snape toward the judging box.

"He has... summoned... us... I... have to... go..."

"Can you tell me where?"

"South... a ways, but... not too far... probably... Yorkshire..."

"Try to locate the spot. It is important. Lives are at stake."

Snape nodded and allowed Dumbledore to guide him to a seat. The pain and urgency of the mark was beginning to abate, and fear was taking its place. *I didn't answer the summons. Even if he didn't suspect me before, he will now.*

Dumbledore left to consult with Ludo Bagman and Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic. Snape was trying to focus his thoughts and pinpoint the location he might apparate to if he responded to the summons. Everything else was a surreal background of normalcy, as if two separate worlds were cohabiting the same space.

Then, after what seemed an eternity, people began to scream and shout. Potter had suddenly appeared at the edge of the maze, though the circumstances of his arrival were hidden from Snape. There was an electric pause, and then the tone of the screams changed from excitement to fear. Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong.

Snape struggled to his feet again and moved toward the front of the stands. People pushed forward to surround Potter. Through the pandemonium it slowly began to dawn on Snape that Cedric Diggory was dead, that somehow both Potter and Diggory had been transported to the Dark Lord, and that Potter had returned alive, but Diggory was dead.

Trying to cope with the magnitude of the thought, that a Hogwarts student had died, Snape sat down on the bleachers. His arm was throbbing and his head spinning. A form hovered over him.

"Are you all right?" McGonagall asked.

"I've been better. What's happening?"

"Albus is with Cedric's parents."

"Where's Potter?"

"Don't worry. He's in good hands. Alastor's taken him up to the castle."

It was the shot of pure adrenaline he needed. Snape rose quickly, seizing McGonagall's arm. "Get Dumbledore. Tell him Moody has Potter. He'll understand. I'm starting up to the castle now."

"But Severus..."

"Move, woman!" An instant of shock on McGonagall's face, then she spun around to search for Dumbledore while Snape pushed his way through the crowd toward Hogwarts hill.

Fighting his way upward through gradually diminishing waves of dizziness, Snape reached the castle just as Dumbledore and McGonagall caught up to him. Dumbledore now in the lead, the three raced up the stairs to the second floor, to Moody's office. At Dumbledore's command, the door crashed open, and Dumbledore's cry of "*Stupefy!*" sent Moody hurtling against the far wall to slump to the floor, unmoving. Snape took in the picture of Potter sitting in a chair and Moody lying on the floor, but his attention was immediately drawn to something else.

There on the wall was the mirror from his dream. Only it wasn't a mirror, it was a *Foe-Glass*. *He's known all along that I was his enemy. He called me to his office that day to confirm it. But I work for Dumbledore. Why would the Foe-Glass think me the enemy of either Alastor Moody or Bartemius Crouch?*

McGonagall was trying to get Potter to his feet to go to the hospital wing,

but Dumbledore wouldn't allow it. "... he needs to understand... He needs to know who has put him through the ordeal he has suffered tonight, and why. This is not Alastor Moody..."

Turning to Snape and McGonagall, Dumbledore gave each a task. McGonagall was to fetch a dog from Hagrid's hut, Snape to bring Veritaserum and a house-elf. Neither questioned the orders. They were off at once down the stairs.

In his office, Snape quickly seized the small bottle of Veritaserum. Dumbledore would decide how much to use. Then he headed out of the dungeon and into the passage leading to the kitchens. The house-elves were bustling around, cleaning up the last of the dinner and beginning the preparations for breakfast.

Snape paused, then said to the crew in general, "The headmaster would like to speak to an elf named Winky."

The disgusted looks told him that Winky was not in good favor with the rest. After some consultation and with considerable effort, they pushed forward a slovenly, untidy elf who appeared to be... tipsy? Snape was shocked, but decided Dumbledore must know what he was doing. "Come with me," he said to the unsteady elf. "You're not in any trouble, but the headmaster needs you."

They went more slowly than Snape would have wished as she followed him up the stairs to the second floor. McGonagall was coming down from Dumbledore's office at the same time. Snape suddenly remembered McGonagall's assignment. *She went to get a dog, a 'black' dog?* Connections formed in his brain, but their import eluded him.

The dog was forgotten when he entered the office. On the floor where Moody should have been was a much younger man with blond hair and freckles. Also from the dream. And though fourteen years had passed since Snape last saw him, he recognized him immediately. "Crouch?" he gasped, stopping dead in the doorway. "Barty Crouch?"

"Good heavens," was all McGonagall could say, but the elf darted forward at once.

"Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you doing here! You is killed him! You is killed him! You is killed Master's son!"

"He is simply stunned, Winky. Step aside please. Severus, you have the potion?"

As Snape handed Dumbledore the bottle, their eyes met for an instant. *He*

has been reporting on me. Dumbledore's voice in his head replied, *I fear it may be so.* Then Dumbledore gave Crouch the Veritaserum and said, "*Ennervate.*"

And so the story came out. How Mr. and Mrs. Crouch had saved their son from Azkaban to condemn him to a prison of another kind. How Bertha Jorkins had learned the family secret and revealed it to the Dark Lord. How Barty had conjured the Dark Mark at the Quidditch World Cup, and how he'd been rescued by the Dark Lord and Wormtail. How he'd taken Moody's place to guide Potter through the Triwizard Tournament, and how he'd killed his own father when Bartemius Crouch escaped from the Dark Lord.

When the tale was told, Dumbledore sent Snape out to find Cornelius Fudge and bring him up to hear Barty Crouch's confession. McGonagall stood guard over Crouch while Dumbledore took Potter up to his office.

It took little time to find Fudge, but considerably more to attract his attention. Snape at first merely told the Minister that Professor Dumbledore wished to see him in the castle.

"A little busy now, Professor. We have to keep order down here first."

"With all due respect, Minister, the matter is rather urgent."

Fudge pulled Snape to one side. "Give me the gist of it. What's bothering Dumbledore?"

"He's discovered that You-Know-Who has had an agent at Hogwarts. The man is in custody now, and the headmaster would like you to interview him."

Fudge looked shocked, then worried. "An agent of You-Know-Who? Where is he?"

"The Defense Against the Dark Arts office."

"Are you sure it's safe to go up there?"

"Perfectly, sir. The man is more than adequately restrained."

"I shall be the judge of my own safety. Go wait for me on the hill. I'll get a guard and join you."

Snape did as he was told. Fudge took somewhat longer than he expected, but when the Minister approached, Snape understood why. The deadly, soul-freezing cold of a dementor preceded the Minister, and Snape shrank from it as one already familiar with a dementor's touch must.

"Minister, the headmaster does not wish dementors inside the castle. He doesn't want them on the grounds."

"My personal safety requires the presence of a guard. I'm sure Dumbledore will see that. If I remember, the Dark Arts office is on the second floor."

Snape tried to stop Fudge, but he was unable to face the dementor.

Instead he followed the Minister and his guard, still insisting that the dementor should not be in the building. When they reached the office, Fudge didn't even knock. He raised the latch and walked in to confront a surprised McGonagall.

The dementor moved fastest. At the first sniff of Barty Crouch, the thing sped across the room and attached itself to him. An instant later it had sucked out his soul, leaving a living but useless shell of a man sitting on the office floor.

McGonagall exploded. "How dare you allow that... thing into Hogwarts!" she screamed. "You have no right to come in here with it! You've ruined everything! Have you any idea how much damage you've done!" She wheeled on Snape. "And you! You couldn't stop him from bringing it into the castle? You didn't have the nerve to stand up to him? What use are you, anyway!"

Snape couldn't respond, but Fudge tried to. "Now Minerva, you know I have no intention of getting in Dumbledore's way..."

"You do a fine job of it for someone with good intentions! Get that thing out of here!"

Fudge hurriedly left the office, went with the dementor downstairs, and returned shortly thereafter, having sent it out of the grounds. The furious McGonagall continued berating Snape. "Why Dumbledore thinks he can depend on you is beyond me. I thought you had more backbone than that."

"It was a dementor, Minerva. You don't understand."

McGonagall paused in her tirade. "I'd forgotten. One of them went for you last year didn't it? Well, Dumbledore is going to hear about Fudge. He must be in the hospital. We're going down there now."

On their way down to the first floor they met Fudge coming up from the entrance hall. "Out of my way, you poor excuse for a..."

"Please try to calm down, Minerva."

With McGonagall in the lead, and Snape bringing up the rear, they headed for the hospital wing. By the time they got there, though, Fudge had moved ahead.

"I agree it was regrettable, but all the same, Minerva..." he said.

"You should never have brought it inside the castle! When Dumbledore finds out..."

Then they were in the hospital wing, facing an irate Molly Weasley with members of her family around Potter's bed. "Where's Dumbledore?" Fudge demanded.

As Mrs. Weasley was protesting, Dumbledore entered behind them. At his question, McGonagall tried to explain, but she was too upset to be fully coherent.

"When we told Mr. Fudge . . ." and Snape quietly described what had happened, punctuated by McGonagall's furious additions and Fudge's protests.

"By all accounts he is no loss!"

"But he cannot now give testimony, Cornelius . . ."

And there began a scene that to Snape seemed like something out of a bad dream, for Dumbledore tried calmly to explain that the events of the evening had been arranged by a Dark Lord now fully returned to his body, while Fudge was determined not to believe that it was anything except the hysterical ravings of a delusional boy. Eventually Potter joined in and shouted at the Minister, "I saw the Death Eaters! I can give you their names! Lucius Malfoy . . .!"

Snape started. *Lucius was there? Who else do I have to face?* He noticed Potter glanced at him strangely and turned back to Fudge. Potter kept blurt-ing out names. "Macnair! Avery . . . Nott . . . Crabbe . . . Goyle . . ." It was useful information.

And still Fudge refused to accept, refused to consider making changes to adjust to the new, dangerous situation, refused to believe there was any danger at all. Clearly Dumbledore and Fudge were at a parting of their ways. Fudge had to be convinced, and Snape did something he'd been trying to avoid for fifteen years. He pulled back the sleeve of his robe, knowing that every person in the room would now share his secret, and held his arm, with its hideous skull and serpent tattoo, in front of Fudge's face.

"There. There. The Dark Mark. It's not as clear as it was an hour or so ago, when it burned black, but you can still see it. Every Death Eater had the sign burned into him by the Dark Lord. It was a means of distinguishing one another, and his means of summoning us to him . . . Why do you think Karkaroff fled tonight? We both felt the Mark burn. We both knew he had returned . . ."

It was too much for Fudge. "I don't know what you and your staff are playing at . . . I will be in touch tomorrow . . ." and he left Potter's winnings and strode from the room.

As Fudge disappeared from sight, Snape knew that others in the room were now staring at him. McGonagall and Pomfrey, Molly, Bill and Ron Weasley, Granger, Potter. All those years of living a relatively normal life

were gone. Even if the Dark Lord were destroyed, nothing would ever be the same.

Dumbledore lost no time. Bill Weasley was sent at once to his father in the Ministry of Magic to try to organize opposition to the Dark Lord despite the attitude of Cornelius Fudge. McGonagall was sent to bring both Hagrid and Madame Maxime to Dumbledore's office. Madame Pomfrey was dispatched to the Dark Arts office to look after the house-elf Winky. When they had left, Dumbledore checked the door to be sure the remaining people were not disturbed. These were himself, Snape, Molly Weasley, Potter, Ron Weasley, and Granger.

"Now," said Dumbledore, "it is time for two of our number to recognize each other for what they are. Sirius . . . if you could resume your usual form."

Snape turned, horrified, in the direction Dumbledore was looking. A great black dog stood in the corner, a dog who suddenly was Sirius Black. Molly screamed and was silenced by her son. Snape could only stare at the man in disbelief.

So now even Sirius Black has proof that I was a Death Eater. Why did Dumbledore bring him here? Why, with everything else there is to endure, do I have to endure this, too? "Him! What is he doing here?" The words nearly choked him. It was clear that Sirius felt no love either.

"He is here at my invitation, as are you, Severus. I trust you both. It is time for you to lay aside your old differences and trust each other."

Trust him? Trust the man that was willing — eager — to throw me to a werewolf? Trust the man that lured me into a trap so he could beat me senseless? Trust the man that betrayed Lily? A little voice in the back of his head was whispering 'Wormtail, Wormtail' but for the moment he wasn't paying attention. Snape made no movement, but eyed Black as if he were expecting the treachery of a dagger at any moment. Black's face showed a similar expression.

Dumbledore broke up the mutual loathing society. "I will settle, in the short term, for a lack of open hostility. You will shake hands. You are on the same side now. Time is short, and unless the few of us who know the truth stand united, there is no hope for any of us."

It was an order. Warily, like two duelists who suspect a trap, Snape and Black approached each other. They never broke eye contact as they touched hands briefly — one could hardly call it a shake. Snape was shut down against legilimency as if it were, in fact, a duel. *Don't look at his hands, look at his eyes. You'll see his attack there before his hands can move.* It seemed Black was thinking the same.

Dumbledore was quick to step between them. “That will do to be going on with. Now I have work for each of you. Fudge’s attitude, though not unexpected, changes everything. Sirius, I need you to set off at once. You are to alert Remus Lupin . . . — the old crowd. Lie low at Lupin’s . . .”

“You’ll see me very soon, Harry,” Black said, and then he was a dog again, and gone.

Dumbledore turned to Snape, and now there was concern in his eyes. They had reached the point toward which they’d been planning for so long, but now Dumbledore could only wait and hope. For what came next, he was unable to help. Snape could feel his apprehension, the worry that looked out at him from the usually calm blue eyes.

“Severus, you know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready . . . if you are prepared . . .”

The intervening years were gone. Snape had gone once before into the secret war, where no one watched your back, and you were always alone. Then he’d thought of himself as a knight errant, serving his lady, pure and untouchable. The lady was gone, but her murderer lived again. Now it was revenge he sought, revenge for the lady he would have died to save, and suddenly Snape felt alive again, alive in the face of death in a way he could never be alive anywhere else.

“I am,” he said.

“Then good luck,” said Dumbledore, and Snape swept wordlessly from the room.

This book was formatted by Blaise Whitesell, who built off the work of other fans of the story. The text was set in 10-point URW Garamond No. 8. Chapter headings were set in Lumos, inspired by the display font used in the US editions of the Harry Potter books, drawn by Sarah McFalls. The book was typeset using L^AT_EX and built on 2016-11-10 at 20:13.