

Tom Riddle's Schooldays

Year One: Silver Blood

by David Styles



Prologue

Despite lessons at the orphanage, provided weekly by the local Rev. Ernest Peabody, most of the children at Wool's Orphanage were not literate to the point that they could read many whole words. However, Tom was not "most children", and in part due to his uncanny ability to pick up on the thoughts of others, which included the mostly literate staff, he had developed a fairly competent reading ability.

True, he had to date practiced only with the eight books in the orphanage's "library", but his favourite of those, a bestiary containing many exotic creatures, was currently once again in his hands, as he sat on the rough grey blankets of his bed reading it.

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Cole, the matron, disturbed him. Judging from the state of her mind and her slight sway as she entered, she was drunk again.

"Tom? You've got a visitor. This is Mr. Dumberton - sorry, Dunderbore. He's come to tell you... Well, I'll let him do it".

A strange, bearded man with shoulder-length hair entered the room. He had a rich plum velvet suit on. Tom's frown did not lessen.

"How do you do, Tom?", asked the man, greeting him with an extended hand. Tom rose and shook it, unsure as to this visitor's intentions.

"I am Professor Dumbledore", said the strangely dressed visitor.

"Professor?", repeated Tom, skeptically. Mrs Cole had been threatening to try to have Tom taken away by a psychiatric institution; maybe this was her latest stupid effort to get rid of him? The man's mind was an annoying blank to him, though; he just couldn't penetrate it as he could with most people's minds. "Is that like a doctor?", he pressed, wondering what had brought him here. "Did she get you in to have a look at me?"

"No, no", said this Dumbledore, smiling. Tom was annoyed at the general lack of forthcomingness.

"Hmm. I don't believe you", he replied flatly, considering that she had told him she wanted him looked at. "Tell the truth", he commanded. Tom had a way of commanding people that he found would exercise a level of influence others could not. It was by no means impossible to ignore his commands, but the trick worked surprisingly often. In this case, though, the man just smiled at him benignly.

"Who are you?", Tom asked, yet more curious now.

Dumbledore reiterated that he was a teacher and represented a school called Hogwarts, not an asylum as Tom appeared to suspect, and that they would like to offer Tom a place, but that if he didn't want to come, nobody would force him.

"I'd like to see them try", replied Tom, with a smirk. The man did not seem put off by Tom's manner.

"Hogwarts is a school for people with special abilities," he began, but Tom interrupted:

"I'm not mad", he said, assuming this last was an effort to humour him.

"I know that you are not mad", he reassured Tom with a smile. "Hogwarts is not a school for mad people. It is a school of magic".

Upon hearing this last word, Tom hesitated. Maybe this was for real, and there were other people like him. A place where he could be with such people instead of these weak mundane fools. And his skills, they were...

"Magic?", Tom repeated.

"That's right". He appeared to be serious, and Tom had yet to encounter a person who appeared to be serious on this topic when they were not. This person did not, of course, appear to be like most people Tom had met, but he decided that no harm could come of taking the visitor's words at face value, for the sake of discussion.

"You're saying it's magic, what I can do?"

"What is it that you can do?"

"All sorts of things", said Tom, with a half-smile. He told Dumbledore about the things he could do that others couldn't, albeit without giving specifics of some of things he had done of which the fellow might disapprove.

"The short and simple explanation", said Dumbledore after listening to Tom's self-accolade, "is that you are a Wizard". He sounded surprisingly sure of himself, and Tom felt his heartbeat quicken; he wondered if the man was like him.

"Are you a Wizard too?", he asked.

"Yes, I am"

"Prove it", he commanded.

Dumbledore merely raised his eyebrows, and said that if Tom was accepting the place at the school, he would insist upon being addressed as "Professor" or "Sir".

Tom felt a flashing burn of anger towards the man, for his defiance and the added insult of assuming superiority. However, annoyingly, it seemed Tom did need to keep him sweet for the moment.

"I'm sorry, Sir", he said, hating Dumbledore and himself equally as he did so, but taking care not to show it. "I meant... Please, Professor, could you show me?". He attempted a smile, hoping it wasn't too much to add it on.

The man took a baton out of his pocket and flicked it at Tom's wardrobe. It burst into flames. Tom leapt to his feet and again resisted the urge to attack the man, who for his part, flicked the magic wand again and caused the flames to vanish.

"Where can I get one of those?", asked Tom, regarding the wand.

"All in good time", came the reply. "I think there is something trying to get out of your wardrobe".

Tom looked at Dumbledore and then at the wardrobe, where he kept his clothes and also some of his secrets. He heard a rattling, indeed as though something might be trying to escape. It probably wasn't his clothes doing the rattling, and that left his secrets. Well, this was a bother. Tom was thinking quickly. This man had magical powers too, and could pose quite a problem if presented with his bad self. But how to hide it in the immediacy of this situation?

"Open the door", said Dumbledore.

Not Tom's first choice of action, but he obliged. Tom wasn't easily bullied, but it made sense to obey the man who could set him on fire; especially when that man seemed to be the gatekeeper to something he wanted. Meanwhile, his box of secrets, his treasures, was rattling on its shelf, as though the treasures had come alive.

"Take it out", Dumbledore instructed. Tom didn't like the way this was going, but he did so.

"Is there anything in that box that you ought not to have?", asked Dumbledore. How did this man know? Was Tom's mind as open to this man as others' minds were to Tom? Or did he just have some other way of guessing at the contents? No, maybe he was just like everyone else, who always assumed the worst of Tom. In this case though, unfortunately, it was correct.

"Yes, I suppose so, Sir", opined Tom, his mind skating around the possible meanings of "ought not to", words about which he, Tom, had never been entirely clear. It was though everyone else around him saw some mystical concept of "ought to" and "ought not to", while Tom merely saw "want to" and "want not", or "can" and "cannot". After listening to extensive sermons on the topic of morality, Tom had come to the conclusion that it was all a popular nonsense.

"Open it" said Dumbledore.

Tom opened the box, and tipped his treasures onto the bed. There was nothing of monetary value there, of course, but he had won each of them from the other orphans by virtue of his natural superiority, and having them as a reminder helped him remain sane in this place. And now he might lose them. Still, uneasy as that thought made him feel, his

head was still swimming with the new possibilities opening to him if he made it through this confrontation successfully.

“You will return them to their owners with your apologies”, Dumbledore instructed, replacing his wand in his jacket pocket. “I shall know whether it has been done. And be warned: thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts”.

That was it? He was still being accepted to the school? It was a terrible thought to have to part with his things, but he was already becoming a little more distant and detached from them in his mind as he reflected on it. Yes, it was a sacrifice that he would be making for his own greater good, nothing more.

“Yes, Sir”, he said.

Dumbledore seemed satisfied with this, and went on to explain some tedious things about rules and laws in the magical world. Tom nodded and readily affirmed how he’d abide by such. The topic of money was broached, as Tom was sure the school would want paying by somebody, and it seemed unlikely the orphanage or its trustees would be footing the bill to his magical education, however much they might want to get rid of him.

“That is easily remedied”, said Dumbledore casually, and not only waived the notion of fees, but actually gave Tom a heavy bag of coins. Upon opening it, it contained large coins of what seemed to be real gold. A few minutes ago Tom was in trouble; now, he had been given this. Today was a weird day.

They discussed the purchasing of spellbooks and such, which brightened Tom’s mood further, and where to buy these things. Tom even managed to weave his way out of the old man accompanying him, and instead got a list of things he would need to buy, and directions to a special street with shops selling magical things, Diagon Alley, accessed via a pub that other people around wouldn’t be able to see. Despite his youth, Tom was to go into the pub, and ask for the barman, of the same name. Another Tom, how annoying. Tom wished he had a unique name, a name that anyone could hear and know exactly who it meant.

“You dislike the name ‘Tom’?”, asked Dumbledore, perhaps picking up on this.

“There are a lot of Toms”, he answered, before going on to ask: “I wonder, do you know if my father was a Wizard? He was called Tom Riddle too, they’ve told me”.

“I’m afraid I don’t know”, replied Dumbledore, simply.

Tom reflected on the matter. His father must have been a Wizard; he couldn’t have got it from his mother, as she surely wouldn’t have died so young if she could do magic. Tom asked about starting at Hogwarts, once he’d got his things.

“All the details are on the second piece of parchment in your envelope. You will leave from King’s Cross station on the first of September. There is a train ticket in there, too”.

Dumbledore got up to leave, and again offered his hand, which Tom shook. For some reason remembering their previous conversation, Tom realised he’d missed out mentioning one of the special things he could do, that surely wouldn’t make him look bad at all, not like hurting people or taking their things.

“Oh, I can speak to snakes...”, he said, to get it in before the man left. “I found out when we’ve been to the country on trips. They find me and they whisper to me. Is that normal for a Wizard?”

Dumbledore hesitated, and Tom wondered if speaking to snakes was a special talent of his, and if Dumbledore was jealous of not himself possessing it.

“It is unusual”, he said, “but not unheard of. Goodbye, Tom. I shall see you at Hogwarts”.

With a nod, he turned and left, leaving Tom to contemplate his sack of gold and pages of information.

Chapter One

A New World

Tom found the Leaky Cauldron easily enough from Dumbledore's directions. There was a small doorway, set slightly back from the level of the shops on each side of it, which the people in the street were all passing by, and perhaps not only because they had their heads down on account of the rain. It seemed to belong entirely to another world. Tom pushed at the door, which opened with a slight creak.

Walking inside, the place was indeed very different to its surroundings, and several patrons were dressed as oddly as Dumbledore had been, in bright colours of the kind not often seen in modern London. The place smelled slightly of beer, tobacco, and, for some reason, cinnamon. As he approached the bar, the young barman in a faded violet and lime-green waistcoat and a woolen flat cap of more normal brownish tones, gave him a look of recognition.

"Young master Riddle, is it?"

"Yes. How did you...?" began Tom, but the man was already answering:

"Professor Dumbledore told me you'd be showing up about now. Boy your age, on your own, Muggle clothes, in here; it wasn't going to be anyone else! Stopping for a butterbeer? Pumpkin juice, maybe?"

"No, I'm just looking for Diagon Alley. I was told that the entrance to it was here, and that a barman called Tom could direct me". He felt a pang of disgust at having to draw attention to their shared name, a name he already disliked enough for its commonness. His namesake, however, was cheery:

"Well, I'm Tom, Tom, and you have reached your destination" he said with a smile, making off to the side of the bar, turning only to beckon Tom to follow. He led him out a back door, and into a small yard.

"Doorknob's here, if you wanna think of it as a doorknob", he said, and tapped the wall with his wand. As he did so, the wall unfolded brick by brick, revealing a cobbled street, no less rainy than the street he'd come from, but lined with tall crooked buildings.

"Know where you're going now, Tom?"

"I'll be fine from here, thanks". Tom already knew exactly where he was going; he just didn't know where that was.

His first port-of-call would be to buy a magic wand, like Dumbledore's. He would have asked the barman (he avoided thinking of him by name), but frankly, he had already had more than enough of his cheery, placid, stupid demeanour. But Dumbledore had mentioned "Diagon Alley", as in one street; how hard could it be to find the shop he wanted, if it was indeed here? And indeed soon enough, making his way through the unevenly cobbled street (apparently, these people had magic wands but not set-squares, something also reflected in the leaning, crooked, untidy, and often top-heavy shops), he encountered a shop with a sign advertising "Fine Wands - Ollivander and Son".

The door of Ollivander's creaked open. Some dust, having been disturbed by this act, fell down onto Tom's head as he entered. Apparently this was not a busy shop. Tom blinked at the dust, and ran a hand through his wet (and now slightly dusty) hair. He looked down at the resulting dirty smudge on his hand, and rubbed his hands against each other in an effort to ameliorate this. Perhaps precisely because most of the orphans didn't care much for cleanliness, Tom despised dirt and any contact with it.

"Good afternoon", came an abrupt voice. Tom turned around, to see a young man with impressive sideburns and an extravagant silk cravat.

"I'm here to buy a wand", said Tom.

"Well, you're in the right place. And somewhat ahead of the crowd, I might add; we don't usually see Hogwarts students this early in summer"

“Are there many of us?”, asked Tom.

“A good few dozen, each year. Most Hogwarts students come here for their first wands; in fact, people come from all over. My father’s craftsmanship is well-renowned.” Tom observed the considerable pride in his words, and expected this to be reflected in his wares. His eyes fell on a wand on display in an open box on the counter; it had a silvery handle in the form of a serpent.

“Care to try?”, asked the Wizard, obviously the junior Ollivander.

Tom, by way of reply, picked up the wand, and realized he didn’t know what to do with it. He looked around for furniture to set on fire, but the small shop seemed to be entirely filled with wand-boxes and little else.

“Perhaps not that one”, said Ollivander, extending his hand to take the wand back. Tom’s own hand pulled back a little automatically, but then he handed the wand back. After all, there were plenty of wands here, and he might find a better one yet.

“Which is best?”, he asked.

Ollivander chuckled, irritating Tom, and replied:

“Whichever chooses you”

Tom looked piercingly at Ollivander. What was his meaning? For a momentary flash, he got a glimpse through Ollivander’s eyes, and found a feeling of power and connection, when Ollivander thought of his own wand. It was personal to him; wands were not completely interchangeable.

“What’s your name?”, asked Ollivander, seemingly curious about Tom for the first time.

“Riddle. Tom Riddle.”

“Hmm. I don’t know the name, but my father, who’s away at the moment, probably sold your parents’ first wands to them.”

“I don’t think my mother could do magic”, said Tom. “She died when I was born. I must have got it from my father, but I think he’s dead as well.”

This was quite straightforward to Tom, but Ollivander looked at him quizzically. Then he seemed to abandon the topic of parentage, and perhaps a little keenly offered him a new wand to try. This one was very simple, lacquered plain black, and smooth.

“Siberian Cedar, twelve inches, with a core of unicorn hair”, he said. Tom took it.

“What can I do with it?” he asked.

“Anything you like - within the bounds of the law”, replied Ollivander, “but right now, just get a feel for it”, he said, as though this was a clear instruction that was easy to follow.

Tom raised the wand and tried to feel what he had experienced Ollivander feel regards his own wand, but the feeling just would not come. Tom frowned.

“No, perhaps not”, said Ollivander. This time Tom yielded the wand more readily. The next wand that Ollivander offered was a more naturally coloured wand with a modest handle. Not so simple as the cedar wand, but not so ornate as the one with the serpentine handle either.

“Holly”, said Ollivander, “eleven inches, and the core is of Phoenix tail-feather”. As Tom took it in his hand, he certainly felt something, but it was not the same as what Ollivander felt, or even close. Ollivander, perhaps noting Tom’s perplexed look, seemed to have been given an idea.

“Hmm”, he said, “let’s try...”, and his voice trailed off as he went to get another wand. He swapped it for the one in Tom’s hand. This one was longer, much paler, and had a polished bone handle. As soon as Tom held it, he smiled as he immediately felt at one with it, as though it were an extension of his hand, feeling just as Ollivander did with his wand, only more powerful. Perhaps because he was experiencing it directly, or perhaps because he himself had more natural magical power, but the feeling was good. He felt the most alive he had felt since that afternoon last summer when he had taken fellow orphans Amy

and Dennis into a cave at the seaside in order to try out some things he hadn't been free to do at the orphanage. He flicked it at the shop's counter, and the counter broke in two.

"Well, that looks like the wand for you, Mr. Riddle", said Ollivander, repairing his counter with a gesture of his own wand. "Yew, thirteen and a half inches, Phoenix tail-feather. Excellent wand for duelling, very responsive".

"I'll take it", said Tom. "How much?"

Ollivander told him, and Tom was momentarily taken aback, as he had examined and counted the coins he had been given to do the buying of all his school-things, and knew that this price would be a sizable portion of what he had on him, and he had many more things to buy. Outwardly though, his face showed at best, perhaps, skepticism.

"This is an extremely powerful wand", said Ollivander, dropping his voice to a near whisper and moving closer to Tom, who wondered if he used such theatrics to bolster his prices. "It will serve you well, and I do not expect you will find a finer match - nor, even if I may be biased, finer craft".

Tom looked at Ollivander eye to eye for a moment, then took out the pouch of coins that Dumbledore had given him. The price did indeed seriously lighten his coin-pouch, but perhaps he would be able to get more money if it was necessary.

Tom left the shop with his wand in its tightly wrapped case. He considered unwrapping it already, but it wasn't like he could do much with it right now anyway, so he might as well experiment with it when he got back. The rain, which seemed to have increased in its fervour, was now washing into his face. At least it would get rid of any remaining dust in his hair. Having acquired his wand, his next priority was spell books, and he looked around for a sign of a shop selling those. Not seeing one immediately, he started along the street. A couple of shops along, he noticed "Lalita Lalage's Robes for All Budgets", and since such was also on his list, he decided to do that quickly now, and get it out of the way.

He tried to push open the door, but it opened itself just as his hand approached it. He cocked his head slightly and examined it; he was not accustomed to inanimate objects moving of their own accord without his impetus.

"Come in, love, out of the rain" came the voice of a plump middle-aged Witch who was now ambling towards him, smiling. Tom could not recall anyone ever having called him "love" before. He frowned in confusion; perhaps she was mistaking him for someone else? He stepped inside the shop regardless. As he did so, he was met by a wave of warm air, and an instant later, his clothes and hair were as dry as if it had been a sunny day.

"Hogwarts robes is it, deary? First Year?"

"Yes, I have a list", replied Tom, reaching into his coat pocket for the letter. "Oh, don't you worry about that", said the Witch, "I've seen so many of them, I could write them myself by now".

She seemed amused, and Tom found himself annoyed at her. Was he as much a stranger in this world as he had been with the ordinary people at Wool's? The Witch, however, was still smiling and seemed oblivious to how annoying she was. Tom forced what he hoped was a friendly smile in return.

"I have barely enough money to buy my school-things", said Tom, "so I'll only be taking the essentials".

Taking. Tom regretted his choice of words, recalling Professor Dumbledore's condemnation of just "taking" things. Fitting in wasn't something that came naturally to him, but it was clear he'd need to learn to at least appease the sensibilities of these new people that presently were the gatekeepers between him and what promised to be a rather better world.

The plump Witch didn't seem anywhere near as sharp as Dumbledore, however, and was now busily rooting through a mass of mostly black robes.

"Don't worry, we'll get you kitted out"

Suddenly and without warning, something cold slid around Tom's neck. He grabbed at it instinctively and turned around, ready to defend himself. Nobody was there, and the cold thing did not put up any fight as Tom pulled it off his neck. It was a tape measure. As Tom relaxed his grip on the thing, it sailed back up into the air and went back to taking his measurements. Tom resisted the urge to bat it away.

"Right, here we are", said the Witch, placing several small piles of clothes on the countertop. The tape measure sped over to her, and landed on one of the piles.

"Well then, that'll be you", she said. She swished her wand at the other piles, and they flew off back to where they had been, into a couple of large hampers.

"Let's see what we have here", she added, spreading the various remaining items out. Some of them had small crests on, with various animals in them.

"Seeing as you'll be a first-year and haven't been sorted yet, I'll reset the crests for you"

She tapped each of the crests in turn with her wand, and each of them changed from being an animal with a coloured background, to being a letter "H" with smaller animals and colours behind it. When she tapped the necktie, its yellow and black stripes disappeared.

"Isn't it supposed to have stripes?", asked Tom.

"Well yes, but we don't know what House you'll be in yet; you might not be a Hufflepuff"

"Hufflepuff? What's a Hufflepuff?"

One of the crests that had disappeared was also yellow, and had had a badger on it. Tom sensed that it had something to do with finding... something... and that these things were connected, but wasn't sure how or why. He opened his mind and peered into hers, but there didn't seem to be an awful lot there. He had got as far as a brief image of a cozy fire and a mustard-yellow armchair, when her answer interrupted the momentary reverie.

"The Houses at Hogwarts; Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin", she said, in a matter-of-fact way. "Everyone's sorted into one of the four when they arrive, but nobody knows for sure which it'll be, before the Hat sorts them - so everyone starts with uniform just like this"

Tom decided not to ask about this hat that'd be deciding where he lived; he had a more pressing and material concern.

"Starts with? Will I need more?"

The Witch chuckled again and replied, "No, these'll be just fine. They're Charmed so that they'll adjust themselves to your House colours once they reach your dormitory"

After she had totted up the prices, writing in a ledger with large quill, Tom paid for his robes, counting out gold, silver, and bronze coins from his pouch. It was nowhere near the astronomical cost he had paid for his wand, but even in this lesser transaction alone, he was parting with more wealth than he had previously been accustomed to having. He had never had nice things in his life, and now he was shelling out solid gold and silver coins for plain, second-hand clothes. Yet somehow, he felt a strange sensation of hope. He held onto that thought, but shunned the feeling. Better not to get too attached to something that wasn't certain - after all, doing so only invites disappointment.

She set the robes on top of an unreasonably large sheet of brown paper, which proceeded to wrap itself neatly around them. A piece of string snaked around the package and tied itself in a tight bow. The Witch tapped the package with her wand, and Tom could tell that something had changed, but didn't know what.

"That'll keep the rain off it", she smiled. Tom had forgotten about the weather. This was not a cheery reminder, but the weather was still the last thing on Tom's mind.

"Thank you", he said, and turned to head back outside. This time the door didn't pre-empt his intention, and opened only manually. He headed out, frowning at the elements.

Books. That was what he needed now. He looked up and down the street. He turned his back against the rain, and saw a sign swinging in the wind above one of the shops, that looked promising. It said "Flourish and Blott's", and had a book painted underneath these words. He headed for the doorway under it, and as he stepped into a puddle and felt cold water enter his shoe, he hoped that this shop would have the same magical drying effect as the last one.

Mercifully, it did. Flourish and Blott's was a much larger shop than the previous two, both in floorspace, and in that it had a staircase leading up to another level that was clearly still part of the store. Unlike in the other shops, nobody greeted Tom upon entry, and he looked around him. Also unlike the other shops, he was not the only person in the store; some other Witches and Wizards were browsing the books. There were books of all sizes; some as small as a fingernail, and others nearly as tall as him. His eye was caught by a weighty but manageably-sized tome entitled *Thurlow's Compendium of Duelling*. He opened it, and found it was arranged in chapters of progressing difficulty, and, it appeared, severity, running the gamut from from "safe spells for jolly japes" to "banned curses for reference only".

"Looking to compete, are you?" said a voice from behind him. Tom turned around, and was met by a translucent whitish figure hovering in the air.

"Who are you?" asked Tom in return.

"Jasper Flourish, at your service", replied the figure, bowing flamboyantly.

"Are you a ghost?"

"That I am, that I am", admitted the ghost. "Never could leave the books behind, you know"

Tom reflected on this for a moment.

"What did you mean, looking to compete?"

"Duelling! Entering competitions, perhaps? You look a bit young to be getting into battles, so I presume it's for sport, hmm?"

"Oh, yes," replied Tom with a reassuring smile. "For sporting purposes. Do you know how much this is?"

"I'm afraid I don't keep up with the business these days. Let me get young Miss Phililexa; she'll be able to help you" - and with this he sailed off around a corner. Tom put the duelling book under his arm with his package of robes, and was just returning to scanning book titles, when a young Witch appeared.

"Jasper said you needed help?", she said, smiling.

"I was looking at this", he said, gesturing to the book under his arm, "but I came here for schoolbooks for Hogwarts"

"You look like you're having fun juggling your things; how about a basket?"

She drew out a long and slender wand, that made a swishy sound as she conjured quite a sizable wicker basket out of thin air, and offered it to him.

"Thank you", said Tom, dropping his book into the basket, and also the bundle of robes, since the basket was large enough. Phililexa tapped the basket with her wand, and Tom felt the weight of it vanish; it was now supporting the weight of its contents for itself.

He tentatively took his hand off the handle, and the basket remained in place, hovering in the air.

"So, Hogwarts books then. First year, right?" she asked.

"Yes. I have a list", he said, not knowing if she would want to look at it or not.

"Let's see, then?" she replied. He produced the list and handed it to her, and scrutinised her while she scrutinised it.

"Mostly the same as last year", she said, nodding to herself, "just a couple of changes. Come with me", she added, still in the same pleasant tone, but without looking up from the list. Tom followed her, and the basket followed him. They came to a table that bore a sign saying "Hogwarts Starter Packs - Special Offer".

"We put these out just this morning; I must say you're quick off the mark", she said, touching various copies of *Bacchanthorpe's Essential Potions* on the spine. They each in turn leapt up into the air at her touch. She pointed her wand at a distant bookshelf, and the books re-homed themselves accordingly. She then glanced back at the list, and with a flick of her wand, a stack of bright green books entitled *The Modern Student's Guide to Potion-Making* sped over to her, and took the places of the dismissed Bacchanthorpe books.

"We're doing a special on the set", she said, "so you save five Sickles overall"

As it turned out, the *Compendium of Duelling* would set him back notably, and Tom was not pleased to hear the overall price.

"If you want cheaper, we do have a trade-in section, if you don't mind some second-hand textbooks?"

"I do want cheaper, and I don't mind second-hand", replied Tom.

"In that case..." said the Witch, trailing off as she dismissed most of the books and summoned replacements. The *Potion-Making* book remained.

"We don't have any second-hand for this one", she explained, "or the *Thurlow's*", she added, gesturing to the *Compendium of Duelling*. She added up the new price, which was substantially less. "I've still knocked off five Sickles for you, too", she said with a smile.

"Thank you", said Tom, wondering why she had done this, when he clearly had the five Sickles more, and was unlikely to find a better offer.

"Still raining, isn't it?" she observed, after he had made his purchases.

"*Impervius*" she said, tapping the collection of books in the basket. Tom departed, wondering about affording his remaining things with his dwindling funds.

Once back outside, the basket still following him, Tom looked at the apothecary across the road, and hoped he still had enough to buy what he needed from there. He crossed, and went inside. It was a small shop, and felt smaller, with all the glassware closely packed on the overstocked shelves all around him. No magical drying Charm here, but at least he had only been outside for a moment. The basket nudged him from behind.

"What can I get for you, my boy?" asked a wizened old crone who was getting unsteadily to her feet behind the counter.

"I have a list", said Tom, producing it. The Witch took it, and examined it with an oversized monocle. "Do you do any discounts?", he added.

"No discounts", she replied flatly, "and this lot won't come cheaply".

Tom emptied his few remaining coins onto the counter.

"This is all I have. What can you do for me?"

The Witch looked at the coins, then at Tom, then back at the list, then back at the coins.

"Not a lot. One of these cauldrons. Some of these cheaper basic ingredients. Forget the scales"

By the time Tom left the shop, he had maybe half the things he was supposed to get from the apothecary, and had no remaining money. He made his way back through the Leaky Cauldron, responding monosyllabically to his namesake's friendly overtures as he did so.

Upon exiting the other side Leaky Cauldron, Tom took the handle of the basket again. He'd have to at least pretend to be carrying it now. How irksome.

Once back at his room in Wool's Orphanage, Tom set the still-dry basket of things onto the bed. He, on the other hand, was not nearly so dry at all. He stripped out of his wet clothes, dried himself with the threadbare towel that hung on a pipe that passed through his room, and put on his other pair of shorts and his other shirt. He remained barefoot. His wand. More than the other things, he was eager to try his wand. He took the box, and opened it. Now *this* was a treasure. Brandishing it, he swished it in the direction of his wardrobe, mimicking Dumbledore's action, intending flames. There was a loud *crack* as

the wood panel nearest to him splintered apart slightly, and a wisp of smoke suggested some recognition of the intention to produce fire. But all in all, it was underwhelming, and this vexed him.

Spell books. He took up his copy of *A Student's Primer of Magical Spells*, and sat cross-legged on his bed with it. He leafed through its pages, and found it was full of incantations, and diagrams that moved of their own accord, indicating wand movements.

On one page, Tom's eye was caught by a spell for setting things ablaze. The incantation was a single word, *incendio*, and there was no required physical gesture, beyond the wand being pointed at the target. He pointed his wand at the wardrobe and allowed himself a slight smile.

"Incendio"

The wardrobe burst into flames immediately. They weren't blue, like Dumbledore's flames though, and he could feel the heat of the blaze. Initially pleased, he then frowned, realizing that he probably ought to have first checked how to undo the fire. He looked at the rest of the page, and the next page. One might expect such instructions to be there, but apparently the author hadn't been that organized. He turned pages rapidly, looking for anything to do with water or undoing one's magic. He found a spell for making water. It had a simple gesture and an incantation, *aguamenti*. He tried it immediately, and the tip of his wand produced a modest jet of water cascading onto his bed. Enough to make his bed wet, but nowhere near enough to put out the fire in the wardrobe. At least the fire didn't seem to be spreading, but the room was getting a bit smokey. He instinctively shook his wand to stop the water, and that worked. He looked back at the fire, and back at his book.

Freezing Charm! Definitely worth a try. There was no diagram, just a colourful illustration of a river that froze over, ran again, and repeated that cycle. But coldness seemed like a good thing, and there was an incantation, so Tom pointed his wand at the wardrobe with perhaps more confidence than was merited given the situation, and spoke the word:

"Glacius"

The tip of his wand glowed with a bluish light, and the flames immediately stuttered, pattered, and went out, and were replaced by a growing film of ice appearing over the wardrobe, which itself was now quite blackened and charred. Tom sank back onto his bed and surveyed the scene. The wardrobe was a wreck, and was covered in ice that would surely now melt onto the floor. His bed was also wet. And he was hungry.

Just then, as though on cue, a bell rang out in the corridor, signifying that it was time to attend the evening meal. Tom stepped onto the floor, and remembered that his shoes were wet, and his dry socks were in the wardrobe. Opening the wardrobe, he was met by a faceful of smoke, causing him to jerk his head backwards and cough slightly. He could see his socks, smouldering slightly in the corner. He used the freezing Charm on them, and the glimmers of warmth went away, but he now had frozen burnt socks. He quickly put on instead his wet socks and shoes, and headed for the door, then hesitated.

Was it safe to leave his things as they were in the room? The staff didn't usually come to his room except for room inspections, which occurred on certain mornings, and the other children would never dare to take his things. Still, he tucked his wand into the side of his shorts, as it was far too long for his pocket. It still didn't fit very well, but he wasn't going to leave it behind here.

He headed off down to the Dining Hall, where watery stew doubtlessly awaited him. Hopefully there'd be bread with it. Sometimes there was.

Chapter Two

The Hogwarts Express

Over the course of summer, Tom learned a lot of things from the books he had bought in Diagon Alley. He learned several more efficient ways of putting out fires, including a specific Flame-Freezing Charm that cooled the flames but didn't have any other effects, an Extinguishing Charm, and information on controlling the amount of water produced by *aguamenti*. He also managed to repair his wardrobe with a simple all-purpose repairs spell. He accomplished this latter act, however, after he had already returned the burnt remains of his trophies to the children from whom he'd taken them, with his apologies, as directed by Dumbledore. Naturally, Dumbledore probably hadn't intended for him to incinerate them first, but he had at least technically complied with his instructions. If Dumbledore was angry, so be it. The prospect of facing some punishment upon arrival to Hogwarts was almost inconsequential to him at this stage, much as he'd obviously rather avoid it if at all possible.

He also learned that the staff no longer came to his room. Ever. Not for room inspections, not for anything. It was as though they had forgotten it, and perhaps were passing it by like the people in the street passed by the Leaky Cauldron. This suited Tom, of course.

He made a couple more trips to Diagon Alley; he had no more money, naturally, but that didn't stop him from exploring. It turned out that Diagon Alley was also adjacent to a couple of other narrower streets, some more interesting than others, but all more interesting than the Muggle world around them.

"Muggle" had entered Tom's vocabulary; it appeared in his books, and functionally it replaced the idea that had previously been expressed by simply the word "people". But now that Tom knew he was not the only one with magical powers, this new word was needed to describe the ordinary, weak, and talentless idiots around him.

He had been disappointed with one of his books, *Introduction to the Dark Forces*, by Fulkward Kettlehelm, as it turned out not to be about using any "Dark Forces", so much as protecting oneself from various sorts of creatures and evildoers. Itself a worthy topic to know about, for sure, but not what Tom had hoped to be learning from it.

He had browsed his potions book, but did not experiment with those, so as to not deplete his already insufficient supplies before he even started school - not to mention that without having been able to afford weighing scales, he'd need to guess quantities or else sneak into the kitchens to use the scales there, if they had a set fine enough - unlikely, based on the simplicity of the cooking.

He had learned a lot from *Thurlow's Compendium of Duelling*, and had jinxed Billy Stubbs with a Jelly-Legs curse, shortly before receiving a strongly worded letter advising him not to perform magic on or in the presence of Muggles, on pain of expulsion from the school at which he had not yet started, and potential criminal proceedings. As the letter was delivered by an owl and arrived several minutes after he had performed the curse in question, he did not doubt its provenance.

Shortly before the end of August, a large wooden coffer arrived to Wool's for Tom. It had the same "H" crest on it as his Hogwarts robes. He put his robes, books, cauldron, and potions supplies inside it. They barely filled half of it. Tom looked at the empty space remaining, and wondered at how much extra stuff most schoolchildren had.

When the first of September came, Tom was conveyed to King's Cross station by Rev. Peabody in his motorcar, which was fortunate, as it would have been quite a struggle handling his coffer alone manually, and a right sight he'd have looked leading it through London if he had made it move itself.

Once Tom was alone amongst the crowds in the station, he wheeled his coffer, which was now on a luggage trolley, to where Dumbledore had told him he could find Platform

Nine and Three Quarters. He looked at the various sections of wall. He approached the most likely section, and tested it with his arm. Sure enough, his arm passed through, just like the Diagon Alley side of the Leaky Cauldron passage. He grabbed his luggage, and after a furtive glance around, wheeled it through the wall.

On the other side was a new platform, indeed labelled "Platform 9¾". He looked up at a large clock, and observed that he was still somewhat early, as indeed were several others, by the looks of things. Some small groups of friends, mostly older boys and girls, were chatting with each other, and some who looked nearer Tom's age appeared to be with their parents. All were better dressed than he was. He parked his trolley against the wall but off to the side a little, before someone else could come through the barrier and crash into him. He sat on his box and waited.

Soon enough, a train arrived, hooting and whistling, as though they might not have noticed it otherwise. It had the words "Hogwarts Express" on it. Those with parents present were now saying their final goodbyes, and those without were making for the train with their luggage trolleys, and began hauling them on board. There was a bit of a crowd, so Tom connected his mind to his coffer, and lifted it up to about chest height by magic, then, guiding it ahead of him, glided it gently towards the train. Much easier than messing around with the trolley.

For some reason, the other boys and girls were making way for it. That suited Tom, but some were giving him strange looks. Surely this should not be strange to them, they could do magic too, couldn't they? Had he misunderstood something? The onlookers posed questions:

"Did you Charm it?"

"Did your parents Charm it for you?"

"Are you doing that, or are you just following it?"

Tom was confused by these questions.

"It's just the same as yours", he replied. He took advantage of the space that had been provided, and guided it into the train. He parked it up on the luggage rack, and sat himself on a seat in the corner of the carriage, underneath it.

Some others came and joined him in the same seating area, manhandling their own trunks like magic wasn't an option. Tom watched them struggling, with some curiosity.

"So, how were you doing that?", asked a well-built fair-haired boy, now sitting down opposite him.

"Can't you do it?", asked Tom.

"I know there's a Charm for it", he replied, "but that needs a wand to do it and then to control it. So the Charm for both was done previously, right? I mean, I'm guessing you weren't doing wandless magic there?"

"Haven't you ever done magic without a wand?", asked Tom, curious as to whether this boy was perhaps somewhere between him and Muggles, in terms of magical ability.

"I stopped a fall once", said the boy, "one time when I fell off my broom".

Tom looked at him without responding, trying to assess him.

"I was really young, and it was bad weather", the boy added, defensively.

Tom didn't care about that. He had come to another idea, though, and asked:

"Do you know where you got your magic from? Are your parents able to do it?"

The boy's face contorted to a scowl.

"You think I'm a Mudblood? I'm a Malfoy"

The others now seated next to them were eyeing them warily, assessing the confrontation. Tom, on the other hand, had no idea what either a Mudblood or a Malfoy was, and remained silent, examining him for clues. The only flash of image that he got from the boy's mind was of a large manor-house in the moonlight.

“To be honest when I saw you on the platform I thought you were a Mudblood”, the boy continued, “judging from your clothes and the absence of friends or family”. His tone was now quite disparaging.

“I am short on resources”, Tom replied, “well, physical resources, anyway”, he added, “and my parents are dead. As for friends, I have always hated the weak and stupid Muggles, and I certainly have never wanted to be friends with them.”

The boy, this Malfoy, seemed unsure what to make of this, but was clearly somewhat appeased.

“What’s your name?”

“Tom Riddle. What’s yours?”

“Abraxas. Malfoy, obviously”

They appeared to have reached some manner of standoff. Tom was not content that he had understood this strange boy’s problem, but he also did not care very much either. Abraxas, for his part, seemed to still be unsure about Tom, but much less on edge now that it was apparent he wasn’t having to defend his honour in some fashion. There was a moment of silence, and a loud whistle sounded from outside. The train jarred into action, and slowly began to pull out from the station.

There were two other boys in the small compartment, and one of them broke the silence:

“I’m Archie, by the way. Pureblood, if you were wondering”, he added, chiefly addressing Abraxas, “or at least as far as I know; certainly all my near family are”. He spoke in a much more offhand fashion. Abraxas smiled for the first time, apparently quite settled now. They turned to the remaining boy, a dark-haired and pallid boy who was dressed almost as well as Abraxas, but seemed almost as out of place as Tom, expectantly. He mumbled something.

“You what?”, prompted Abraxas.

“Antoninololov”, was what the second, louder reply sounded like, but with an unusual accent. He didn’t add anything else.

“Pleasure”, said Archie, smiling. Abraxas looked like he’d given up on introductions.

For perhaps the next hour, Archie periodically tried to start up conversations, but Abraxas was at most lukewarm towards him; not hostile, but somewhat disinterested; the accented foreigner with the incomprehensible name was not the greatest conversationalist, and Tom, for his part, did not care for Archie’s platitudes, and also did not have anything he pressingly wanted to know from him either. He was curious about Archie’s abilities, but after the short and near-fruitless conversation with Abraxas, he was content to wait until later to find out directly.

A man in a red and blue uniform, pushing a trolley, came by the compartment.

“Any drinks or snacks?”

“Yeah”, readily replied both Abraxas and Archie simultaneously, surveying the trolley. They purchased a selection of things, mostly bright and colourful confectionary. The colours on some lollipops were changing constantly and chasing each other around. Some long sticks of licorice had a slight glow at the end, like a magic wand.

Tom and the other boy ignored the man, who departed.

“You want any, Tom, Anto-whateveryourname was?”, asked Archie, gesturing.

“Dolohov. Yes. Thanks”, said Dolohov, taking a licorice wand and nibbling at it.

“Why?”, asked Tom.

“Well, I didn’t know if you just didn’t have money on you, that’s all. But if you just didn’t want anything, then never mind. Just being friendly”

“I wouldn’t be able to pay you back”

“I don’t care, it’s just some sweets”, smiled Archie.

“Alright, but don’t expect anything from me”, said Tom, who was in fact hungry but did not wish to leave Archie with any impression that he might be in any way indebted to him.

“Not a thing”, said Archie, who seemed entertained. Tom took what appeared to be bar of chocolate. It turned out it was, but it also had some sort of gooey caramel inside it. When Tom bit it, it dripped a little. Upwards. Oh well, the novelty notwithstanding, it was a satisfying bar of chocolate.

For the next few hours of the journey North, mostly through green countryside now, Archie intermittently talked to, or at least at, the others. About the sweets, about broomsticks, about Quidditch, a sport played on broomsticks, about the spellbooks on their list, which it seemed he had leafed through, but not studied so much as Tom. Abraxas said he hadn't read them and that there'd be plenty of time for that at school. Dolohov just nodded.

The topic turned to Hogwarts Houses. Archie said he expected he'd probably be in Hufflepuff, but hoped to at least try out for Gryffindor. Apparently there was some sort of test. Abraxas said he didn't see any reason he'd be anywhere other than Slytherin. Tom, of course, didn't know which House he'd be going into, but if there were aptitude tests to check their magical abilities, he felt confident he'd be able to get into the best House, and said so.

Archie laughed, and said:

“Well, that's that for you, then”

“What?”

“Nothing, just a joke; I do that a lot”, said Archie, still looking cheerful.

“Tell me”, commanded Tom.

“It's just, you're a bit... Self-confident, let's say. Reckon you might well end up in Slytherin, with so much unabashed pride of yourself”

“Doubt it”, said Abraxas, rejoining the conversation.

“Why?”, asked Tom.

“Look at you. No friends, no family, no money, practically wearing rags, lived amongst Muggles all this time... Hardly hallmarks of the Noble House of Salazar Slytherin”.

“Eh, he's got a point Tom, no offence”, said Archie. “Maybe Gryffindor for you; you don't seem like the kind of person who backs down easily. But really, this all just a guessing game; nobody really knows until we get to Hogwarts and get Sorted.”

They sat awhile without speaking, largely pretending to be interested in the scenery going by. It was, predictably, Archie who broke the silence.

“Gobstones, anyone?”

“No”, said Abraxas, rolling his eyes. Dolohov kept his gaze yet more fixed on the passing scenery.

“Gobstones?”, asked Tom, raising an eyebrow. He had never heard of them.

“Yeah, you're right, probably not the best idea on a train, now that I think about it, said Archie. “How about chess?”

“Do you have a chess set?”, asked Tom. Back at the orphanage, Tom and the other boys had learned to play chess one weekend with Rev. Peabody, while the girls were taught to knit by his wife. Thereafter, he'd managed to find people to play against from time to time - sometimes Rev. Peabody - but mostly the battered old chess set at Wool's lay neglected.

“Yeah, just let me get it out”, said Archie, rummaging for it. He produced a small stone board, and a bag of pieces. “Could we swap places?”, he asked Dolohov, who looked back at him, bearing an expression like he'd been asked a hard mental arithmetic question. “Can I sit there, and you sit here, please? So Tom and I can play chess?”

The rephrasing did the trick, and Dolohov swapped seats with Archie, such that Tom and Archie could now sit with the board between them. Archie picked a couple of pieces out of the bag, hid them behind his back a moment, and presented Tom with two closed

fists, for him to choose one. It was quite apparent to Tom which colour lay in which hand, and he chose the white piece.

"You have White", said Archie, upon opening his hand. He emptied all the chessmen onto the board, and then spoke to them, calling: "Battle positions!"

The small stone figurines scrambled to set themselves up correctly.

"Yeah, they're not exactly crack troops", said Archie, misreading Tom's slight expression of surprise.

"Oi, let's see you do our job then, eh?" said a Knight who had just tussled with a Bishop for his proper place.

"It's normal for chessmen to talk in the magical world?", asked Tom.

"Believe me, it's getting them to shut up that's the problem", said Archie. "Anyway, your turn".

Tom could have moved the chess pieces with his mind, but out of custom, manually pushed the King's pawn two spaces forwards.

"Gerroff me, stop pushing", complained the pawn. Tom looked to Archie.

"You just tell them your move", said Archie. "Like this: Pawn to King four"

Archie's King's pawn moved to meet Tom's, and Tom nodded. The pawns now head-to-head in the middle of the board seemed to be avoiding eye contact with each other.

"Pawn to King's Bishop four", said Tom. His Bishop's pawn advanced, giving Tom a grim look over his shoulder as he did so.

"Pawn takes pawn", said Archie. His King's pawn raised its halberd, and struck a surprisingly swift attack on Tom's Bishop's pawn. A split second later, the attacked chessman had skidded off the side of the board, in several broken bits. The bits groaned slightly, which made Tom laugh. Archie swept the bits back into the bag.

"They'll sort themselves out later", he explained.

The game was swift and brutal. After all of six moves, Tom had yet to capture any of Archie's chessmen at all, but himself had meanwhile lost two pawns and a Rook, his King was ridiculously unprotected, and Archie had an extra Queen. Abraxas chortled as he looked over at the board. Dolohov looked at once amused and bemused.

"Maybe, I can play who wins?", he said.

"Sure", smiled Archie. "Unless I'm missing something, it shouldn't be long"

"Hmmm", said Dolohov, simply, but he seemed to agree with the statement.

"Queen takes pawn, check", said Tom, and the White Queen looked relieved to make her way across the board away from her two Black counterparts who were looking menacing in the vicinity of the White King.

Archie looked confused for a moment, as he clearly hadn't expected Tom to be attacking when his ranks were in such a shambles and his King in such clear danger.

"King takes Queen?", said Archie. His King gave a mirthless laugh.

"No can do", it said. "Can't you see the Bishop?"

"Oh, yeah. Er, King to Queen one, I guess", said Archie.

"King takes Bishop. Checkmate", said Tom.

Dolohov was ready to take Archie's place while Archie was still staring at the board trying to work out what had just happened.

As the train continued Northwards, the day's grey sky shifted for a dusky glow, and the setting sun reminded Tom of how long they'd been travelling; the three of them playing some games of chess passed the time better than Archie's conversational efforts.

After a time, a voice from some hidden loudspeaker (or, as Tom reflected on the matter, probably magic doing the job of a loudspeaker) announced that they would be soon arriving. Students were advised to make sure they took all of their belongings to their House dormitories, except first-years, who were advised to leave theirs on the train, as it would all go to their as-yet unassigned Houses separately. Students were further advised

to put on their Hogwarts robes, if they had not already done so. This having been done, they peered out of the windows into the darkness that had fallen in the past half-hour or so.

As the train slowed and came to a standstill, they made their way to the train doors, although there were of course many students clamouring to reach them now. The doors opened themselves, and the students poured out into the cool night air.

Chapter Three

The Sorting Ceremony

“First-years, over here!” shouted a sharp-voiced Witch who held a glowing wand above her head. The haze of golden light around it threw into clear relief her rather striking appearance; she had grey hair, but fairly youthful features. Her poise was athletic, and she was stood on a wall as she watched over the sea of heads and gathered the first-years to her. Others made their way up some steps away from the platform.

“Any more first-years?” she called out, and her eyes roved over the assembled group, apparently doing a quick head-count.

“Good”, she said, “I am Professor Merrythought, and you will follow me”. She hopped down onto the ground, turned, and strode up the steps without looking back. The first-years had to jog slightly to keep up.

At the top of the steps, she turned and went in the opposite direction to that taken by the other students, before heading down a narrow track. Soon they came to a waterfront, where about a dozen small boats were tethered.

“Form an orderly line” said Professor Merrythought, “and hop in, four to a boat. Don’t bother arguing about who goes where, just get in. You’ll find your friends soon enough.”

After they had all embarked, she flicked her wand at the moorings, and the boats slipped loose and began to glide across the water. The evening was a little cold and misty, but Tom found it peaceful. Whether they also found it peaceful or for some other reason, a hush had fallen over the students. Eventually they came within sight of the castle, and it was quite clear from the sight of it that this was Hogwarts. Reaching the bank nearest the castle, the boats moored themselves.

“Well, come on, get out, then” said Merrythought, and they disembarked, some less steadily than others. She led the way up a steep path, and across a bridge that brought them what appeared to be the front of the castle. Approaching the huge oak doors, she opened them with a flick of her wand without slowing down. They went into a large entrance hall, itself perhaps the size of the Dining Hall back at Wool’s. Professor Merrythought stopped, finally, and turned to the first-years. She waited for the last couple to make it inside, and with another gesture of her wand, the great doors closed behind them.

“Welcome, first-years, to Hogwarts School of...”

Weee - she was interrupted by a shrill whistling noise. Glancing upwards, she reacted in time to swat aside a falling wastepaper bin. It bounced on the stone floor and came to a rest.

“Thank you Peeves, that will be enough”.

The sound of raspberry-blowing greeted her in reply, followed by a *pop*, and then silence.

“Peeves is a Poltergeist and as such it is in his nature to cause trouble about the castle”, said Merrythought, taking an object from her pocket, and silencing the whistling noise that it had been making.

“Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In a few moments, you will be Sorted into your Houses. Each House has its own qualities, and the Sorting Hat itself will make these known to you. Headmaster Dippet may wish to say a few words first. Simply follow the instructions you are given, and you’ll do just fine. Meanwhile, wait here, do not wander off, and in fact do not do anything other than wait to be invited into the Great Hall”. She gave them a stern look, and departed through a small doorway to the side of the chamber.

As they waited, Tom observed the nervousness in those around him, even most of those who clearly intended to show confidence. He closed his eyes and cast his mind through the large doors into the larger Hall beyond. There were a lot of chattering students

there, but that was not news to him; they were already audible. Professor Merrythought came into focus; she was speaking to a grey-haired man sitting in a particularly high-backed chair at the middle of a table populated with what Tom presumed were teachers.

The man, presumably the Headmaster, nodded in response to whatever she had said, and at that moment Tom's concentration was broken by a voice from next to him.

"Nervous, Riddle?"

It was Abraxas Malfoy, perhaps the only other in the room who could be described as calm. Most of the others were nervous, some merely excited, but this one was treating it like he did this every day. Tom smiled.

"No".

The doors to the Great Hall opened, and the students were met with hundreds of heads turning to look at them, chattering to each other. The man in the high-backed chair stood up and spoke loudly:

"Quiet, please. Thank you. New first years, please come forth"

He gestured to an open space, between the students' tables and the teachers' table. They advanced, remaining in a cluster.

"You will now be Sorted into your Houses. While your House will be very important to you and touch many aspects of your life here at Hogwarts, each House has produced outstanding Witches and Wizards for nearly a thousand years. During your time here, your triumphs and successes will win points for your House, and any misdemeanours will lose points from your House. New for this year, Professor Vassy has installed these splendid Hourglasses that will keep track of points for the House Cup"

He gestured to four large hourglasses on the wall behind the teachers' table. The bottom sections were small and empty; the top sections were large and full of brightly coloured tiny gemstones; green, blue, red, and yellow, respectively.

"And now, I see the Sorting Hat has arrived"

Another teacher approached with a rather battered old leather hat, and handed it to Professor Dippet as though it were a great treasure. Dippet in turn passed it on to Dumbledore, perhaps a little less ceremoniously, speaking to him briefly. Dumbledore nodded, picked up a roll of parchment from the table, and proceeded to a small stool that stood alone on the dais in front of front of the teachers' table, placing the hat upon the stool. As he stepped away from it, the creases of the hat took on the form of an ugly face with a wide mouth. To Tom's surprise and slight dismay, the wide mouth started singing doggerel verse, in a croaky voice.

The song, despite its cringeworthy rhymes, proved somewhat educational, as the hat sang the virtues of the four Houses of Hogwarts. From what Tom could tell, the cleverest and most scholarly of newcomers would be placed in Ravenclaw, where dwelled the intelligent but perhaps slightly out-of-touch with reality. Gryffindor, meanwhile, would become the new home of those who were fearless and brave, perchance to the point of foolhardiness. Hufflepuffs, as it turned out, would be those who were hard-working, reliable, good friends, and kind-hearted. Slytherin, on the other hand, welcomed less the pure of heart, and more the pure of blood and ruthless of ambition, whose hallmarks were described as versatility and self-centred focus. The hat seemed to disapprove of their vanity.

Vanity wasn't something Tom thought much about, but he reflected on the various traits mentioned by the hat. Tom had never had a friend in his life, and kindness was a somewhat alien concept, that he had been told about (repeatedly) but had never quite understood. Frankly, he'd come to be contemptuous of it, after being told so many times that he should try to be more like the weaklings around him. He was clearly more intelligent than most of the idiots around him at the orphanage, but he didn't know what was usual in this unusual world. He'd always considered himself a practical and worldly sort, despite his obvious unworldly talents. As for bravery, he struggled to think of a time

he'd been afraid, but somehow whatever situation he'd been in, he'd always felt strong enough to deal with it. All in all, he wanted to be around fewer people who were alike in character to the Muggles at the orphanage, and more who were more like himself, though that seemed to be asking a bit much; after all, he knew what he was like, and he hadn't yet met anyone quite like him, even in the magical world.

"When I call your names, you will each come in turn and try on the Sorting Hat", said Dumbledore.

He opened the parchment and read from it:

"Aardwolf, Archibald"

Archie walked forwards to the stool. Dumbledore picked up the hat, and gestured for him to sit, which he did. The hat was placed on his head, and was far too big for him. It slipped down over his eyes, prompting smirks and stifled laughter from some of the others. Tom glanced at them, trying to work out if they were missing the obvious fact that if it was too big for Archie, it'd be too big for them too.

Meanwhile, the crinkly face in the hat appeared to be deep in thought for a moment, before proclaiming loudly:

"Hufflepuff!"

Loud applause came from one of the tables, presumably that of the Hufflepuffs, and more subdued applause came from the other tables.

"Albertstone, Enid" quickly became the first new Ravenclaw.

Soon thereafter came the turn of "Avery, Emlyn". The hat took a moment before finally announcing its decision:

"Slytherin!"

So, that was what a Slytherin was like, then. This one seemed quite different from Abraxas, who seemed quite certain to be going to Slytherin House. It had occurred to Tom that clearly one didn't need to be absolutely exemplary of the values described, but merely have more of those qualities than the qualities of the other Houses. Logically this made some of the standards a little low, but hey, at least he would be ahead of the crowd in three out of four Houses, by his own estimation. Tom was a little downcrest at his realization about standards, but on the other hand, he was anything but averse to the notion of being the best.

Tom watched the students being sorted with some interest, including "Dolohov, Antonin" (Slytherin), "Everard, Philibert" (Gryffindor), "Dunston, Ezra" (Hufflepuff), Highcastle, Elvira (Ravenclaw) and "Howard, Naomi" (also Ravenclaw). Slytherin acquired a dark-skinned girl with strange plaits in her hair, by the name of "Jabez, Belinda".

Tom soon noticed that the hat took decidedly longer to assign Houses to some, than to others. When it came to "Lestrange, Tiernan", the hat called out "Slytherin!" in only moments. Lestrange smirked, and headed for the Slytherin table.

"Llewellyn, Leonid" was sorted to Gryffindor almost as quickly.

"Malfoy, Abraxas" was sorted into Slytherin after only a few seconds more than that.

"Meyrick, Tatiana"

Tom was trying to pre-empt the Sorting Hat's pronouncements by now. This girl seemed quite out of place as she fidgeted on the stool. No, wait, she was looking for her place, needing to belong. Guess that makes her a...

"Hufflepuff!", announced the Sorting Hat.

Quite some students later, Dumbledore came to:

"Riddle, Tom"

He made his way to the stool, and scowled as the battered old hat slipped over his eyes.

"Well well well," spoke a voice in Tom's head, "it's all in your blood, isn't it? Haven't seen such lineage for a long time. A sharp mind too, so many questions, hungry for knowledge. But it's not just knowledge you're after, is it? You want to be better than others,

you want to be great. Plenty of confidence; you don't fear any hurdles before you. But when it all boils down, for you it's got to be... Slytherin!"

This last word had been called out loud by the hat. Tom removed it, thinking "thank you for your opinion, hat".

He handed it back to Dumbledore, who seemed to be scrutinising him. Tom turned and headed to the Slytherin table, where the expected applause had already come and gone. Now they were looking at him not exactly welcomingly, but perhaps with a little more open-minded skepticism than Abraxas had on the train.

A few remaining students were sorted into various Houses, but he had been the second-to-last to be sorted into Slytherin, the very last having been a small, blonde-haired and hollow-cheeked waif-like girl by the name of "Zelyonaya, Marca", quite a contrast after the chubby "Wilmot, William" who had been sorted into Hufflepuff only moments previously.

At the end of the Sorting ceremony, Dumbledore took the Sorting Hat out of the Great Hall, and after he had departed, the Headmaster spoke again:

"Well, another year, another Sorting!", he said, cheerfully. "May all those freshly Sorted find their new homes welcoming and stimulating. Your Heads of Houses will give you a proper introduction in the morning, if not this evening. But first, let us feast!"

He clapped his hands twice, and the tables were now filled with all manner of food, including many kinds that Tom had previously only seen in people's daydreams. Around him, other students were catching up with their friends, and in some cases making introductions to first-years. A curly-haired older girl sitting opposite Tom, with a silver-rimmed green enamel badge on her lapel saying "Prefect", addressed him:

"Riddle, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes", Tom replied.

"Yeah, no idea. Welcome to Slytherin" she said, and turned back to her neighbour without another word.

Antonin Dolohov had also been sorted to Slytherin and was next to him, and did not make conversation. He had nodded to Tom when Tom arrived to the table, as though to say "you and me both, I guess we're alright". Tom, for his part, gave the boy a half-smile but was, despite his eagerness to learn about the magical world around him, which at this stage would mean conversation, also preoccupied by the food.

Quite some time later, when the eating had slowed down to a minimum, with most people finished and now just chatting, Headmaster Dippet addressed the Hall:

"Now that we are all satiated," he began, met by a look of surprise from the very few who were still eating, "it is time to head off and refresh ourselves before the start of term tomorrow. For those who do not know already, lessons will begin tomorrow afternoon.

First-years, you will have an orientation of sorts in the morning, and the rest of you, I urge you to use the time to prepare for the oncoming term, reviewing your new textbooks of the year"

A couple of nearby older Slytherins tried to suppress their laughter. The Ravenclaw students were nodding thoughtfully, on their own table.

"So, without further ado, I would like to invite Senior Prefects to gather up your newly Sorted fellow House-members, and to all, a good night!"

Dippet turned to speak to a couple of the other teachers, perhaps wishing them a goodnight, and himself made his way off and out of the Hall. Students around the Hall were rising to their feet, and the volume of chatter increased again.

The Prefect with the curls spoke loudly:

"Alright, first-years, with me now! Come on, hurry up, no, not you... *Slytherin* first-years"

It was a good thing she was taller than the others around her, and had quite distinctive hair, as it might not otherwise have been easy to keep with her in the ensuing crowd. There was more space once they'd left the Hall, as the various Houses went their separate ways. Even the throng of Slytherins now thinned out, as many of the older students were already heading off way in front of the tall girl.

"My name's Black, by the way, Dorea Black" she said, now that she had only the freshly sorted first-years around her. "I'll be watching out for you, but you'd better not give me any trouble. And if you have any problems, go tell the Bloody Baron, not me. Like me, he knows plenty about Hogwarts. Unlike me, he's already dead, cannot die of boredom, and has nothing better to do than listening to you lot whinging".

Tom smiled, but the others were exchanging somewhat chastened glances. In any case, the Slytherins were now descending a spiral staircase, and Tom had to watch his step a little in the darkness. Another corridor and another staircase later, Black stopped partway down a corridor, and waited for the tail end of the group to catch up.

"Alright, this is where you live now", said Black. The first-years looked about at the bare corridor and dank walls.

"*Asclepius*", she said, ostensibly addressing the wall. Part of the wall shunted itself backwards, and then slid aside, leaving a doorway. "That's not a spell", she continued, "that's just the current password, but you'll need to remember it. Now, quickly, inside. The fewer students in the other Houses know where the door is, the better. Don't want all the riff-raff hanging around."

Inside the doorway, Tom and the other first-years looked around. The door closed behind them with a loud "thunk".

"From this side, just touch the door and it'll open", said Black. "Now, this is our Common Room, but your dormitories are in the annexes here and here" - she gestured to two passageways heading off to the left and the right.

"Boys this way, girls that way. Your stuff's already there. Well, go on then!"

Nobody moved immediately, as they were all still taking in the room around them. Black seemed to consider her job done, though, because she was now ignoring them and had joined some older students. The common room was largely rectangular with several levels and adjoining annexes separated by a few steps each, and had a curved section at one end, and... something that felt large and powerful. Tom slowly walked in the direction of the curved, dark glass wall in which he could see some reflections from the common room.

"It's the lake", said an older student, who had noticed Tom's gaze. "You can't see it properly at the moment, but in the daytime, the sun shines through", he added.

"*Lumos*", said Tom, directing his wand at the window. Light flared at the tip of his wand, but it just made his reflection more pronounced and actually obscured his view.

"Yeah, that won't work. But you can use *lumos maxima*" - and with these last words, light flared from his own wand, but sailed through the glass and into the abyss beyond. As it made its way through the water, Tom could make out some plants, and maybe a glimmer of something moving past the light, something alive; maybe it had been attracted by it.

"Hmm" said Tom. He nodded to the boy, by way of leave-taking, and turned back to the annex that would lead to his dormitory.

Chapter Four

Welcome to Slytherin

“Wake up, sleeping beauties”, came Dorea Black’s voice, through a blinding light. “Time for your orientation morning; don’t be sluggish, be in the Common Room in ten minutes”.

Tom blinked slowly, as the light faded. Momentarily disoriented, it quickly came back to him that he was now at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. What with the staff at Wool’s having forgotten about his room, he had grown accustomed to being able to have a lie in when he wanted one. Oh well, he’d still rather be here, by a very long shot. He sat up, and momentarily failed to swing his legs out of bed. This bed was a lot bigger than the one at Wool’s. He rolled over, and actually swung his legs out of bed now, sitting up. The beds in Slytherin House dormitories were set into alcoves in the walls, which provided a rather cosy secure feeling, with walls on three sides and an overhanging ceiling. He made his way to the adjoining bathrooms, where yesterday evening he had bathed in more luxury than ever before, and washed his face, more to wake himself up than anything else. Back in the dormitory itself, he and the others, various morning greetings now having been exchanged, changed from their pyjamas into their school things.

As they got changed, Tom noticed that the others didn’t have caning marks on their skin. Neither did Tom, but he was one of the few at Wool’s who didn’t. The staff had given up on Tom quite some time ago, and even when he was smaller and had been caned, any injuries healed themselves overnight. The very last time he had been caned, the cane snapped, and a large splinter had gone into the matron’s eye.

Once assembled in the Common Room, the first-years were met by Dorea again, who only told them to get to breakfast and return to the Common Room for nine o’clock, at which time they would be met by their Head of House, Professor Slughorn.

They found the Great Hall again easily enough despite Dorea not showing them the way; anyone who was about and moving in the Castle was heading in that direction. Once there, they found a wide selection of breakfast foods on their House table. Tom definitely approved of the fare here over that at Wool’s. Not only were the sausages incomparably better than those at the orphanage, but there was a food Tom had not previously encountered, identified by Emlyn Avery as “black pudding”, that was truly excellent.

Breakfast was briefly interrupted by a sudden influx of owls delivering the morning mail. Naturally, Tom did not receive anything; after all, who would be writing to him? He had received only one letter by owl so far, and it had been to chide him for cursing a Muggle.

During breakfast, though, the new Slytherins did get to meet the “Bloody Baron”, whom Dorea had mentioned the previous evening. He turned out to be a doleful ghost, clad in chains and blood. Tom was surprised that this was a Slytherin, as he did not seem to be exactly the epitome of Slytherin values. Perhaps this was what failed ambition looked like.

Upon having eaten, and noticing the time on the large clock at one end of the Great Hall (Abraxas ostentatiously confirmed the time on his golden pocket-watch), they made their way back to the Common Room without getting too lost. They joined routes, partway back, with a curly-haired teacher in dark green robes, who welcomed them to Slytherin House:

“Great to see you all, well done on getting into Slytherin”, he said, “I’m Horace Slughorn, your head of House, not to mention Potions teacher”. He seemed far more interested in Tiernan LeStrange, Abraxas Malfoy, and Emlyn Avery, than in the other students combined,

and in no time at all was chatting with them about their families. Tom was beginning to see that the denizens of Slytherin House valued family very highly. A pity he didn't have any.

In the Common Room, Professor Slughorn took a parchment out of his robes, presumably with notes on. Tom took a look at it through Slughorn's mind, which turned out to be far more open than most. The parchment had a list of the first-years names, and after that, said simply:

- Timetable
- Quidditch
- Duelling
- Salvo
- Library
- Points

He went briefly through the register, checking all were present and correct, and then began:

"You should all receive your lesson timetables sometime this morning. Most of the lessons, you'll be taking along with another House. I'll be expecting you to outperform them, but more on that later"

Tom felt confident of this part.

"Now, I know you're all new here, and the castle is quite large and can be confusing, but do try to be on time for lessons. If you get lost or don't know where you're going, and you don't see a friendly face around, a good bet is often to ask one of the portraits. They get to see more of the castle than you might think, because they can visit most of the other paintings in the castle. So even if you can't take exactly the same route as they do, they'll usually be able to point you in the right direction. Oh, and whatever you do, don't think of taking advice from Peeves, under any circumstances", he chuckled.

"As today's Friday, you'll have some lessons this afternoon, and then your lessons will recommence properly on Monday morning. I recommend you use some of the weekend to familiarize yourselves with the castle. You mustn't leave the castle boundaries, though, or venture into the Forbidden Forest, which got its name for a reason, you know."

Some of the students were nodding, but Tom wanted to know why it was forbidden. He didn't have to ask, though, as a dour-looking girl, named Iolanthe, beat him to it:

"Why can't we go there?", she asked.

"Because, Miss, er, Oannes, is it? We don't want you getting bitten by a werewolf, or worse, losing points for Slytherin. Now, let that be the last we hear of that", he warned.

Some of the students smirked at Slughorn's priorities, but he didn't notice as he was looking back at his parchment.

"Now, where was I? Ah yes, next up, Quidditch."

He seemed to have more attention now from some of the first-years.

"Know that it's very rare for first-years to get picked for the House Quidditch team, but there's nothing to stop you from trying out for it. Anyone interested in playing for Slytherin, make sure to speak with Violet Selwyn, she's a fifth-year Prefect, and also the Quidditch captain for our House, before Sunday afternoon, which is when Slytherin's Quidditch trials will be held. Anyone thinking of going for that? Abraxas, your father told me you'd make a good Beater or maybe a Keeper, and you seem a strapping lad for your age; however good you are though, I don't think Miss Selwyn will choose you over herself for the Keeper position, so it looks like going for Beater would be a better bet for you. That said though, you'll be competing against Messrs Parkinson and Bulstrode who've put up a fine show as Beaters last season; I know young Lucretia Black is going to try out for it, which probably means Walburga Crabbe will try out too, you know what those two are like... or maybe you don't, but anyway, the point is, it'd be at least five of you going for two positions"

Malfoy shrugged nonchalantly, and said he'd think about it. Slughorn frowned, but didn't get to continue yet, as another girl, the snaky-haired Belinda Jabez, spoke up:

"I want to try out for Seeker"

"Well, do speak with Selwyn then, but I warn you, competition will be stiff"

"On the train yesterday there was a Mudblood girl saying..."

"We'll not have that language here, Jabez", said Slughorn reproachfully, "Muggle-born, I'm sure we can manage to say"

"Alright, a Muggle-born girl", began Jabez anew, but with a clear tone of distaste, "saying she wanted to play for her House. She got sorted into Gryffindor, and I don't know who their Seeker is, but it'd be a crime if they let some Muggle girl..."

"Muggle-born", interrupted Slughorn.

"Yeah, some Muggle-born girl onto the team, if I don't get a place when I've been flying all my life"

"It might perhaps be wishful thinking to expect Gryffindor might field an inexperienced Muggle-born first-year as Seeker, but we can hope", joked Slughorn.

"She seemed weirdly confident, said she had a half-blood Squib of a great-aunt or something, who'd lent her things and she'd been training for it"

"Jabez, really, it doesn't sound like she has much of a chance. Now, we're not here to talk about great-aunt Squibs, so let's move on, shall we?" Jabez sighed, and Slughorn continued: "The other main inter-House sport at Hogwarts is of course duelling"

This item had Tom's attention much more than the previous. "First-years don't duel with the older students straight away", he said, quickly adding "for your own good, you know", which clearly did not appease his students as much as he had hoped. "However, all first-years are invited to an inter-House introduction to duelling this evening at seven o'clock in the Great Hall".

Quite a few of the students looked pleased with this.

"Know that competitive duelling is a great way to win points for your House, so do train hard if you take that up, but please try not to injure each other too much; we want you in one piece. Which brings me to the next item. Should you have any ailments that need attending to, Hogwarts has a professional Healer living on-site. Salvo Tegner, or Healer Tegner to you, is an expert in his field and can fix most things as efficiently as anyone from St. Mungo's, so you're in good hands. He can usually be found in the Hospital Wing, as you might expect, so just ask any of the portraits to direct you there if you're not sure".

Slughorn consulted his parchment again and Tom resisted the urge to prompt him with the next agenda item.

"On the topic of the library: Hogwarts has one of the most well-stocked libraries around, so don't be shy about making use of it. You first-years shouldn't be needing anything from the Restricted Section, but if you do, let me know, and I'll write you a note to keep you on the good side of Madam Redmond, the librarian".

Tom liked the sound of that. He approved of having access to resources that most did not.

"Last but definitely not least, and something I've touched on here a couple of times, do bear in mind the importance of the relationship between your actions and the reputation of Slytherin House. Many of the things you do here at Hogwarts can earn you House points if you do them well enough, and any transgressions can lose points from the House. So make sure to play by the rules at all times", - he emphasised these last words - "and don't get caught doing anything you shouldn't".

Tom smiled at the dissonance.

"Last year, the House Cup was won by Ravenclaw, and we can't have them getting too big-headed, so it's really important that we win it back this year", concluded Slughorn.

Their schedules indeed arrived later that morning, appearing not by owl but rather placed upon their beds by some unseen deliverer. This afternoon, they would have Defence Against the Dark Arts, followed by Transfiguration.

Defence Against the Dark Arts, as it turns out, was taught by Professor Merrythought, who had brought them from the train the previous evening.

“Good afternoon, Ravenclaws and Slytherins”, she began. “With me, you will learn some of the most dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts, and you will also learn about some of the most dangerous things you may encounter in the world at large. As such, I will require your utmost attention and obedience. With your cooperation in this regard, I will teach you skills that will serve you well for life. Fail to cooperate in this regard, and I will teach you a level of regret that you would not previously have thought possible”. She had their attention.

“Today we’ll be starting with something that is, in and of itself, quite safe, but will also help to keep you safe: Shield Charms”

Tom had read about these, but not yet had occasion to practice. After all, he had not come under any form of magical attack while he was at Wool’s.

“The incantation for producing a very basic Shield Charm is simple enough, and several kinds of wand movement, which we will discuss, will work nicely. Timing, however is important. It’s not an umbrella that you can put up and forget about. It will only block an unfriendly spell that arrives as you are casting it, so it will have to be neither too soon, nor too early. The spell is cast thus: *protego!*”

With this last word, she brandished her wand, and Tom felt a slight buzzing of magic in the air, but there was nothing to see.

“The swish you just saw with my wand is only one way of casting a basic Shield Charm. It is an oblique motion that will help to deflect unfriendly spells; that way your magical power is not pitted directly against whatever’s coming at you. It’s easy, and most importantly, it’s quick. You can, however, also respond more directly, which will be slower but more powerful, thus: *protego!*”

This time she held her wand pointing directly forwards towards them. Several students looked uneasy about this, but there was no need. While the sensation of some kind of magical pulse was more notable than the previous time, it was still barely tangible.

“Now, time for you to try, wands out please”

Tom’s wand was already in his hand.

“The first way, on a count of three. Three, two, one...”

“*Protego!*”, chorused the class, brandishing their wands.

“Good, I note that some of you have it already; others need work. Let’s go again”

They practiced this for a while until they had all got it, before moving to the other kind, which perhaps only half of the class had got before Professor Merrythought announced that this would be enough for today in the category of solo practice. Tom wondered if they would now get to try curses on each other, but apparently this was not in her lesson plan.

“I will now call out your names in random order. When I call out your name, know that I am about to hex you with a Sneezing Jinx. This is harmless, but I want you to try to block it. If you fail, you’ll sneeze, of course. Let us begin!”

Enid Albertstone, a Ravenclaw boy, was the first to be called out, and also the first to miss and sneeze, to some amusement of the class. But Professor Merrythought was making the rounds of the class swiftly enough that soon all were far more focused on their own personal defence, than on any failures of others. By the time she got to Tom, he was quite prepared, and deflected the spell with ease, a feat he had repeated a few times by the end of the class. When the class did end, she reminded all that while it was not obligatory, they would certainly be well-advised to come to the first-years’ introduction to duelling in the Great Hall in the evening. Tom didn’t need further encouragement.

Transfiguration, on the other hand, did not seem likely to become one of Tom's favourite subjects.

The class was shared with Hufflepuff House, and the subject's teacher was Professor Dumbledore. While he had not directly addressed with Tom the matter of the burning of the trophies he had accumulated at Wool's, which he had been supposed to return to their previous owners with the expectation that they be unharmed, either it was Tom's imagination or Dumbledore was making a reference to this when, introducing the subject matter, he warned students of the importance of paying attention, lest they (being inexperienced young Witches and Wizards) might transform something of value, or something irreplaceable, into something worthless or even dangerous.

Today's lesson did not seem all that dangerous, however, and had them transforming matchsticks into pins, or at least trying to. Even after much instruction and many demonstrations, and the process being broken down into several stages, with the intention that they could later do it in one go as Dumbledore did, very few of them had made any noteworthy changes to their matchsticks by the end of the class, unless one were to count that several matches needed to be replaced after being accidentally lit and burned out.

Tom, for his part, had succeeded only as far as making his match pointier and somewhat silvery, which displeased him. He did not take well to failure.

For homework, each student was given a box of matches, and the instruction to practice. Even after a long and frustrating lesson, Tom had to smile at the idea of them all being given boxes of matches, something that would certainly never have happened at Wool's. But then, this was a very different place. All the same, Tom was glad to get out of the lesson, and off to the Great Hall to eat. But really, what he was most looking forward to was duelling, in the evening.

When the appointed hour came, the excited chattering of first-years in the Great Hall was interrupted by the arrival of Professor Merrythought, who strode in, conjuring the huge wooden doors closed behind her, with a flick of her wand over her shoulder.

"Good evening, first-years. Now, this afternoon I have taught you how to cast a Shield Charm. You're going to need that now. Since we've been practicing that with the Sneezing Jinx, feel free to use that as an offensive spell during duels."

She walked a few paces further away from the group, and turned back to them, raising her wand. Many of the students tried to subtly hide behind other students.

"Don't worry, I'll just be defending for a moment here. Spread out a little, stop hiding behind each other. If you please, on my mark, hit me with your best Sneezing Jinxes. Yes, all of you, wands out, if you haven't already. Alright... Three... Two... One... Go!"

"*Steleus!*" chorused the first-years, speaking the incantation that Professor Merrythought had used in class.

This time she didn't speak the protective spell out loud, but the Sneezing Jinxes crackled noisily as they hit the shielding force that she had clearly conjured anyway with a swish of her wand.

"Very good", she said. "Now, pair up, and spread out along the length of the Hall"

There was a clamouring of people trying to pair with their friends, or at least with people they knew. Someone put their hand on Tom's shoulder, and he spun around. It was a Gryffindor, smiling at him. How odd.

"Wanna go?", she asked. It wasn't really a question though, as pretty much everyone else had paired up already.

"Everyone face their partners so that you're facing the sides of the Hall. We don't want stray spells to start hitting other pairs", said Merrythought. People adjusted their positions as necessary, and she continued:

"First, we must observe the niceties. Which also means introductions, especially relevant as many of you won't know each other yet. You will address your partners, stating

your names. Then you will bow, turn away from each other, take five paces, turn back, and the duel begins. Do this now”, she instructed.

Tom and his partner regarded each other, and spoke:

“Tom Riddle”

“Jana Teires”

They bowed. Jana Teires had spiky hair that swept back like the venomous needles of a porcupine, a ferocious creature that Tom remembered from the bestiary at Wool’s.

Opening and connecting to her mind, Tom could tell she was itching to unleash a bunch of offensive spells at the very first opportunity, and that he would need to immediately parry them before he could get in an attack.

Rising from their bows, they turned away from each other, and as they took their steps in opposite directions, Professor Merrythought was calling out:

“Five... four... three... two... one... go!”

“*Steleus!*”, cried Teires.

“*Protego*”

“*Stel...*”

“*Protego*”

“*Fli...*”

“*Protego*”

This was getting silly. They eyed each other warily, on guard for the slightest motion. Tom wanted to attack, but it was clear that the time advantage was with the defender, particularly because they’d each spent half of the afternoon practicing that. He decided a new strategy was in order.

“*Protego!*” was Tom’s new idea, shielding against nothing, but the feint worked, and prompted premature action.

“*Protego!*” she responded instinctively, meaning that her defence was too soon for his next spell that followed a split second after the first:

“*Vesparamanda!*” cried Tom as she was part way through doing that, aiming a Stinging Jinx at her. He’d aimed quite centrally, so that he’d hit at least something, and (either by chance or because he had been focussed on it) the something in question that the jinx hit was her wand-hand, which had been raised, and now part way through casting a second spell that didn’t get completed. Her wand clattered to the floor, and she sprang after it to retrieve it. As she made her grab, stumbling slightly and regaining her feet, Tom realized he didn’t actually have a plan of what to do next, and used the first spell that came to mind:

“*Incendio*”

Teires was still partly stooped from picking up her wand, and it was her impressive hair that caught the blast of the spell. It burst into flames.

“*Flipendo!*”, she countered, with her newly recovered wand.

“*Protego*”, counter-parried Tom, though judging from where her sparks met his Shield Charm, it had been unnecessary; it wouldn’t have hit him anyway.

“Stop, stop, stop”, called Merrythought.

They stopped duelling, but did not lower their wands, just in case. Teires now had noticed her hair was on fire, and had a brief moment of looking like a startled rabbit, as she clearly didn’t know what to do. Tom and Merrythought both acted at once.

“*Aguamenti*”, shouted Tom, hitting Teires full in the face with enough water to cause her to stagger backwards, but also to put out the flames. Whatever Professor Merrythought had cast, it hadn’t been as dramatic. Probably an Extinguishing Charm, which now Tom thought about it, might have been more appropriate.

Teires regained her balance and stood up with her hands to her head, partially obscuring her face.

“Are you alright, Teires?”, asked Merrythought, through the former’s spluttering. Teires’ reply was a little indistinct. “Teires?”, repeated Merrythought.

“Yeah,” she replied, sliding her hands up to the top of her head, presumably checking the status of her hair. Her face now revealed, Tom saw she was actually on the brink not of tears, as one might have expected, but laughter. Tom had to admit, she did look quite funny, soaking wet and clearly in pain, with wisps of smoke rising from her hair.

“Owww”, she continued. “I can sort out the hair,” she said, still dripping and half-grimacing, half-laughing now, “but this really hurts”, she said, gesturing to her stung hand, which was looking rather swollen. “Can you do anything for it, Professor?”

“I’m sure Healer Tegner will be able to fix you up”, said Merrythought.

“Alright, then I’ll go up to the Hospital Wing now to see if he’s still there, if you don’t mind”, said Teires, brandishing her injured hand.

“Yes, you do that”

Teires turned to Tom as she was leaving.

“You...”, she began, but didn’t continue, as she now trying to suppress laughter again, and also distracted by her hand. “See you later”, she concluded, and made her way out of the Hall, leaving wet footprints behind her.

Tom watched her depart, and glanced into her mind as she did so. He saw a few things flickering by in her thoughts, but some images were prominent than others; her stung hand, her hair, her wand, and Tom’s face. Well, that didn’t tell him much.

Professor Merrythought turned to Tom, who now wondered if he was in trouble for setting a fellow student on fire.

“Riddle, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Professor”

“Hmm. I think you can join in with the older students next week.”

Tom smiled, and Professor Merrythought now returned to watching the other duels, leaving Tom on his own, as he no longer had a partner. He wondered if she would have the group periodically swap partners, in which case he’d get a new one, but she did not.

“I saw that you set that Mudblood on fire. Brilliant!”

They were back in the Slytherin Common Room, and Jabez had a look of congratulatory admiration.

“What Mudblood?” replied Tom. Of course he knew whom he’d set on fire, but knew nothing of her parentage, and wondered how Jabez knew this. Maybe Teires was the Gryffindor from the train, that she’d mentioned to Slughorn.

“How many Mudbloods *have* you set on fire?”, asked Jabez, looking both surprised and slightly awed.

Tom thought for a moment as to whether he’d ever set any other person on fire, even in the Muggle world. He hadn’t, but the time that was passing by while he was busy looking thoughtful without answering the question was resulting in Jabez looking yet more awed.

“The only person I’ve set on fire so far has been that one in the Great Hall”, replied Tom. Jabez looked momentarily disappointed, but then continued:

“Well, I still like that you say “so far”; it’s cool that you’re planning to do more... You think you’ll get away with it if you keep doing it? Do you think it’d be alright if I did the same, or has Merrythought made a rule against it now that you’ve done it?”

“I don’t know about rules. I don’t think she expected us to know enough spells for us to need rules telling us which ones to not use yet”

“I completely outclassed Avery”, said Jabez, apparently of the opinion that they’d been talking about Tom for long enough now.

“I imagine you both had some experience already?”, asked Tom.

“If he did, it wasn’t showing”, said Jabez, “but I’d expected better from him, yeah”

“Do you know how many of us are joining in with the older students next week?” he asked.

“What, is there an option to do that? Where do we sign up?”

“Professor Merrythought told me to join in with the older students next week. Didn’t she invite you too, since you were beating Avery?”

Jabez looked like she wanted to hex Tom, and it was a moment before she replied:

“No, she didn’t. Maybe she didn’t see us duelling. There were a lot of people in the Hall”

Tom resisted the urge to point out that Professor Merrythought seemed quite sharp and attentive, and instead advised:

“Perhaps you should speak with her when you see her, let her know of your interest”

Jabez looked thoughtful.

“Yeah, I’ll do that, she said, brightening up a little. “Anyway, I’m off to bed now. Going to get up early to hit the Quidditch pitch”

“I thought Quidditch trials weren’t until Sunday afternoon?”

“They aren’t, but Selwyn said that if I get down there early enough in the morning, I can check out the school brooms before any of the other Houses do their trials and take up the pitch. Not that it should matter - my father said he’d buy me a Comet 180 if I get on the team”

Tom wasn’t sure if this was a sign of support or disbelief, on her father’s part.

“Anyway, goodnight”

“Goodnight, Jabez”

“Call me Belinda”

Tom smiled but didn’t reply. She turned to leave, and Tom dropped the smile.

Chapter Five

Sparring Partners

“Anyone seen Jabez this morning?”, asked Avery, at breakfast. Most of the Slytherin first-years were seated together.

“She was gone already when I got up”, said Oannes. “Why?”

“No special reason”, said Avery. “Just conspicuous by her absence”.

“She said that she enjoyed duelling with you, by the way”, said Tom, with a smile.

Dolohov smirked, and Abraxas outright grinned.

“I went easy on her”, said Avery. “Got to, you know, against a girl”.

Marca Zelyonaya put down the unbuttered toast at which she’d been nibbling.

“Is that so?”, she said.

“I wasn’t aware of that rule”, said Tom.

“Exactly”, retorted Avery, “and look how long your partner lasted before she needed medical attention. Can’t go around putting all the girls in the Hospital Wing”

“Perhaps, you would rather find yourself there?”, inquired Zelyonaya, pointedly.

“Morning, boys and girls”, interrupted Slughorn’s voice. “Glad to see you’re all getting on and making friends”

Slughorn was either oblivious to the fight that had been looking like it was about to break out, or an absolute master of intervention. Tom wasn’t sure which, and when he looked at the Professor’s thoughts directly, they were overwhelmingly preoccupied with breakfast foods. Slughorn continued on his way up to the staff table, greeting a few others as he went.

As a further distraction, the morning post arrived. Abraxas received a copy of a newspaper, *The Daily Prophet*. After a moment’s distraction on account of the moving pictures on the page, Tom caught sight of the headline. Judging from it, there was talk of war brewing in both the Muggle world and his new world. He wondered how it would affect things, and also wondered what war in the magical world was like. He imagined soldiers in trenches, launching spells at each other. He then dismissed that, as there wouldn’t be nearly enough Witches and Wizards to fill miles and miles of trenches. Would there? And wouldn’t Shield Charms render trenches redundant anyway? He wondered at how Muggles could possibly fail to notice wars between Wizards when they did break out. Missing the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron was one thing; missing all-out war was another.

Tom’s musings were interrupted by a small and fluffy-feathered owl landing on his plate. He was already reaching for his wand when he realized he probably shouldn’t kill what was, after all, a messenger, even if it had just stood on his breakfast. It had a note. Tom took it curiously, wondering if it had been misdelivered, and unrolled it. In very loopy handwriting, it read:

Tom

You and me, rematch?

Jana

Tom’s brow furrowed as he read this. Judging from her parting thoughts having been on her wand and his face, he’d assumed she’d want to get her own back, but had expected that she would try to do so when he wasn’t suspecting. The request for a presumably fair rematch was more surprising than if she had tried to surprise him.

Tom swatted the owl away from his food while he considered the matter. He looked around to see if she was in the Hall. The owl pecked at his hand. He turned back and

looked it in the eye, causing it to back hop backwards and hoot apologetically. Tom took out a quill and ink, and wrote:

Where and when?

He was of course happy to oblige and would take pleasure in hurting her again. He'd have to figure out what spells to use to win without such obvious injuries this time, but he was content to do that. He rolled the note back up, and gave it to the owl.

"Take this back", he commanded.

"What was it, Riddle?" asked Lestrage.

Tom ignored him for a moment as he watched the owl depart and fly over to the Gryffindor table. Presumably she was sat there, though Tom couldn't see her directly due to a number of breakfasting older students between them. He could have extended his mind to see her that way, but he wasn't too interested in actually seeing her, just knowing where she was.

"Riddle?"

He turned back to the table.

"Just a note"

Lestrage went to speak, probably to press the issue, but upon making eye-contact, decided not to.

Tom was now finished with his breakfast, but wanted to see if a new reply would come. He didn't want to go and visit her at the Gryffindor table, and have to deal with the questions that would raise amongst his fellow Slytherins, let alone have to discuss the matter in the presence of other Gryffindors. He didn't have to wait long. The owl was soon back, this time the note bearing the additional words:

Good point. Any ideas?

Tom sighed. This was not the exciting arch-enemy scheme of vengeance he'd been expecting. He put quill to parchment again, and replied:

Let's meet in the library, now, to discuss.

"Got a pen-pal, Riddle?" asked Julia Nettleskip, who was sitting next to Oannes.

"I think I'll leave before the infernal bird comes back", replied Tom, dismissing the owl with the latest addition to the note. "See you in the Common Room".

He got up and headed out of the Great Hall, without looking back. He took a few random turns, before asking a portrait for directions to the library. The directions weren't very good, and several portraits later, he asked a passing flesh-and-blood Ravenclaw student, who directed him more helpfully. He looked forward to knowing this castle a lot better.

Professor Slughorn had not been exaggerating when he had hinted at the size of the library. Vast bookcases stretched high up to lofty ceilings, and looking down the aisles, it was clear that there were yet more rooms to the library, off to the sides.

"Can I help you?", asked a Witch who had seemingly appeared from nowhere, presumably the librarian.

"I was just looking to learn a little more about Hogwarts, actually"

"First-year, are you?", she asked, pleasantly.

"Yes"

"Hmm. Well, if it's background reading you're looking for, there's nothing to match Patterwine's *Ab Schola Condita*; it's very much the seminal work on the history of Hogwarts"

“Sounds fascinating”

“Great, well, that was easy then. I’ll take you to it. Follow me”

Tom followed her, wondering why she didn’t just summon the book to her like the shop assistant in Flourish and Blott’s had done. She led him through what appeared to be the largest and most central room of the library, which also had a couple of rows of large reading desks down the middle of it. A smaller room and a staircase later, Madam Redmond gestured to an array of bookcases.

“Here we have histories of the school; here’s *Ab Schola Condita*, by the way; and here we also have indexed chronicles, architectural treatises, personal memoirs from some of the Headmasters and other staff and notable former pupils, House-specific histories, inter-school events and competitions, and that narrow bookcase over there is a most delightful collection of poetry and songs that have been composed about the school over the years, including the *Collected Works of the Sorting Hat* - dictated, of course, in the latter case”

“Thank you”, smiled Tom, thinking he’d give the Sorting Hat’s efforts a miss.

“Always a pleasure; let me know if you need anything else”, said Madam Redmond, and left him to his research.

He took a copy of *Ab Schola Condita* off the shelf, and momentarily staggered under the weight of it, before hovering it onto the reading table in the middle of the chamber.

He had almost finished the first four chapters, which were actually abridged biographies of the four Witches and Wizards after whom the Houses were named, and who had originally founded Hogwarts School, when a footnote about a duel between Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor reminded him of something. Teires! He had completely forgotten about her, and it would take her quite a while to search the entire library for him, especially with Madam Redmond helpfully asking her what she’s looking for.

He made his way back to the central chamber of the library, in case she had opted to wait for him in the most obvious and easy-to-find place. Sure enough, there she was, quite recognizable even from behind due to her hair, which showed no signs of being any the worse for wear for having been on fire only yesterday evening. She was sitting with her back to him, facing the entrance at the other side, presumably so she could watch the entrance to the room.

He walked towards her, and wondered if she would hex him on sight if startled from behind. Then he thought that maybe *he* should hex *her* first, while he had the advantage, to avoid the problem. He decided against this course of action, and instead cleared his throat. She turned around to see who it was, and did not hex him.

“Oh, hello Tom, I was beginning to think you weren’t coming”

“Well, here I am”

“Get lost?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Did you get lost, on the way here?”

“Something like that. I see you’ve entertained yourself though”, he gestured to the book on the table. He recognised it as *Thurlow’s Compendium of Duelling*. Well, there went his superior knowledge of duelling spells. Still, he should be able to beat her regardless just by superior talent.

“All the better to beat you with”, she grinned.

“How’s your hand?”, he asked. He didn’t care, but wanted to bring her attention back to his superiority.

“Good as new”, she said, flexing it. “Have a seat, why don’t you”, she added, gesturing. Tom took it, and set the book, which he had made follow him, on the table.

“I didn’t know they did that”

“Who did what?”, asked Tom.

“The books, follow you around, fly, set themselves down when you sit down. I mean, it makes sense, but I didn’t know they did it”

“Everything around me does as it’s told”, said Tom, flatly.

“Ooh, that sounds like a challenge”, said Teires, raising an eyebrow.

“Speaking of challenges”, said Tom, moving the topic onwards, “I’m to be duelling with the older students next week, and you, presumably, are not”

“If I am, it’s news to me”

“So, if you really think you stand a chance against me, we’ll need to meet somewhere that’s not the duelling club, and let’s not have bystanders either”

“Afraid I’ll make you look bad?”

“Hardly, but it makes things simpler if we’re alone”, he replied. He preferred that their duel be without intervention from others, and besides, he was not sure what was allowed where, when it came to duelling in the school. He’d have to get hold of a list of rules, assuming such a list was extant. He was not averse to breaking rules, but preferred to do so knowingly, so as to know what needed to be hidden and what did not.

“How about down by the lake?”, said Teires brightly.

“I doubt anyone will be down there, so that should be fine”

“When?”

“Now?” suggested Tom.

“Umm...” hesitated Teires.

“Surely you’re not afraid, a big brave Gryffindor with frightening hair?”, jibed Tom. She wasn’t actually very big; smaller than Tom was, but still, the phrase came naturally. He glanced into her mind, to see if she was in fact afraid, and it was a whirl of flight on a broomstick, a tiny golden thing on wings that she was chasing, and roaring cheers of a crowd. Strange girl couldn’t even keep her thoughts on the present conversation.

“You wish”, countered Teires. “The thing is that I have Quidditch trials this afternoon, so, you know, just in case, wild off-chance, just in case it should go badly for me against you a second time, I’d rather not be injured for my Quidditch trials”.

“What kind of vengeful enemy are you, that asks for favours regards your sporting pursuits?”

“Oh, come on, Tom, it’s just in good fun”

She seemed surprisingly familiar and friendly. Somehow, he didn’t disturb people here nearly as much as he had done in the Muggle world.

“This evening?”

“I’ll be tired and achy from my Quidditch”

“I don’t care”

“Ah, the famous charm of Slytherin House”, said Teires.

“You challenged me”, Tom reminded her.

“True enough”, she conceded. “Alright, quarter past seven, shall we say?”

Quarter past seven. She meant to intimidate him by the use of the quarter of the hour. Not seven, not even half past, but quarter past. As though her schedule were already so full, that this is when she will be free.

“Quarter past?”, repeated Tom, incredulously. “How about seven?”

“If you insist, but I’ll be slightly late”

Tom stared at her, and also into her mind. He saw her in a room decked with red and gold, presumably in the Gryffindor Common Room, or perhaps her dormitory. The focus was on her and her Hogwarts trunk, so he missed the finer details of the decor. Come to think of it, surely the trunk meant she was in the dormitory. What could she be so busy with? A nap? Getting changed?

Nevertheless, they agreed the hour, and Teires departed the library.

Come evening, and after dining, Tom waited by the lakeside, observing how long the waterfront was, and that perhaps they ought to have been a little more specific. Nor did he want to attract too much visual attention, lest it attract it from the wrong people. He opted to wait by the first part of the lake he met, in the hopes that she would arrive by the same route. He wished he knew some way of making heat without setting things on fire. He didn't know what time it was now, as he didn't have a watch, but he had set out shortly before seven. As he waited, he became gradually more annoyed at the delay, and looked forward to her arrival yet more, such that he might vent his frustration.

Eventually, movement came down from the castle, and it was the easily recognisable silhouette of Jana Teires. Tom resisted the urge to curse her immediately from here. He'd already thought through her likely strategy; she'd probably still attack him furiously like last time, but she'd be wary to the Shield Charm gambit after any initial onslaught. So she might be hesitant to block the first spell he cast after any pause, so whatever that might be, he should make it fast and effective; that would be his prime window to gain the advantage. Once he had the advantage, he'd simply press it until she was overwhelmed.

Hopefully without setting her on fire, but he was feeling quite cold now, and was reconsidering his position on avoiding injuring her.

"Is that you, Tom?" came Teires' voice.

"Of course it's me"

"Wow, you look cold. I thought it might be cold, so I put on some Steadywarm lotion; my great-aunt makes it; it's brilliant. I'd offer you some, but it's back up at the castle"

"Well, it's the thought that counts, isn't it", said Tom, testily. Was this what had kept her? Putting on lotion so that she'd be warm while he was cold? Tom drew his wand, and Teires stopped in her tracks.

"Are we doing this the same way as at the castle? With bowing and pacing and all that?"

"Let's skip the introductions, shall we?", suggested Tom, bluntly.

"Alright", said Teires, descending the final bit of slope, her open hands out slightly, either to steady her balance or to demonstrate that she didn't have a wand in her hand yet, or both.

"So, bowing and pacing, then?", she asked, as they met. Tom nodded. She drew her wand, they bowed, turned, and...

"Hang on Tom, there's not enough room for me to pace here"

Tom turned and glared at her.

"Well then, over here, quickly"

They relocated some paces down the shingled waterfront, and started again with bowing, turning, pacing, five, four, three, two, one...

"Protego!"

"Protego!"

"Vespamanda!"

"Protego!"

So much for the expectations and plan so far, but they seemed to have hit the anticipated pause, rejoining Tom's idea. Now would be the moment for his swift, decisive attack.

"Stupefy!" cried Teires.

"Protego!", blocked Tom, surprised and almost too slowly, stumbling backwards as he did so.

"Stupefy!", continued Teires, pressing her advantage.

"Protego!" countered Tom, actually falling backwards now onto the shale shore. This was not how things were supposed to be going. He held his wand towards her with both hands, ready to do the less dynamic, more powerful Shield Charm that Professor

Merrythought had taught. Teires now calmly and confidently closed in on him, and grinned, levelling her wand at his face.

"Flipendo!" yelled Tom, before she could finish the thing in her favour. His spell hit her square in the face, and true to its name, flipped her into the air and backwards, landing back on the ground with a loud grunt, followed by a longer groan. Tom didn't even wait to get to his feet; he settled for getting as far up as being on one knee, and followed up:

"Stupefy!"

He didn't want to take any chances, after such a nearly terrible situation. Teires' body shuddered back a bit further when hit by the spell, and she didn't make any further noise. Tom approached her, wand still pointing at her, just in case. Upon checking, she was definitely stunned. He had won.

Now what? Tom was sure there was a spell to undo stunning, but couldn't remember it. He had some ideas, but this didn't seem to be the moment for experimentation. He hated to have to concede something to Dumbledore, but it was true that a misstep could result in dire consequences. He wondered how long stunned people took to come back of their own accord. It was really very cold, and he didn't want to be out here all night, and besides, people would surely soon notice their absences from their respective Houses. He could maybe take her back up to the castle as she was, but what then? Deliver an unconscious Gryffindor to their House Common Room, wherever that was? The Hospital Wing, wherever that was? Teires obviously knew where the Hospital Wing was, but her mind wasn't accessible right now. Then again, she also knew where the Gryffindors lived. And for all he knew, she also knew how to undo stunning. A lot of good that did him now.

No, there was only one thing for it. He would just have to take her back up to the castle, dump her somewhere obvious, let someone else find her, and hope she covered for him. It was her own fault for challenging him anyway. Hell, she had even chosen the ridiculous location. He went to heave her onto his shoulder, but just tripped over himself.

Apparently, unconscious people are heavier than they look. He lifted her with his mind, which was much easier. Catching sight of her wand on the floor, he picked that up and put it in her pocket, folding her robes over her, so that it'd stay put.

Heading back up to the castle with Teires' unconscious body gliding behind him, Tom heard a groaning noise, and was momentarily startled before realising it was Teires waking up. He let her down onto the ground, and then realized he probably ought to have done that more gently, instead of just dropping her. Oh well, tough Gryffindor and all that. The tough Gryffindor groaned, went to get up, and flopped back down.

"Ouch", she said.

"Welcome back", said Tom, wondering if he should have taken her wand, just in case.

She smiled weakly.

"Hello"

"Can you walk?"

"I think so, give me a moment. Owww. Yes, give me a hand, will you?"

Tom, suspecting a trick, offered his hand while keeping his wand ready in the other. She stumbled to her feet.

"Thanks".

"So, you'll now concede defeat, I trust?", said Tom.

"Heh", replied Teires. "Best of three?"

Tom looked at her incredulously, not sure if she was serious or not. Her mind didn't answer the question either, as it appeared to be focussed on her aching body, and something in the castle, presumably to soothe that.

"I want to get back into the warm", he said, "so let's discuss it there".

They made their way back into the castle. Teires looked like she had a sudden moment of realization.

"You carried me part way up here. I was unconscious. How long?" she asked.

“No idea. Not long.”

Teires was now checking a small watch. She blinked at it for a moment, and seemed satisfied.

“Well, er, thanks for the duel”

“My pleasure”, replied Tom.

“I nearly had you, you know”.

“Next time, maybe. Goodnight, Jana”

He wasn't sure why he was now on first name terms with her. For all her friendliness, all he'd done was knock her out. But it seemed natural, and a name was a name, after all.

“Goodnight, Tom”, she smiled.

Back in the Slytherin Common Room, Jabez was talking with some older students about the school brooms. Tom wondered if she'd made the Quidditch team like she wanted, then remembered that no, she had her trials tomorrow. It was Jana who had had them today. He then wondered the same thing about her. Oh well, not important really. He went to warm up by a fireplace, with the plan of heading to his cozy bed thereafter.

After a good night's sleep and a missed breakfast, Tom went back to the library to take his mind off his hunger while he waited for dinner, and also to see about taking out *Ab Schola Condita*, and maybe something about healing and restorative spells, in more detail than in his textbooks. He was aware he had still not done the homework that Dumbledore had set, but he couldn't face doing that on an empty stomach. He knew he'd just burn the matches or something, and he did actually want to learn to Transfigure things.

It turned out that he was able to take the book out, and in fact Madam Redmond seemed quite pleased that he had taken an interest in it. Having taken it back to his dormitory, he met up by chance with the others to head down to the Great Hall to eat together. Jabez made a point of only having a light lunch, while the others, with the exception of Zelyonaya, who invariably nibbled slowly at some things before leaving the rest of it, tucked in quite heartily.

“Want to come watch me on the Quidditch pitch?”, asked Jabez, who was already wearing green and silver robes, presumably Slytherin's Quidditch gear.

“No”, said Tom, at the same time as several of the others were agreeing. Jabez frowned at him, but seemed content enough with the audience she had otherwise gathered.

Tom, for his part, was pleased to enjoy this meal without intervention from owls. Finally, Jabez stood up and stretched, saying:

“Alright, let's go!”

She gathered up those who were coming with her, and the remainder stayed on to dine a while longer, comparing the efforts they'd made or not made with Dumbledore's matches, before making their own way out of the Hall.

Reading *Ab Schola Condita* in the Common Room, Tom was learning about some of the more colourful myths of the early days of Hogwarts Castle, when he heard the door from the corridor open. Tom looked up.

“Ah, Belinda. You're back early. Did you...” he began, but was interrupted.

“*Silencio*”

Caught off-guard, Tom's voice had been jinxed from him, and he was unable to complete his sentence. He mouthed something at her, but she was already striding off into the girls' dormitory. He wanted to follow her, but also wanted to be able to speak when he caught up with her. He focussed on the movements of his tongue, and then of his lips, and was able to whisper. By force of will he got his vocal chords obeying him again. He snatched up his wand and headed into the first-year girls' dormitory.

“What are you...” began Jabez, clearly surprised.

"*Silencio*" uttered Tom, returning the favour. "*Locomotor wibbly*", he snapped, and she fell to her knees. She finally managed to draw her wand, and was trying to get back to her feet, but Tom took it out of her hand by force, and her legs gave way under her a second time, planting her once again on her knees. The couple of girls in the dorm looked too shocked to act or speak, particularly while Tom had a wand in each hand. Iolanthe Oannes was frozen in position, halfway through getting changed, clearly afraid to move. Tom pointed his own wand at Jabez's face.

"Now, Belinda. Do not ever try to hex me again, while I am reading or indeed in any other situation that's not a duel or similar classroom activity. Or maybe I should just snap this, to be sure?"

He waved her wand, which sputtered some sparks as he did so. She mouthed something silently that appeared to be pleading and no longer defiant.

"Good, I think we understand each other, Belinda. *Hiksisempra!*"

This last spell knocked her backwards, sprawling onto the floor. Her chest twitched with a silent hiccough. Tom nodded in satisfaction, and left the dormitory, dropping her wand behind him as he did so.

He headed back to his armchair, wondering why Oannes had been getting changed at this time of day. Maybe getting changed was a pastime for people who had superfluous sets of clothing. He put aside this musing, and was soon once again lost in *Ab Schola Conditā*.

"Please do not hex me", said Marca Zelyonaya, interrupting Tom's reading. He looked up.

"Why would I hex you?"

"Hopefully you would not, but you did seem a little... on edge, is it? Look, about Belinda, she was just upset about that she did not achieve the Seeker position". Zelyonaya had a notable foreign accent, and said things strangely, but was clearly much more comfortable with English than Dolohov.

"I don't care what she was upset about; I don't wish to be attacked in the Common Room"

"I'm sure, that she will not do it again"

"So am I", smiled Tom.

"She has stopped crying now, but she hiccoughs still"

"Perhaps she needs surprising?", Tom suggested with a smirk.

"I think, that you did that enough already", said Zelyonaya, smiling now. "You know, that boys are not allowed into the girls' dormitories, right?"

"Are you going to report me, Zelyonaya? Do you want to be responsible for points being taken away from Slytherin?"

"No", she sighed, "but please, do not do it".

"Then don't give me cause to do it"

"For my part, I have no plan to do so. But..." she trailed off, uncertain as to whether she should continue.

"But?"

"To take a Witch or Wizard's wand from them, it is just... I don't know, I mean, a person's wand... It's that, what separates us from the Muggles, is it not?"

"Is it? If you take my wand away, I'll still be nothing like a Muggle", said Tom. "You can't take my wand away, though", he added.

"People feel it as such, though. It's a symbol, it is important"

"That's fine, so long as she remembers where she's pointing her important symbol, because if not, I will remind her"

Zelyonaya gave him a long, considered look, and sighed, before giving up on Tom, and leaving the Common Room.

Tom, for his part, went back to his book, and the efforts of early Headmasters of Hogwarts to fully understand the castle for which they had inherited responsibility, from their grander predecessors. It was obvious to Tom that much had been lost over time, and it filled him with conflicting feelings; a sense of loss, anger that such things had been wasted, when he would have treasured such knowledge, and motivation, to uncover what he could about his new home, and what he could gain from it. It seemed almost a shame that he'd have to leave here in seven years, far away as that felt right now. It already felt far more like home than Wool's ever had done. Yes, he thought, he would master this place, in time.

Chapter Six

Tryphena Vassy

Professor Vassy, the Charms teacher, was a tall and slender Witch, with long dark hair in a single braid down her back. Her height was further accentuated by a pointy cornflour-blue hat perched atop her head, and by the flow of her robes, of which some parts matched the hat, and some were of a deeper midnight blue. She looked quite young, but Tom was quickly learning that looks were often deceiving at Hogwarts. First-year Slytherins shared Charms classes with Ravenclaw House, and Tom had understood from overheard conversation that Professor Vassy was their Head of House.

“Good morning, everyone”, she began cheerfully. “Many of you have already made my acquaintance by now, but for those who have not, I am Tryphena Vassy, and I will be your Charms teacher”.

Tom wondered if she was new.

“Spelled thusly”, she added, quite literally spelling it onto the blackboard with her wand.

“Charms can be extremely difficult and dangerous”, she began, no less chipper about it though, “but I imagine you are already sick of hearing from each teacher about how their subject is remarkably difficult and dangerous”.

Perhaps she wasn't new after all.

“So next, of course, comes the part of the introduction to the lesson where the teacher tells you that you're going to start with something simple and safe and work up to the more difficult and dangerous things, in order to both reassure and motivate you”

A good portion of the class was either nodding, smirking, or otherwise acknowledging that this was the format they'd been experiencing so far.

“So, that's not what I'm going to do”, she said, with a smile.

Tom suddenly realized he hadn't been paying nearly as much attention as he ought to, from how much these latter words caused his focus to sharpen up, with the prospect of them leaping straight into the realms of difficult and dangerous.

“Instead, what I'm going to do is allow you to benefit from the knowledge of what can be dangerous, by first teaching you how to fix the many errors and misapplications you are bound to commit. Most Charms have counter-Charms of some form, ways of undoing things that have been done. I will be first teaching you how to undo some of the spells that more readily invite mishaps than others. When you've mastered how to undo them, then we will work on how to do them. Clear?”

At least most of the Ravenclaws and a couple of the Slytherins were nodding their assent.

“First, we will be addressing a very general-purpose counter-Charm, useful for stopping many simple Charms. The more studious amongst you will have encountered it in your textbooks already, as “*finite incantatem*”.

She tapped a large candle on her desk, and it began to tap-dance.

“Observe my wand movement: *finite incantatem!*”

The candle instantly stopped tap-dancing, and resumed its previous behaviour, that is to say, standing in a candle-holder without legs, and for all the world appearing to be an ordinary candle.

“You each have a candle on your desk”, she began, and then frowned for the first time. “No wait, you don't, sorry, one moment...”

She tapped the the candle twice, and then gestured at the class with her wand. The candle was peeling out of itself, producing more candles, candles which in turn grew wings and fluttered daintily over to each desk, set themselves down, and folded up their wings so smoothly that one would once again not suspect they were anything other than ordinary candles.

“Now, let’s practice”, she said, tapping her candle once again, and every candle in the room began tap-dancing. “And here’s the incantation again for the sake of clarity”, she added, spelling it onto the blackboard, replacing her name. “So, in your own time, *finite incantatem*”.

Soon the classroom was abuzz with students swishing their wands and speaking the incantation. Professor Vassy gave a point to each student’s House when they got it right, and reset their candle so that they could carry on practicing. Of the Slytherins, Tom had been second only to Marca Zelyonaya in stopping his candle. As Professor Vassy re-Charmed it for him, Tom was momentarily surprised by someone else’s candle sprinting across his desk, and high-tailing it out of the classroom.

“It’s *finite incantatem*, not *venetur incantatem*, Antonin”

“Sorry, Professor”, replied the heavily accented Dolohov. Once everyone had achieved stopping their candle at least once, even Dolohov, they moved on to

Extinguishing Charms, something that Tom had been practicing in private after his various fiery mishaps. He didn’t want to have to freeze or soak everything he met and set on fire.

Most of the students managed the Extinguishing Charms quite quickly (“it doesn’t count for a House Point if you physically hit the candle with your wand, Meredith”), and they had just got as far as an explanation of the basic Mending Charm (of the kind Tom had already used back in summer to repair his wardrobe), when the bell rang signaling the end of class. Professor Vassy invited them to each keep their candle, and instructed them to practice on their own.

“Potion-making”, began Professor Slughorn, addressing the assembled first-year Slytherins and Gryffindors in his subterranean classroom, “is a very complex art, and can produce disastrous results if incorrectly practiced”. He either missed or ignored the couple of sniggers from those whom these words reminded of Professor Vassy’s lesson introduction deconstruction.

“However, no need to fret, as we’ll be starting off with some simple potions, to get you used to proper best practice, handling ingredients, cauldron management, and the like”. Slughorn was clearly a traditionalist, it seemed, an assessment confirmed by his continuation:

“So today we’ll be starting with the first potion whose recipe you’ll find inside your copies of the Modern Student’s Guide to Potion-Making, which is, as in many introductory potions books, a cure for boils. It’s a good first potion to make, as it’ll teach you a good number of necessary skills. Now, be sure to follow instructions to the letter, because we’ll be picking a few to test when they’re done”.

Tom was amongst those who immediately grasped the ramifications of this latter statement.

“If you’ve brought your own potion ingredients, keep them for practice; for the moment, you will find ingredients on the small tables to the sides of your desks. Work in pairs, please. Well, go on then, get started!”

Apparently Slughorn believed in learning as one goes. He did, however, pace around the classroom watching the students measure ingredients and prepare their brews, correcting mistakes where they were evident, and offering general advices when they came to mind, usually as a result of someone’s error.

“Be careful to be mindful of the different sizes amongst the horned slugs - no relation, by the way”, he chuckled.

A loud hissing noise prompted a further advice about the proper timing of taking the cauldron off the heat.

Not usually one for partnerships, Tom was glad to be working as part of a pair, because he didn't have his own set of scales, so it was a saving grace to use that of his partner, Tiernan Lestrangle.

"You've done this before, haven't you, Tears?", asked Slughorn, from a couple of desks behind Tom.

"Teires, Sir", came Jana's voice, correcting him automatically, "but yes, I've had a little practice, my great-aunt helped me an awful lot over summer"

"Anyone I'd know?", asked Slughorn. The chopping and mixing of things in the classroom had slowed down now, as half the class were listening:

"Her name is Marte Boney, Sir; if you have ever heard of her, it'd be as the author of *Madam Boney's Book of Household Potions*

"Really?", asked Slughorn, his voice brightening. "Never read it myself, but now that you mention it, I think I have a copy at home; it was a birthday present one year from Mendax Pratt, who was by that time the editor of the Daily Prophet, you know"

Whether or not Jana did know was never confirmed, however, as distraction came in the form of a cauldron noisily boiling over; turning to the source of the noise, it turned out to be the cauldron shared by Jabez and Abraxas, who had clearly both assumed the other to be watching it, while they themselves listened in to the family history.

Tiernan hastily turned down the heat on their own cauldron, and Tom realized they had been doing exactly the same thing.

Some toil and trouble later, more than half of the class had completed their potions, and the remainder had erred so badly as to render their potions unsalvageable.

"Now, who's feeling confident?", asked Slughorn. Apparently this was when potions would be tested, which would surely mean giving someone boils in order to test their potion. Most of the class were trying to shrink behind their cauldrons.

"Come on now, someone must be feeling brave, we have ten Gryffindors in the room, for a start", he joked. Three of the Gryffindors rose immediately to the challenge, and raised their hands. Jana was amongst them.

"Five House Points for each correctly brewed and tested potion, did I mention? Come on now Slytherins, don't let the House down"

Marca Zelyonaya and (at a different cauldron) Julia Nettleskip raised their hands, the latter more tentatively than the former. Tom and Tiernan looked at each other.

"Do you...?" began Tiernan.

"By all means, feel free, go ahead", said Tom, gesturing for Tiernan to raise his hand, which he did, before looking immediately alarmed that he had done so, but it was too late, at Slughorn had already noticed and acknowledged it.

With some unnecessary drama, the six students were hexed in turn to give them boils, and cured with their own potions. Well, five out of the six were cured; Leonid Llewelyn on the other hand grimaced as his boils merely exploded when he drank his potion, leaving his face covered in fetid-looking oozing craters.

"Oh ho ho", responded Slughorn, clearly a touch light on sympathy, "Skimped a little on the porcupine quills, did you? Not to worry, I think Miss Teires has some spare"

There was a moment of silence, and then:

"Spare potion, I mean, of course"

Jana, blushing slightly, stepped aside so some of her and her partner's remaining potion could be served into a beaker. Upon drinking it, Llewelyn's boil-remnants mostly healed over, and looked a lot less ghastly, though his face was distinctly on the blotchy side. Slughorn didn't offer him anything for it.

"So, fifteen points for Slytherin, and ten for Gryffindor", concluded Slughorn. "Well done to our volunteers and their partners. Nearly the end of the lesson now, so do clear up your things. For homework, I want each of you to write down anything you did incorrectly,

and what you should have done differently. Be warned that I may ask you to make it again, and if I do, I'll insist on testing it".

"And now that jumped-up Mudblood thinks she's a superstar just because she can make a bloody drink", carped Jabez at the Slytherin table, as they lunched. "Someone needs to cut her down to size", she added, emphatically.

"In the past seventy-two hours", began Tom, "she's been stung, set on fire, knocked out, dropped on her head, hexed with boils, and she seems to have shrugged it all off.

What, exactly, did you have in mind?"

"Well, I don't know, I... wait, when did she get knocked out and dropped on her head?"

"Saturday night. By yours truly", replied Tom.

"Hmm. Drop her from higher, next time, will you?"

"I'll see what I can do", Tom smiled.

"I just hope she doesn't get onto the Gryffindor Quidditch team, 'cos then she'd really be unbearable", said Jabez with a frown.

"Gryffindor's Quidditch trials were on Saturday, so she's either in or not already".

"Do you know if she's on the team?", asked Jabez, accusingly.

"No, why would I?"

"I dunno, just... Hey, flying... We've got a flying lesson next, that's with Gryffindor too, isn't it?"

"Yes"

"Time to show off?", asked Avery, from across the table.

"You bet", replied Jabez with a grin. Clearly she had not lost all her confidence after not being selected as Slytherin Seeker.

Down on the Quidditch pitch for the first time, Tom felt surprisingly conscious of the fact that it seemed everyone else already knew how to fly. Hopefully this would be one of those things whereby he make up the difference just from his own natural brilliance.

A score of broomsticks lay on the ground in two rows as they approached. Jabez was just about to take one, when Professor Vassy's voice interjected from above them:

"Not yet, Belinda, do hold on for everyone to get here, if you'd be so kind"

The Witch, still in her two-tone blue robes, but minus the pointy hat, descended from immediately above them, on a broom of her own. She must have just arrived, or been flying very high, because Tom and several of the others had been looking up when they walked onto the pitch. Tom wondered if she didn't have a Charm to keep her hat on while she was flying. They didn't have to wait long though, before all were present and correct.

"A broomstick", said Professor Vassy brightly, "is a Charmed item used for flying, both for transportation and for sport. Most of you will know this already, of course. Who here has already flown a broom?"

All of the Slytherins except Tom raised their hands. All but three of the Gryffindors raised theirs. Tom didn't like being in the inexperienced minority. It made him angry, and desirous of correcting the situation. Ideally without an audience.

"Very well then. Everyone, please stand to the left of a broom. Any broom, they're all the same. That's it. Good. Now, place your right hand over the broom, and say "up", like you mean it"

Tom had already directly caused his broom to fly up into his hand before he got as far as commanding it verbally. The others were succeeding, one by one, at the task of verbally commanding their brooms up into their hands. Jabez, broom in hand, was clearly pleased to see Jana still struggling.

Everyone's brooms in their hands, Vassy now directed them to mount their brooms, but to remain still for the moment. They mounted their brooms, and at least half of them,

Tom included, began drifting slightly. Tom stabilized his broom with his mind, and wondered how the others who struggled with wandless magic were doing it.

“Now, brooms respond mostly to your body position and hand grip”, explained Professor Vassy, who was making her way around the assembled students and correcting those two things.

“To steer, just guide the front of the broom in the direction you want to go. It’s as simple as that, on a basic level. You’ll need to lean into it if you want to do it with any grace, but that’ll come with practice. Going forwards or backwards is a matter of leaning in that direction. The more you lean, the faster your acceleration or deceleration. Got it?” Tom hoped he had got it.

“Good. Now, keeping low to the ground, I want you to fly to the end of the pitch, turn around, and return here. It’s not a race, so let’s see nice good form. Off you go!”

Jabez was off before anyone, and most of the Slytherin boys plus Zelyonaya were also streaking off towards the end of the pitch before Tom and numerous others - more than just those without previous flying experience - had turned around. So had Jana; she was out towards the front with the leaders; and also Xavier Vermeil, the other Gryffindor whose potion had been successfully tested, and Valerie Clemence, a Gryffindor who had worked with Jana in the potions class. The remainder of the Slytherins, that is to say Tom, Julia, Oannes, and Meredith Keenhaven, now made an effort to catch up with the leading Gryffindors and Slytherin boys, leaving the remaining Gryffindors trailing behind. Tom moved ahead of the three trailing Slytherin girls, mainly because he was adding speed to his broomstick, and they did not appear to have the ability or inclination to do the same. By the time he was halfway to the end of the pitch, Jabez, Jana, and Xavier were passing him while heading back the opposite way. The annoyance of this gave him another burst of speed, gaining him another few places in the not-a-race.

He missed who won, because the first few fliers were back with Professor Vassy before Tom had turned around at the end. Unlike those immediately around him, who just flew in a curved trajectory to turn around, Tom emulated what he’d seen the faster fliers do, and pulled his broom around a hundred and eighty degrees. He nearly crashed into the central giant hoop at the end of the pitch doing so, but he did it. When he did arrive back to the central point with Professor Vassy, it was in clear seventh place. He would practice and get better at this.

The remainder of the flying lesson had them working on smoother turns, and in many cases, not overcompensating when crashes seemed imminent. While not yet up to the acrobatics of Jabez and Jana, or some of the other more experienced fliers, Tom was at least getting the hang of flying quite quickly. He wondered if Xavier Vermeil and Valerie Clemence were also Quidditch players, and was surprised that Antonin Dolohov hadn’t tried out for some position, based on his obvious skill on a broom. Abraxas, on the other hand, while clearly comfortable, also wasn’t a patch on the aforementioned fliers.

Jabez had intended to show off and certainly succeeded in showcasing her skill, which seemed to indeed be amongst the best. Jana, meanwhile, went the entire lesson without injury despite Tom’s presence, much to Jabez’s disappointment. All in all, from what Tom could tell, they seemed pretty even on the flying front.

“You’re getting the hang of this, Riddle, not bad for a first-timer”, said Abraxas to Tom at the end of the lesson.

Tom wasn’t initially sure if he was being intentionally condescending or not, and a glance into his mind at that moment gave an instant’s recollection of their first conversation back on the Hogwarts Express. So, this suggested it was half-way trying to be friendly, half-way trying to compensate. Like Tom cared. Oh well, better to have him well-disposed towards him than not, all things being equal.

Chapter Seven

A Happy Thought

The second-year scrambled back to his feet, as duels continued throughout the Great Hall.

“Protego! Stupefy!”

“Vespamanda!”

“Expecto patronum!”

Tom felt himself hit in the face with a ball of light that turned out to have tentacles, which held the ball of light against his face, obscuring his view.

“Stupefy!”, he cried, blinded by the light, and merely hoping to hit something. The blinding light vanished, and as Tom regained his vision, he saw his partner, Octavian Nott, unconscious on the floor. Nott was a fellow Slytherin, and he'd been partnered with Tom so that Tom wouldn't be bleeding House Points by losing duels to partners belonging other Houses. Professor Merrythought need hardly have bothered, however, as Tom was holding his own quite well, winning at least as often as being defeated, despite Nott's extra year of education and correspondingly larger repertoire of spells, not to mention more extensive practice at duelling.

Healer Tegner was present, and in serious danger of getting hit by stray spells as he periodically dashed down the Hall to tend to a fallen (or otherwise injured) duelist.

Professor Merrythought also made her way up and down, reviving stunned students and enforcing adherence to the rules, something that some students were more apt to neglect than others.

“What was that last?”, asked Tom, when Nott had been revived and his stung face deflated with some wiping from a faintly glowing damp cloth that Healer Tegner had produced from a bag.

“Patronus Charm”, answered Nott. “Can be tricky to conjure in a pinch, but not a bad one to know. We've been doing them in Merrythought's class solidly since start of term, and there's only really me who's been able to do it properly so far”

Tom made a mental note to ask Professor Merrythought more about it, later. Meanwhile, he was waking up to the upside-down face of Healer Tegner. Apparently Tom had missed something and lost a duel. He struggled to remember it now. Oh well, nothing for it but to win at least two duels in retaliation. They kept on guard against each other in the next duel, mostly casting and deflecting stunning spells. After some exchanges of these, Tom's partner decided to up the game a little.

“Expelliarmus!” cried Nott, and Tom was knocked backwards as his wand flew out of his hand. As he fell, he reached out to reacquire the wand, and it obeyed his intention, changing trajectory and snapping back to his hand as though it had been attached by an elastic string.

“Stupefy” bellowed Tom in return as he hit the ground, closing his fingers as the wand met his outstretched hand. Nott looked more surprised than usual as the spell hit him.

“How?” was his first word when he came to.

“My wand, my hand”, replied Tom flatly in return.

Entirely different in pace was Herbology. Tom hadn't looked forward to it especially; after all, gardening did not seem like the most interesting or productive of activities to him. He'd heard that there were some interesting and dangerous magical plants, but he'd wager golden Galleons that they weren't going to be going near anything more dangerous than a buttercup at the start of their lessons.

“Who can tell me what this is?”, asked Professor Armstrong Diggory, as the first-year Slytherins and Hufflepuffs crowded around the dirty worktop in a long greenhouse.

“Potato?”, said a Hufflepuff, prompting some tittering from those around.

“Close, but no Dragonsnuff”, said Diggory. “Anyone else?”

While content to laugh at their classmate's incorrect answer, nobody seemed especially keen to offer their own.

"This," explained Diggory, "is a *Tuber tibetensis*".

The class looked blankly at him.

"Also known to its friends as a Tibetan turnip"

This clearly had not illuminated many more of the students.

"As Professor Slughorn might tell you, the root tuber of the Tibetan turnip, mixed with Carinata milk and a decoction of *Nervilia flabelliformis*, can be used to greatly enhance bodily vigour, and the boiled leaves also have magical medical properties, which are certainly beyond the scope of this lesson"

So there was a reason that he held the title of "Professor" after all, despite being ostensibly employed to get dirt under his fingernails.

"Today we'll be taking cuttings from these plants that are at the height of their growth, and propagating them in these meteorological trays here. That way, these main plants can be taken away and used for potions, and we'll still have twenty wholesome copies of the original, give or take any that should perish, which with a bit of tender loving care shouldn't be many."

Even with magical propagation trays and an potential array of Charms, death of some was expected despite care. Some care that constituted. Tom had never been especially caring or nurturing, and could not exactly be described as a loving sort. Investing energy into keeping ugly weak plants alive seemed like an odd use of time. Still, he was mildly intrigued about the practice of lopping off parts of a thing in order to have it again after the main thing has been destroyed. He wondered if this was what Arithmancy would be about, a subject he'd heard could be chosen as an elective subject later on. Dividing a whole to keep the whole whole seemed wholly in keeping with a special kind of logic that might actually be supportable with magic.

For the next while, however, it was less about wholes and more about holes, as the class readied their segments of the meteorological trays, before taking cuttings from the Tibetan turnip plants; itself something of a challenge as the leaves shied away from any approach, dodging fingers and clippers alike.

Back in the Slytherin Common Room that evening, Tom was practicing his latest Transfiguration homework, which had him turning spiders into tie-clips.

"*Impedimenta*", interjected a second-year boy, to stop one of Tom's tie-clips from wandering off the table. Tom looked up. It was Morgan Rosier, one of the Slytherins from the duelling club. Tom now Transfigured the tie-clip fully, and Rosier spoke:

"Saw you duelling Nott the other night; pretty good going"

"Not good enough yet", said Tom, but with a smile.

"Still, hopefully we can get you duelling against other Houses soon; it's looking like you'll really be an asset"

"I'm still losing some duels, but I think I'm improving quickly", said Tom.

"Everyone loses duels sometimes, Riddle; the trick is just winning more than you lose"

"I don't like losing"

"Well, nobody does, but I guess that's a good attitude to have"

Tom nodded thoughtfully. Another of his tie-clips was starting to descend a silken thread, abseiling down to the floor.

"Do the teachers ever duel?", he asked.

"Not with us, that's for sure", said Rosier.

"Hmm. I'd like to see Professor Merrythought duelling"

"Yeah, I bet she'd give even Dumbledore a run for his money"

"Dumbledore duels?", asked Tom, surprised. Somehow he didn't seem like the type for it.

"You bet. Rumour has it he even dueled with Grindelwald once, for real, you know, not sport. The both survived though, can't imagine how. It was when they were young, mind"

Tom recalled the name from one of the newspapers he'd looked through. Grindelwald was some revolutionary over on the Continent.

"Why?", asked Tom, curious.

"No idea", said Rosier. "Might not even be true. I head it from Lucretia who heard it from Dorea who heard it from her boyfriend who grew up in the same place Dumbledore did, albeit he'd only have been a small boy at the time, if he was even born, probably wasn't actually, come to think of it... so it might be one of those tales that grew in the telling, what with village gossip being what it is, and that's even before Dorea's boyfriend heard it."

"That does sound quite... tenuous", said Tom.

"Still if any village can get history right, it should be that one, they have that historian living there, don't they? That writer, Bagshot. Talk about potential for a nosy neighbour who'd never let the world forget a thing."

Tom frowned. This was getting from tenuous to tedious. He had developed some interest in history, but history that seemed relevant to him.

History of Magic did not grip most of the students with a great sense of excitement, especially as the teacher, Professor Binns, was possibly the most boring person Tom had encountered in the magical world. Old and balding, dressed in robes that looked almost as old as he did, he managed to make even the most bloodthirsty or wondrous events sound as dull as his drab attire.

Today the class was being lectured in a dry monotone on the topic of Ancient Goblins, and how they came to have been divided from the original Proto-Goblins into today's quite cerebral Andro-Goblins, such as those most commonly seen in England, and the rather bloodier Haemo-Goblins, more usual in Greece and Eastern Europe.

Tom soon found himself zoning out, and instead leafing through his copy of *A Magical History of the British Isles*, learning less about Goblins and more about the tensions between Muggles and Wizard-kind that had led to the International Statute of Secrecy, whereupon the Wizarding world collectively hid itself from Muggles, despite their vastly superior power. This seemed strange to Tom.

On the one hand, Muggles were killing magical folk when they found them and were able to strip them of their wands, but on the other, wasn't this just an incentive to keep a closer eye on personal security, and keep Muggles in their place?

Children first displaying magical talents were of course particularly vulnerable, but surely older Wizards could look out for them? There was obviously some means of locating even magical orphans; after all, Dumbledore had come to Wool's to find him. Fortunately, they had livelier lessons too, with Defence Against the Dark Arts perhaps top of the list.

"As Halloween is approaching, it is likely that Peeves, our resident Poltergeist, will be especially active", warned Professor Merrythought. "Now, it is not possible, by any art that I know, which with modesty is quite a lot, to outright defeat or even control Peeves. However, there are some things that will help you to keep his disruptions to a minimum." So far, Tom had not been bothered by Peeves, but had observed him being a nuisance to plenty of others, pelting them with food in the Great Hall, knocking over cauldrons in Potions class, pulling chairs out from under people, and he had even overheard from one traumatized Hufflepuff, William Wilmot, of Peeves bursting out from a toilet when William was using it.

"Firstly, it is important to be aware of a Poltergeist's nature. Who can tell me what, exactly, a Poltergeist is?"

Tom, Marca, and a handful of Ravenclaws raised their hands. With practice, Tom was getting better at extracting answers directly from teachers' minds; with some teachers, at least. There was quite a spectrum of transparency-to-obscurity when it came to how open people's thoughts were to Tom's trespassing. Professor Slughorn, for instance, had his most immediate thoughts perfectly accessible most of the time, especially while teaching, and when addressing Tom directly. Dumbledore, on the other end of the scale, might as well have been one of the portraits for all the access Tom had been able to gain to anything inside.

Professor Merrythought was perhaps halfway between those two extremes. Her thoughts did not betray every passing banality like they did with Slughorn, but whenever she asked a question to the class, she tended to hold the answer in the front of her mind at the same time, and offered it forwards to the class like a desperate gift from behind the façade of detached coolness, not that the others seemed to pick up on this. It was likely unintentional on Merrythought's part, not to mention unknowing. Given that the others did not seem to pick up on people's thoughts nearly as often as he did, if at all, Tom had made an assumption that had come naturally to him in many aspects: he was simply better than they were.

"Yes, Carter?", prompted Merrythought, indicating to Errol Carter, one of the Ravenclaws.

"It's a kind of ghost that can become tangible at will and move physical objects around"

Tom glanced sideways at Carter, and then back at Merrythought.

"Close, Carter", she said, "but not quite. Riddle?", she added, indicating to Tom.

"A Poltergeist is not dead and was never alive, so it is not a ghost. It is an amortal being that can be tangible or intangible, and yes, move physical objects. Also, it's... spawned from children". He wasn't actually sure what the last part meant, and hoped she wouldn't ask. If she did ask, he'd admit that he wasn't sure, and claim to have read it somewhere, or heard talk of it. He tried to focus on her mind again, but it was shifting, and at best, he got a glimpse of himself through her eyes, which wasn't useful.

"Very good, Riddle. Five points for Slytherin. Carter, one point for Ravenclaw."

Carter gave a glimmer of a smile, but a couple of other Ravenclaws looked irritated.

Perhaps they had known the fully correct answer. Probably they had. Several Slytherins looked smug, as though they had known the correct answer all along, even though there had been only Tom and Marca who had raised their hands. Tom wondered if Marca had known it. Unfortunately, the girl was almost as impenetrable as Dumbledore, so now he'd not likely find out.

"A Poltergeist", Merrythought continued, "is indeed an amortal being, a product of the presence of so many young minds in one place. Poltergeists sometimes - very rarely - appear in houses where a child is present and of perhaps less than even temperament, occurring as an outlet for that child's excess mental energy. If the child is magical, the chances of a Poltergeist appearing are notably increased. Put hundreds of magical children in one building and have them live together there, and, well, Peeves appeared as soon as Hogwarts School was opened".

So, that's what that meant. A Ravenclaw's hand went up.

"Yes, Renard?"

"So, Peeves is for all intents and purposes just something projected by our minds?"

"In origin, yes. Born initially of the minds of those children who were first taught here, and sustained by your continued presence to this day. That's not to say he'd blink out of existence if the school were emptied; after all, he doesn't disappear during the holidays. But he'd not be nearly so active without you here".

"So why doesn't Peeves obey us, if he needs us?", asked Oannes.

"There is a Boggart in a stationery cupboard just down the corridor from here. Do you know what a Boggart is, Oannes?"

"It's a creature that forces people to confront their worst fear, isn't it?"

"Yes. Now, if you speak without permission in my class again, I will see to it that you get to spend the night locked in that cupboard with the Boggart and without a wand. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor. Sorry, Professor". Oannes' hopes for winning House Points with her last answer vanished.

Abraxas raised his hand.

"Yes?", prompted Merrythought.

"The same question, Professor. Why *doesn't* Peeves obey us if he needs us?"

"Good question, Malfoy. The answer is that just because a person or group spawned a thing from their mind or minds, does not necessarily give them control of that thing", she replied. "Once it gets out into the world, it can become its own thing".

There was a moment of silence while the class pondered this, before Professor Merrythought continued:

"Perhaps the single greatest advantage Peeves has is that we have next to no leverage against him. Perhaps the only threat we could make is to shut down the school, and even a fairly simple creature like Peeves can work out that such isn't a course of action we'd take just because of him. Well, not permanently, anyway. There was one occasion when the school had to be evacuated because Peeves' mischief crossed too far into the realms of perilousness, but negotiations led to the return of children to the school. Now, besides negotiation, any idea what else we might use against Peeves?"

Tom looked into her mind and thought of Shield Charms, but he couldn't see how they'd help. Peeves didn't cast spells, and probably wouldn't be kept at bay by a Shield Charm since he could fly through anything else, and besides, Shield Charms were difficult to sustain for more than a moment.

"Nobody? Well then... Shield Charms, something already in your arsenal, can be useful against one of Peeves' main weapons; the throwing of missiles. You may recall that when you first arrived at Hogwarts, Peeves and I demonstrated this attack and defence".

Alright, that worked, Tom granted.

"So, let's practice that briefly before moving on", said Merrythought. She took a piece of chalk, hovered it, and multiplied it a few times in the air with her wand.

"Wands out, please, and prepare to defend yourselves"

There was a flurry of movement in the classroom as everyone made sure to have their wands in their hands.

"*Oppugno*", said Professor Merrythought, and directed the chalks to attack.

For five minutes or so, the classroom was a battlefield. Tom, for his part, deflected a few chalk attacks with the Shield Charm spell, before switching to merely overpowering them with his mind, like he would with any other object. He then realized he was collecting chalks in the air in front of him, and released them back into the room, where they continued their attacks.

"*Finite incantatem!*"

The chalks stopped in mid-air, and then fell to the ground. It wasn't Professor Merrythought who had stopped them though, it was Elvira Highcastle.

"Good thinking, Highcastle", said Merrythought. "Not what I'd intended for you to be practicing, and in fact you've deprived your classmates of a little extra practice, but I was going to stop them any moment now anyway, and I like your thinking. Five points for Ravenclaw. *Accio* chalks". The chalks flew to her, and she set them on her desk.

"Also, a point to Slytherin. I saw what you were doing there, Riddle. *Accio* chalkdust", she added, pointing her wand at Enid Albertstone, who blinked a few times and stopped rubbing his eye so much, though it still looked rather red where a chalk had hit it.

“Be seated”

There was a scraping of chairs as the students retook their places; in some cases after righting their chairs, and in Dolohov’s case, after righting his entire desk and fixing his chair.

“Another thing to bear in mind is that Peeves is susceptible to many common Jinxes that broadly work on corporeal forms. He can’t be stunned or killed - or stung or set on fire, Riddle - or even hurt in any fashion we know. But he is susceptible to some Locking Jinxes, Knockback Jinxes, and the Impediment Jinx - again, only while he’s tangible. We’ll not practice those with chinks, because you’d need to actually hit the flying chinks, which is a lot more difficult than hitting Peeves, who is considerably larger. In any case, of those Jinxes, the only one I want you to consider using is the Impediment Jinx. That way, it won’t be as catastrophic if you should miss and hit a fellow student. The Impediment Jinx, for those who haven’t met it already, merely slows down an attacker for ten seconds or so, but you can always cast it again. Now, wands out, and stand up, please”

The class stood up, and warily stood on guard with their wands. “First row, face the second row. Third row, face the fourth”. Thus facing each other and lined up in pairs, this felt uncannily like the most ridiculous scenario for a duel in remarkably confined spaces, what with the furniture all around. Tom was facing Jabez, who had been sitting behind him.

She did not seem pleased with this arrangement, after their encounter in the girls’ dormitory.

“You will now be casting Impediment Jinxes only. Anyone casting anything else will receive detention. Furthermore, you will cast them only when I say. This is not a duel”.

Upon this revelation, Jabez looked only slightly happier at the prospect of being Jinxed by Tom.

“First and third rows, raise your wands. Second and Fourth rows, you will not block them. Don’t worry; you’ll come to no harm. Now, casters, after me, *Impedimenta*”

“*Impedimenta!*” chorused half the class, including Tom.

For a moment it seemed those receiving the spells froze in position, in the cases that the spells had worked, in any case, but thereafter it became clear they were indeed just slowed down.

“Those who just now cast your spells, now lower your wands. Those who just received them, raise yours, and after me, *Impedimenta*”

This time there were two waves of spells, because half of the casters had started off moving in slow motion from the previous round, and needed to wait for the spell on them to wear off. Jabez’s spell was successful against Tom, and he glared at her very slowly indeed.

It took a while for everyone to get this, and being repeatedly Impeded was quite frustrating. Much sooner than that, Tom was about ready for venting his frustration via some real duelling. However, the session was ended when Peeves himself entered the classroom heralded by loud whistling from Professor Merrythought’s desk, or rather a small spinning top on it that picked itself up and started whistling; Merrythought had explained to them that this was a Sneakoscope, which alerted the user to nefarious intentions of those nearby.

Peeves’ first action upon entering the classroom, and without becoming visible, was to take the chinks from the desk and, cackling loudly, begin inserting them up the noses of those who were Impeded. Those who were not, could not see Peeves and therefore found themselves unable to cast anything at him. Tom felt uncomfortably powerless, but at least he wasn’t Impeded and didn’t have chalk up his nose.

Suddenly the classroom filled with a bright white light, and the cackling stopped.

“That”, said Professor Merrythought, “was a Patronus Charm”

Tom remembered the tentacled thing that Nott had set on him. Hopefully they were now going to learn to do that.

“However, the casting of a Patronus Charm takes rather more doing, and considerably more practice, than makes it practical for you to learn right now”.

Or maybe not. Still, if Professor Merrythought wasn't going to teach it, maybe Tom could practice it himself. He already knew the incantation, from Nott.

When the evening came, Tom stayed up late, and waited until after everyone else had gone to bed. Once he had the Common Room to himself, he set aside his book, and raising his wand, thought back to the bright glowing white light, and proclaimed:

“*Expecto Patronum!*”

Nothing. Not a thing.

“*Expecto Patronum!*”

Still nothing. Tom wondered if there was a necessary wand movement that he had missed in the duel with Nott (and he had not seen Merrythought casting hers, as he had had his back to her at the time).

There was nothing about the Patronus Charm in Fulkward Kettlehelm's *Introduction to the Dark Forces*, aside from a couple of footnotes mentioning that it was useful against certain creatures. It wasn't in *A Student's Primer of Magical Spells*, and nor could he find it in *Thurlow's Compendium of Duelling*, which he had already read cover to cover in any case. He checked all the likely places it might possibly be in *Touchstone's Introductory Book of Charms*, and nothing there. Very well then, thought Tom, nothing for it but to keep trying to recreate it, and consult the library tomorrow if he still didn't have it.

“*Expecto Patronum! Expecto Patronum! EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM!*”

“Medea's flaming hatstand, Riddle!” came a wearied voice from the shadows. “Some of us are trying to sleep and here you are sounding like you're battling an army of Dementors in the Common Room!”

It was Lucretia Black, a second-year girl who also attended the duelling club.

“Trying to master this spell, but it resists me”, said Tom. “Is there a wand movement I'm missing?”

Lucretia sighed, and replied:

“No. What's your happy feeling?”

“My what?”

“Your happy feeling, happy memory, whatever?”

Tom looked at her blankly.

“If you want to cast a Patronus Charm, then when you cast it, you need to be immersing yourself in a happy thought. It's tricky though. We've just spent the past few weeks on it in Defence Against the Dark Arts. I'd demonstrate, but frankly, I'm tired and irritable and unlikely to achieve it myself right now. I'm going back to bed. Please consider doing the same, or at least being a little quieter”.

She went back to her dorm, and Tom stood nonplussed. A happy thought? A happy memory? Tom had never been overly given to sadness, but neither was happiness exactly a usual state for him. He was generally a level-headed pragmatist, unless he was particularly excited or angry. He was going to have to think on this one. Admitting temporary defeat, he gathered up the books he'd been going through in vain, and headed to his own dormitory.

Chapter Eight

Pumpkins and Patronuses

“Today”, said Professor Slughorn, “we’ll be brewing Pompion Potions. Who can tell me what a Pompion Potion does?”

From Slughorn’s mind, Tom saw visions of Abraxas’ head turning into a pumpkin. So this was either the purpose of the potion, or more likely, a result of brewing it incorrectly.

“Nobody? Very well then; the Pompion Potion is a very seasonal brew that will temporarily turn the drinker’s head into the likeness of a pumpkin”

Slughorn looked pleased with himself, and had clearly expected this to go down well with the class, who mostly looked quite unimpressed, though a few smirks were appearing, perhaps amongst those who were realizing the potential for pranks.

“So, if you’ll all turn to page 113 of your textbooks, you’ll find the recipe there. This one’s actually quite simple, and usually the worst that’ll happen if you get it wrong is that your head will just turn orange, and stay that way until you drink a Complexion Concoction to revert it”.

This did indeed sound very safe, though Tom hoped they wouldn’t be leaving the classroom with pumpkin heads.

“Regards a couple of the ingredients”, added Slughorn, “one of them, Foxgloves, has a whole host of names, and it’s important to know what they are, as reference works are rarely standardized in this Art. Who can tell me another name?”

Most of the students raised their hands, and offered various answers in turn:

“Goblin gloves”, said Tiernan.

“Witches’ fingers”, said Jana.

“Digitalis purpurea”, said Tom.

“Plant of the hairy women”, said Xavier.

“Plant of the *fairy* women”, corrected Slughorn. “A House Point each for Lestrangle, Teires, and Riddle. Besides its use in today’s potion, who can tell me some of the standalone properties of this plant?”

Again, most of the class raised their hands.

“Yes, Malfoy?”

“It’s poisonous, Sir”

“Good, another point for Slytherin”

Most of the other hands in the room went down. Apparently that had been the property most of them knew. Jana, Tom, and Marca kept their hands in the air.

“Zelyonaya?”

“It can be used in order to mend a broken heart”

“Correct, one more point for Slytherin. It can also be used to outright restart hearts that have stopped. Don’t worry about it being poisonous as-is; it’s perfectly safe in this potion. But no snacking on it while we’re brewing!”, he chuckled.

If any of the class did poison themselves, Tom was aware that Slughorn kept various antidotes to hand, just in case of such emergencies.

“Pumpkin seeds and other standard ingredients, you should know where to find them by now. Flitterby moths can be collected from the front; you’ll need to use these fresh ones, not the desiccated ones from the store cupboard. Only one each, though; these are the last of the summer’s stock. Bouncing Bulbs shall also be collected from me directly”.

With this last, he held up a canvas sack that looked like its contents were trying to escape. In all likelihood, they were.

The first-years lined up to collect today’s special ingredients.

“Everard, where’s your tie?”, asked Slughorn. Philibert Everard, a Gryffindor, looked down and clasped at his collar in surprise, suggesting it was also news to him that he wasn’t wearing one.

“Oh no, it’s gone again”, he said.

“Gone again?”

“It must have slithered off again Sir... Professor Dumbledore had us turning our ties into snakes and back, in Transfiguration this morning. It’s... er, possible my tie still thinks it’s a snake... wherever it is”. Everard was now checking his robes more thoroughly in case the tie was hiding in the folds somewhere. Tom smiled. Slytherin had Transfiguration this afternoon, and Tom had always liked snakes.

“Carefully with the Bouncing Bulbs now”, said Slughorn, as Clothilde Hastings’ Bouncing Bulb leapt from her grasp. As it rebounded from a worktop, it was snatched out of the air by Jana and handed back to Clothilde.

“Good show, Teires; you should be on your Quidditch team, with reflexes like that” joked Slughorn.

When it came to testing time, for once, every potion had been correctly brewed; the class was now a crowd of pumpkin-heads, as though carved out in the form of Jack-o’-Lanterns. Nobody had been poisoned, and Tom felt his oversized head with his hands. Almost as strange as its size and shape were his absence of hair and lack of a nose. His eyes were carved like slits. He looked around at the array of carved faces, all quite unrecognizable.

Almost everyone had similarly lost their hair; a couple of those with more distinctive styles of hair now had such represented in the greenery atop their pumpkins, to include multiple thick ropey stems sprouting from Jabez (who was also easy to recognize by her hands still being dark-skinned), and Jana still having some manner of spiky-looking arrangement of stems. Marca Zelyonaya’s long blonde ponytail had vanished without representation, but her pumpkin was a little paler and greener than most, after her usual complexion.

“Well done everyone”, Slughorn congratulated the class. “Do clear up your things, and when you’ve done that, you can clear off a bit early”.

They went about the tidying-up and cleaning activities quite slowly; for some reason, nobody had a pressing urge to rush off into the rest of the castle while they still looked like pumpkins. However, when it was time to leave, they still had their pumpkin- heads on.

From Tom’s perspective, the saving graces were two; firstly, like most of the others, he was quite unrecognizable now, so at least people would not associate this look with him; secondly, the Slytherins’ next class would be History of Magic. While this was not exactly a nearby classroom, and in fact was quite some way away, neither was it a very active class, and nor was Professor Binns the most exacting of teachers. It was not like they had a flying lesson next, or Professor Merrythought to have them hexing each other in some fashion.

As it turned out, if Professor Binns even noticed that they turned up with pumpkin heads, he didn’t show it, and before the end of the lesson, everyone’s heads had returned back to normal; one head after another reverting with a popping sound back to its more usual form turned out to be the attention-grabbing thing of the class.

For a change, Tom had been looking forward to this afternoon’s Transfiguration lesson, so it was with particular disappointment that he learned they would not in fact be turning ties into snakes as the others had done, but instead, hats into bats. He frowned at this announcement, a reaction that Dumbledore clearly noticed; perhaps he had been paying special attention to him again, as Tom suspected he often did, and that he wished he wouldn’t.

“Is there something troubling you, Tom?” “I was just wondering: why aren’t we turning ties into snakes, as the other class did, Sir?”

“Because, Tom, the lesson is directed by me, and I intend to provide variety. Now, let’s continue”, replied Dumbledore.

Tom did not see how this provided variety to anyone but Dumbledore himself, as the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs had not transformed ties into snakes, and the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws had presumably not transformed hats into bats, but he did not press the issue, and Dumbledore was now providing a step-by-step guide to the process at hand.

The Transfiguration of the hats was difficult enough already, and it only compounded the difficulty when Transfigured and partially-Transfigured hats flew off and tried to hide in nooks and crannies around the tops of the walls of the Transfiguration classroom. In the case of flying hats, Tom pioneered the use of *finite incantatem* to cause them to drop out of the air, a practice then adopted by several others.

There were numerous instances of attempts to claim better-Transfigured hats as one's own, and Tom had certainly managed to acquire Marca's hat before the end of the lesson. To the entertainment of those around, Hufflepuff Ermentrude Smith's hat would not leave Abraxas's hat alone; only those hats' respective owners were not so amused, with Ermentrude growing gradually more red-faced with embarrassment, and Abraxas, whom Tom hadn't seen being anything other than casual under any circumstance since their first encounter on the Hogwarts' Express, clearly becoming increasingly irritated each time Ermentrude's hat returned to visit his own, getting in the way of his wandwork efforts.

While Tom did eventually complete the Transfiguration of his hat (it was his now, thought Tom) by the end of the lesson, many of the class had managed only to produce flappy-winged hats with teeth and ears. Dumbledore himself reverted everyone's hats, a service he had presumably not provided to the other class with their ties. Perhaps ties-to-snakes-and-back had been easier.

In the "Defensive Arts" section of the library, Tom had found a heavy tome dedicated to the topic of the background and the use of the Patronus, and was now absorbed in the finer points of certain aspects of what it described as "Higher Magic". The Patronus Charm was described as advanced and difficult, as one had to say two words and think a happy thought, at the same time. Amongst its principle uses, the book described the practice of the Charm against certain creatures that otherwise sucked the happiness from the caster.

While in principle this was logical, using a resource to stop the resource in question from being taken, it did also seem that being around happiness-sucking creatures might not be the easiest time to conjure happiness.

The text discussed how it came to be that many fully trained Wizards could not conjure a Patronus, or if they could, were able only to produce an abstract shield form, not a corporeal representation of an animal, as some were able to manifest, and which provided greater protection. Tom went on to read of how particularly skilled conjurers of such were able to have their Patronus speak with their voice. On the other hand, there were grisly descriptions of those who had tried to conjure a Patronus and instead got it horribly wrong, producing hideous ruined forms that turned against the caster, to their downfall.

If Nott could do it, he could do it, Tom told himself. How hard could it be, even for one not normally given over to emotion?

"Hello, stranger", said a voice from behind him.

"Hello, Jana" said Tom, frowning, though more because he was preoccupied with thinking about the Patronus Charm and its relation to a barely accessible emotion.

"That looks cheerful", said Jana, looking at an illustration of a Wizard being consumed by ghostly glowing maggots that were emerging from his wand.

"What do you want?", asked Tom.

Jana sighed, but also smiled as she was shaking her head. For some reason she always seemed happy. Tom imagined that she'd produce a brilliant Patronus. It'd be a porcupine, a smiling porcupine, and she'd send it to him to bother him.

"The usual", said Jana; "it's nearly the weekend, are you up for duelling?"

“Why do you keep wanting to duel with me, Jana? I beat you every time. It’s five-nil now”

“All the more reason. Got to improve. I’m easily in the top few of the first-years’ duelling night, only maybe half a dozen who are perhaps nearly at my level, but I’d rather be in the Open category with you and the older students”

“Half a dozen? You call that a few? Who, anyway?”, asked Tom, curiously.

“Well, from Gryffindor there’s Valerie, and Xavier maybe... Then there’s Elvira Highcastle, she’s a Ravenclaw girl, and some of your Slytherin friends. Malfoy, Tolohov...”

“Dolohov”, corrected Tom.

“Tolohov”, repeated Jana, nodding, “Belinda Jabez, I think she hates me, and that blonde ponytail girl who looks like she’s been exhumed”

“Marca”, said Tom. “and Belinda hates you, yes”.

“Any idea why?”, asked Jana, sounding like she’d been wondering already.

“She thinks you’re arrogant”, replied Tom.

“And she hangs out with you?”

“She doesn’t really have a choice about that; we’re in the same House, same year, same classes, same... people around us”. Tom didn’t quite bring himself to say “friends”.

“Why does she think I’m arrogant, anyway? Do you think I’m arrogant?”

“You have confidence in your skills at Quidditch and Potions, despite being a Mudblood”

Jana opened her mouth to reply, but did not speak immediately. She swallowed, and then spoke:

“I’d heard that a lot of Slytherins had a big thing about magical blood purity and hated everything to do with Muggles, but I thought you were alright with me, and now...”

“And now?”

“Well, am I just a Mudblood to you?”

“You’re a duelling partner to me. I don’t care about your parents. I’m merely aware they were Muggles”

Jana bit her lip thoughtfully.

“Are, by the way”, she said, almost absent-mindedly. “I wish I didn’t care about them”.

“They’re not dead?”, asked Tom, ignoring the latter comment. “You said you’d been living with a great-aunt”

“Yes, mum and dad couldn’t handle it when... I mean, they couldn’t cope with me being... Well, I’m better off with my great-aunt. She’s really nice, and understanding”

“Well, she’s a Squib, so I guess she’s used to the magical world”

Jana looked momentarily surprised, but then nodded.

“Yes, she is”.

“Muggles are stupid”, observed Tom. “Weak. I’m glad to be away from them”.

“You lived with Muggles too?”, asked Jana, brightening up a little despite the bitterness of Tom’s tone.

“At an orphanage, yes”, confirmed Tom. “Not by choice”, he added hastily. He didn’t wish to be associated with them.

“I don’t think many people choose to grow up in an orphanage, but good thing you’re here now, I suppose”

“I certainly think so”

“Anyway, weekend, duelling?”, prompted Jana hopefully.

“Quidditch will be starting soon; don’t you have training to do?”

“Oh, I didn’t get on the team”, Jana replied cheerfully.

“Hmm. Alright, usual spot, usual time”. They still duelled outdoors, but Tom had now exacted from Jana a jar of Steadywarm lotion, so it was not quite so vexing each time when she was predictably late.

“You’re on”, replied Jana, like it had been a question or a challenge on his part.

After that weekend (and another minor injury for Jana, this time a broken nose after Tom had hit her in the face with the Hammering Charm he'd been curious to try out on a person), there was quite a party atmosphere in the Great Hall for Halloween. There were pumpkins and bats all over the place (Tom wondered as to their provenance, what with their own recent lessons), and everyone was in great cheer, with the exception of a cluster of Ravenclaw first-years who were currently being terrorized by Peeves. Shield Charms and Impedimenta Jinxes did little to protect against an invisible Poltergeist grabbing you by the nose. Tiernan Lestrangle nearly choked on his pumpkin juice when Peeves gave Errol Carter a wedgie.

"Careful, Lestrangle", said Avery, "we don't want him coming over here".

"Not likely", opined Milton Mulciber, a second-year sitting nearby. "Peeves is afraid like crazy of the Bloody Baron; he never bothers anyone at the Slytherin table. That's why he doesn't come to our Common Room or dorms either"

Tom reflected on this happy circumstance that he'd previously taken for granted. It must be really annoying to have Peeves showing up at home when one is trying to sleep or do one's homework.

"Why is he afraid of the Bloody Baron? What could he possibly do to him?" asked Tom.

"No idea, but perhaps best not to question it, eh?"

Tom was about to reply, to say that there was surely no harm in asking anybody other than Peeves about it, but was interrupted by a loud bang and a flaring of the already moody lighting in the room, and a hush fell over the Great Hall.

"Welcome, all, to the traditional Hogwarts Halloween Feast", began Headmaster Dippet magnanimously. "At this time, we celebrate the life that flourishes in the darkness, the warmth that is sustained in this icy season, and enjoy the opportunity to take advantage of good food and good company"

Tom wondered what Dippet meant by taking advantage of the others. As Dippet wasn't an old Slytherin, it's entirely possible he hadn't meant it that way. But then, he should probably get someone more competent to write his speeches for him. Or maybe he had, and the more competent person wanted him to look bad.

"A few notices before we all lose ourselves in the comforts and pleasures of the evening", he continued, gesturing now to the House Point Hourglasses. "As you can all see, the House Cup is well under way, with Slytherin and Ravenclaw well in the lead, and with Gryffindor and Hufflepuff trailing a little behind. But be neither disheartened nor complacent, for it is still only early in the year. We have the Quidditch season upon us, duelling continues fiercely, we have most of the academic year still to come, and who knows what exam-time may bring. Apart from those students taking N.E.W.T. level Divination, of course!"

A little polite laughter was offered from some parts of the Hall. In most cases, it hadn't taken N.E.W.T. level Divination to be able to foresee his punchline.

"May I take this opportunity to wish a very happy Deathday to Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington" - he gestured to the Gryffindor table, where cheers erupted, and the Gryffindor House ghost took a bow, causing his nearly-severed head to flop down, to much laughter of those nearby - "and to all, a very festive All Hallows' Eve!"

Tom wondered what a Hallow was, and how many "all" of them constituted. Upon Dippet's closing words, the Halloween feast appeared on the tables. Tom reflected on what might have happened if someone had been leaning where the food had just now appeared. The delicious smell of the food arrived almost as soon as the food itself, however, so Tom soon dropped such thoughts in favour of helping himself to large portions of everything in reach, and some things that weren't actually in reach, but could be summoned regardless. Life wasn't bad, thought Tom.

Of course, life at Hogwarts was not all feasting and laughing at Peeves, and as lessons went on, so also did Tom's extracurricular studies, and he was at the library almost as often as any Ravenclaw. Today he was in the Historical Archives, skimming through for the name Riddle wherever it might appear, or variants on it, to see if he could find anything about his family, but as yet, nothing. That said, some of the older texts were very difficult to read, being quite far removed from modern English.

"I'm impressed, that you can read that", shared Marca Zelyonaya, returning to the shelf a book that she had been using while writing an essay that was due for their History of Magic homework.

"I can't", admitted Tom, "but that doesn't stop me from trying. I only need to find my name, and if I find it, then my next task is to figure out how to read what's around it".

"Well, I salute your resolution... resoluteness... resolute?" she replied, clearly growing dismayed with her own linguistic ability.

"You can say determination", said Tom, with a smile, hoping she'd go away now, and irked that he himself was not sure which was better, resolution or resoluteness. She turned to go.

"Resolve", Tom then heard himself say, despite himself. "You can say you admire my resolve, if you want a reso- word", he explained, as she turned back to him.

"Thank you", she said, and sounded like she meant it. And then she actually left, leaving Tom wondering why he had bothered to educate her when there didn't seem to be anything in it for him. Strange. Oh well. He turned back to *Ænglisc Stæ̅r: Hús Mid Wiccecræft* and resumed his search.

Quidditch captured Tom's attention not in the slightest, and he had quickly learned to tune out when talk turned to this topic. Jana had soon given up on trying to talk to him about it. Belinda, on the other hand, would air her opinions about it not only to anyone who cared to listen, but also to those who did not. After a Charms lesson that had had the students learning to Charm paints, inks, dyes, and the like to shift colours around in accordance with one's wishes, many had taken it upon themselves to start Charming things into their favourite Quidditch team's colours, be it teams from the National League, or from the School Quidditch Cup, i.e. their own House colours, in some cases shifting between multiple colours, like Slytherin's green and silver.

"I think we should be cheering against both teams this weekend", said Belinda on the topic of the first game of the season, Ravenclaw vs Hufflepuff. She frowned, while using her fork to impale a Toad-in-the-Hole that had tried to hop off her plate in the Great Hall. "I mean, we can't very well cheer for Hufflepuff; I think I'd need an anti-nausea potion. But I don't exactly want to cheer for Ravenclaw either; they're probably going to be our biggest rivals judging from their team and Gryffindor's, and if they do badly against Hufflepuff it'll be good for us in the Cup".

What exactly she did end up doing at the match, though, Tom never knew, because he himself took the opportunity of everyone's absence to work on his Patronus Charm in the Common Room, before eventually everyone came back, arguing spiritedly about the game - the prime topic was whether the result was more a product of the Ravenclaw team's skill, or their better brooms, or the key weaknesses of the Hufflepuff side. Tom, for his part, was far more concerned with the fact that several hours' work had produced nothing more than a sore throat and a slightly dizzy head.

"Tom, I don't get this", said Tiernan Lestrage, later that evening, looking up from his Potions homework with an air of dismay as most of the other Slytherins had gone to bed already. "What was the reason for folding in the Coccolithophores twelve times on a low heat? Why couldn't we just pour the lot in, or just fold it until the putrid slimy guck was all added?"

“Because each Element needs to be included in proper measure, and it’s the folds that render the Air into the mixture”, replied Tom, without looking up from the library copy of *The Summoning of Guardians* that he had brought back to the Common Room.

“It’s alright for you”, said Tiernan. “You’re good at everything. King of duelling, ahead of every lesson in Charms, somehow know everything in History of Magic classes while simultaneously not paying attention, manage to impress Professor Merrythought yet more each Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson....”

“I don’t think I’m Dumbledore’s favourite student”, opined Tom.

“Eh, don’t worry about him. Head of Gryffindor House, probably just jealous to see a Slytherin doing so well”.

“Maybe. And when it comes to other lessons... Herbology’s mostly boring but not exactly a challenge. Flying’s fun. As for Potions... Well, I keep winning House Points, in any case, and one can do a surprising amount with the Art. I look forward to getting good enough to experiment with them instead of just working from textbooks”.

“Glad I sit next to you in class”, said Tiernan. “At least this way I can just do whatever you say and everything works out alright”

“That’s fine by me”, agreed Tom.

Chapter Nine

Christmas in the Castle

By the time December came, Professor Cicada, the Arithmancy teacher, had spent an afternoon with Professor Vassy setting up a giant calendar in the Great Hall, to count the days approaching Christmas. Each number had a small door to it, and on the day denoted by the number, the door would open, and things related to that number would spend the day flying in and out busily. Items from previous days still popped out of their own doors from time to time, as though they didn't want to be forgotten.

Presently it was the seventh of the month, and heptagons and heptagrams whizzed in and out, along with with a cluster of seven little orbs of various sizes and colours, some bodies of water presumably representing the seven seas, rainbows, musical notes, seven-headed candelabra, various seven-headed monsters, another small burst of seven colours, not in the form of rainbows, grotesque faces with their orifices exaggerated (eyes, nostrils, ears, and mouth), a collection of girls holding hands, seven-fingered hands, some strange trees, periodic blasts of some icy white thing, some foodstuffs of various kinds, and other things that Tom did not know what they were.

"What's with the picky selection of heavenly bodies?", Emlyn Avery asked Tom, by now used to Tom being apparently able to produce answers out of thin air. "I see the sun, moon, Jupiter, Mars, Saturn... Probably Venus and another planet; it makes no sense to ignore the others; that's so contrived".

Tom was momentarily unsure how to respond, as he had no idea, but Marca replied almost immediately:

"They are the seven Classical Luminaries; after the beliefs of millions of Muggles, who believed for a long time that, those were the only heavenly bodies, and not any others were to be found; that collective belief was strong enough, that it impacted magic itself. I expect, that is why Abraxas is called so. I don't know much, about Arithmancy, but there is a mention of it in *Fundamentals of Magical Theory*"

Avery looked at her, without words for a moment, then shook his head.

"Why aren't you in Ravenclaw, since you're so clever?", he asked, perplexed.

"Why aren't you in Gryffindor, since you're so stupid?", shrugged Marca in reply, returning her attention to her breakfast.

Avery looked to Tom, incredulous, with an air that said "She can't be serious, can she?"

"Knowledge isn't the same thing as cleverness", Tom opined.

"Knowledge is often only the result of having used resources", rejoined Marca.

"Resourcefulness is a Slytherin trait" nodded Tom, "and one could definitely also consider the skilled use of resources to be a matter of cunning. I'm certainly resourceful, but I think cleverness is a separate matter. Perhaps the same with you, Marca?"

"I think, that it is a wise observation", said Marca.

"Well, I am a Wizard", noted Tom, with a smile.

"Are you saying it means she's cunning?", asked Avery.

"Well, I am a..." began Marca, before correcting herself: "No, wait, that does not work in modern English, does it?" - she trailed off, her brow furrowed.

"I'm sure we could make an exception for you", smirked Tom, guessing at her pun. For a moment, it almost looked like Marca had red blood in her veins. Which she presumably did, of course, though Tom hadn't as yet opened one of her veins to check. One simply wouldn't usually suspect it from outside appearances. For now, however, it was time to head off to a Transfiguration class, so they finished up and headed out. And in Tom's case at least, feeling less than festive, but determined to succeed no matter what; every Transfiguration lesson, for him, was a battle of his skill against Dumbledore's attempts to have him fail.

Tom's private battle of skill however did not attract nearly so much attention as the next Quidditch game of the season, Slytherin vs Gryffindor. Even Tom ended up attending the game, despite his plans otherwise. From the Slytherin stands, and surrounded by cheering classmates, Tom could absolutely not understand what they were cheering about when nothing had happened yet. When the teams actually flew out onto the pitch, the cheering hurt his ears and he dearly wished he'd been more resolute in abstaining. But, it seemed, politics mattered and while he had found he could clearly get away with a number of oddities, missing Slytherin vs Gryffindor was not one of them. So he redoubled his scarf against the December chill - he hadn't seen fit to use Steadywarm lotion today, not expecting it to be this cold during the daytime - and tried to look interested.

As the game began, he actually did slowly develop some interest, not really in the game itself, but in the interactions of the players. The Gryffindor Beaters, Gideon Keane and Fergus Laghan, worked far better as a two-man team-within-a-team than their Slytherin counterparts, who seemed keen to outdo each other in violence towards the Gryffindor side. Neither Walburga Crabbe nor Lucretia Black seemed overly focussed on their duty to protect their own side, but the result of them batting the Bludgers towards the Gryffindors was of course often the same regardless. Crabbe did however get a loud cheer on one occasion for a sheer plummet to intercept a Bludger heading for the Slytherin Seeker, Sylvester Murdock.

The Gryffindor Chasers, again better team players than their Slytherin counterparts, who tended to try to hog the Quaffle a little more often, would have been racking up points very quickly indeed, were it not for Violet Selwyn's attentiveness and skill as Keeper.

The game really came to a head, however, when the Golden Snitch took it upon itself to mark the Quaffle for a few seconds, more than long enough for both Seekers to notice it and streak towards it. The Gryffindor Seeker, Oscar Lucien, was a broom's length ahead of his counterpart when suddenly Black slammed into him, sending them both off- course.

Whether the crash was intentional or not on Black's part was unclear, but the two of them seemed to be fastened together for a moment, before a Bludger, sent hurtling into them courtesy of Crabbe, not only knocked them apart, but also smashed clean through Lucien's Comet 180. Grasping at thin air for a moment, he reached out for the front half of his broomstick that had now spun away from him, but he had no more chance of catching that than the Snitch that he was now a long way behind. Seconds before he hit the ground, the other Bludger slammed into his head with a loud CRACK that could be heard from where Tom was standing. Tom laughed out loud as for a moment Lucien hung motionless in the air, like a broken doll, before dropping the final few feet to the ground.

The Slytherins around Tom broke out into raucous applause and cheering; Tom joined in the applause before he even realized that they were actually celebrating not the entertaining spectacle of Lucien's fall, but rather that Sylvester Murdock had - in the absence of competition and without molestation by the Bludgers, both of which had been directed at Lucien by the Slytherin Seekers, caught the Snitch. The capture turned the score in Slytherin's favour, and had ended the game in victory.

Good cheer in Slytherin House lasted some weeks, but Slytherin family values were such that almost nobody was staying at Hogwarts during the Christmas holidays; in fact, the only Slytherins remaining turned out to be Tom himself, Marca Zelyonaya, and Antonin Dolohov. Of the latter two, both had families in Eastern Europe, and both were avoiding things in their home countries.

"In my country", explained Marca, "the Muggle government is trying to impose equality everywhere, and the disease of mediocrity infects even our own people. For this reason I was not sent to Koldovstvoretz, and I came here, instead"

It seemed reasonable enough.

"With me it is simple", said Antonin of his own situation. "My country is nearly at war. My father thinks, that war is good for a young man. But after learning, not before. So I come here, rather than to Durmstrang Institute, to learn now, so that I can fight later." Tom approved also of this idea, and reflected on the importance of keeping oneself in one piece.

Soon it was Christmas Eve, and Charmed decorations seemed to have multiplied. In Slytherin House Common Room, a large Christmas Tree stood in front of the curved window that allowed a dark view into the lake. It had tiny shining fairies whizzing around it, and large silver snakes slid slowly through the branches. Aside from their monochrome sheen, they looked real, and Tom wondered if they were snakes partially Transfigured into decorations, or decorations Charmed to look and behave like snakes.

"Are you real?" he asked.

"Real is as real doesss..." hissed the nearest snake, looking at him, its tongue flickering as it spoke.

"Why are you here?"

"Salazar Slytherin's students' schoolmaster Slughorn sought silvery serpentine supportersss", came the hissing reply.

"Why are you slithering around the tree? Don't you have anything better to do?"

"We serve and submit to our commandsss"

Tom left them to their circling of the tree, thinking on their obedience, and headed off to his dormitory. For some reason, a day with far less in it than usual had left him quite ready for a good night's sleep.

"Wake up both, Happy Christmas!"

Tom blinked his eyes to reduce the morning blur. It was still dark. Someone was now poking him, and he grabbed the wrist of the person in question. It was Marca. He released her.

"What are you doing here?", he asked, bluntly.

"Happy Christmas to you also!", she replied.

"It is still December", grumbled Antonin, who had also now awoken.

"And it is still Britain; here we have Christmas in December, remember"

"Oh yes. I knew that. I had forgotten", intoned Antonin, who was not known for being a morning person.

"In Britain you have celebration of Christmas held in December", explained Marca to Tom; "in Soviet Russia, celebration of Christmas has *you* held - the Muggle government doesn't like it and one can be arrested - but that doesn't really apply to us; all our dwellings have Muggle-repellant Charms, and anyway, Christmas is traditionally held in January, for us. And for them too", she added, gesturing to Antonin.

Tom thought about this for a moment.

"So... What are you doing here?", he repeated.

"I am here to wish you both a Happy Christmas, and inform you that gifts await us in the Common Room"

Tom and Antonin ignored her rule-breaking of showing up in the boys' dormitory, in favour of paying attention to this news.

"Us, as in, me too?", asked Tom, skeptically.

"Of course", smiled Marca.

All this smiling. Tom wondered for a moment who this was and what she'd done with the real Marca, but an effort to extract the answer from her mind produced the usual absolute blank yielded by any efforts to read Marca's thoughts, so apparently, she was just "a Christmas person", like those he had despised at Wool's. Still, gifts might be worth getting up for. At Wool's, the orphans had annually received a piece of fruit and some nuts. Some years, they had also received some sweets. However, experience had taught Tom

that everything was immeasurably better at Hogwarts. Regardless, he had not thought about it, and had not expected to receive presents, even if he hadn't for a moment doubted that Christmas dinner here would be rather an improvement on the usual fare at Wool's.

"Alright, I'm getting up", he said. "Just let me get dressed, and... you're still in your pyjamas?" - indeed, she was not only not dressed, but her usually sleek hair showed distinct signs of her having just now rolled out of bed.

Marca looked down, and then back at Tom.

"Yes. Christmas. Gifts first; we get dressed later. Antonin?" - she looked to Antonin, who was sitting on his bed looking like he had received bad news.

"Budnik", he replied. "I have not one"

"Yule log", said Marca. "That tradition exists here also, or some of it, anyway".

"I was going to cut it from the forest, but I should have done it yesterday"

"Let's do it for the Eastern date", said Marca. "Come on!" "Alright", he grumbled. They followed Marca into the Common Room, where the Christmas Tree now not only had the silver snakes circling through the branches as it had yesterday, but also presents slowly floating all around it, flying as close to the branches as possible without either touching them or flying away. They were wrapped in paper of various colours, fastened with ribbons. Shiny purple, gold, black, red, and blue wrappings and ribbons abounded, and broke away from the green and silver colour-scheme the tree had borne the previous evening.

"Gifts", said Antonin. "Wait, I have gifts for you... No, they are here... How did they appear there? They were in my trunk. Did you take them?"

They had neither moved them nor even known that he had gifts for them, and chalked their relocation up to some unknown Charm. Gifts from Marca were also there, but she had left them under the tree in the evening.

The next few minutes were spent catching the presents when they were in reach, and Tom brought down the last few by magic, as they tried to circle near the top. Tom was quite surprised to find he had received five presents in total. He would never have expected that.

"Those are from me; open them firstly", Marca said to the boys, indicating to two silvery packages wrapped with dark green silk ribbons.

Tom undid the ribbon, and the paper then undid itself. Opening the box inside, which had an unequal weight distribution, he found a large magnifying glass. Meanwhile, Antonin had also opened his, and he had received a small Sneakoscope, of much more elegant design than Professor Merrythought's. Antonin expressed his thanks to Marca, and Tom held up the magnifying glass, confused.

"It's a Pervodal Glass", she explained, "if you hold it to a text in any language, that you do not know, then it will appear to you as that language, which is most easy for you".

"Thanks. I didn't get you anything"

"You are welcome. And, I noticed. It is clear, that you just do not love us enough"

Tom had no idea whether she was joking or not, but Antonin laughed. Tom wanted to hex him but had very uncharacteristically left his wand in the dorm. It was of course not part of his usual morning routine to leave the dorm in his pyjamas, and he hadn't needed his wand until now. He jumped to his feet and strode towards the dorm.

"Tom?", said Marca. Tom stopped and half-turned back to look at her. "It is alright?", she asked, perhaps having guessed what had prompted his action.

"Yes, I just remembered I left my wand behind; I feel strange without it", he smiled, reassuringly, he hoped, and turned back to the dorm, dropping the smile. He returned with his wand, and did not hex Antonin.

"This is for you from me", said Antonin, upon Tom's return, passing him a small parcel that, from his quite transparent thoughts, contained gravity-resistant caramel-centred

chocolate bars. Tom opened it, and thanked him. Marca was already eating her gift from him, a sherbet fountain, and was managing to do it quite daintily despite its famous Charm to “explode in your mouth, not in your hand”.

The next present Tom took up had a note attached, which read:

T.M.R.

Merry Christmas to you and your family.

A.L.M.

The box was light in weight, and when opened, revealed a quill with an ornately carved nib, and a manufacturer’s note advising of its qualities, to include auto-spelling correction, smudgeproof anti-blotting action, and an ink multiplication factor that promised to facilitate writing a thousand furlongs per thimbleful.

“Hmm, spelling correction. I wonder, if I can write in Russian with it?”, said Marca, who had received one too. So had Antonin, just the same. She ran to her dorm and came back with a small bottle of ink. Tom was already examining his next present’s note (it was from Tiernan), when Marca experimented with her quill.

“No”, she sighed, “it cannot even do Cyrillic letters. But useful for classwork perhaps”, she added.

Abraxas had managed to give them all something equally thoughtless; for the Eastern Europeans, a quill they couldn’t use to write to their families, and for Tom, Christmas wishes to the family he didn’t have. Identical presents and notes with no personal touch beyond the initials, albeit probably the quills were of notable monetary value. It was, if nothing else, “very Abraxas”.

Tom’s present from Tiernan turned out to be a small curved blade with a rounded handle on each end. It was either weighted or Charmed such that it always oriented itself cutting-edge downwards, to the point that it would just stand perfectly balanced, blade down, if it was permitted to do so. Tapping one of the handles caused the blade to rock back and forth quickly and neatly.

“Oh, for potion ingredients, that’s thoughtful”, opined Marca, looking up from her present from Iolanthe Oannes, and regarding Tom’s rocking knife. Antonin didn’t have any more presents to unwrap, but was observing theirs with interest.

Tom’s final present was also the largest, and contained a note reading:

Dear Tom,

Happy Christmas! Hopefully these things will help.

See you in the new year,

Hugs and kisses,

Jana

Hugs and kisses seemed odd from the girl who was usually trying to curse him, but Tom opened the present without suspecting a trap.

It contained a book, *Marte Boney’s Book of Household Potions, New Revised Edition*, and also some jars, bottles, phials, and ampoules containing liquids of various colours and viscosities. Labels included Steadywarm Lotion, Blemish Blitzer (did Tom have blemishes? He wasn’t aware of any), Stargrass Salve, Jollity Juice, Essence of Murtlap (he’d need to

look that one up) Grand Pepperup Potion, Calming Draught (did Jana think he needed this?), Vitamix Potion, Invigoration Draught, Burning Bitterroot Balm (another one to research), Scintillation Solution, Euphoria Elixir, Hair-Raising Potion (come on, Jana, I'm not drinking that, thought Tom). He was examining "Flying Ointment", wondering as to its application, when Marca observed:

"From Jana Teires, is it not? She is quite talented for a Mudblood, is she not?"

"I suppose she's good at potions, and flying", replied Tom. "Perhaps because they're a base kind of non-magic magic. Potions is just a matter of recipes, and flying is a physical thing. I imagine a Muggle could use a broom if they had one, couldn't they?"

"I do not know about that", said Marca, thoughtfully, as though this was actually a statement of ignorance and curiosity, and not an outright negation. "But she is a quite good duellist also".

"She's never beaten me yet", said Tom.

"Well, it seems you are quite competent indeed in that category", replied Marca.

"It's real magic. My magic. My power", said Tom, almost thinking out loud. "She said you two were good, though", he added.

"Better than most", confirmed Marca.

Tom grinned slyly, and offered them to duel him at the same time. He had no idea if he'd be able to take them both simultaneously, but it'd be a great opportunity to find out, without other witnesses, should he fail. He did not, however, explain this reasoning to them.

"What, now?" asked Marca, groping for her wand that wasn't there because she was in her pyjamas. Antonin was already getting up to head to the boys' dorm to get his own.

"Sure, let's", said Tom.

"Alright, but let us dress first, and meet here again"

This they did, albeit Tom and Antonin had to wait some further minutes for Marca. When she did emerge, her hair was straighter and tidier, and she was wearing an emerald-green silk dress.

"No, this is not good enough for Christmas", she began.

"You look fine", replied Antonin.

"Not me, him", said Marca, gesturing to Tom, who raised an eyebrow.

"*Sericaria*", she said, with a vertical swish of her wand. Tom felt a moment's chill as his cotton shirt changed to silk.

"Good enough for you?", asked Tom.

"Nearly. *Nitorpolitus*" - she jabbed her wand at his rather worn shoes, and they took on a smooth polished shine as though they were new. She surveyed him.

"The hair is acceptable", she conceded. Antonin smiled.

"Yours is not", she judged, turning to him, "but your attire compensates. Let us duel. Tom, you asked for it".

Tom stood facing them, with his back to the Christmas Tree. As he approached the tree while pacing, he had an idea upon seeing the silvery serpents still slithering through the branches.

"*Snakes...*", he whispered, to get their attention. They turned towards him. "...*I command you, attack them when I turn around*".

The duel began, and as Tom turned, the snakes darted out of the tree and towards Antonin and Marca. Even Tom wouldn't have expected such speed from them, but the others were even more surprised.

"*Protego!*" he began, but unnecessarily, as Marca and Antonin were attacking not him, but the Christmas decorations that were heading for them eagerly.

"*Expulso!*" cried Antonin, blasting at the nearest shimmering snake.

"*Reducto!*" was Marca's similar effort, looking wildly at the snakes and Tom. Tom beheld the scene. So distractible, these others.

“*Stupefy*”, he stunned Antonin almost casually, just as Marca got as far as thinking to use *finite incantatem* on the snakes, and did so. His silvery serpents stopped in their tracks, and splashed into shiny glistening puddles on the floor. Evidently they had been something Charmed into the form of snakes, and not the other way around.

“*Vespamanda*” he aimed to sting her face, but she blocked it.

“*Stupefy*” he essayed, and was blocked again.

“*Petrificus Totalus*” he snapped at her, this time simultaneously holding her wand-hand down with his mind, so that she did not manage to block this one, being thus hampered. Her posture straightened as her limbs locked out, but she still had the same surprised look on her face as she had from him mentally holding her wand-hand down. She toppled over backwards, landing on the thick carpet with a muffled thud.

“I win”, said Tom, to her supine body. He reflected for a moment on what fun he could have at her expense with her in this position, but dismissed the thought. If it were a Muggle, perhaps, but not a classmate and useful ally. “There’s a counter-curse”, he added, “but I forget it, so I shall go and look it up”.

Without further ado, he went to check with his usual reference, stepping over Antonin on the way.

Upon finding the counter-curse, Tom remembered that he also wanted to check those couple of potions he didn’t know about, and set about looking them up also. This took a while, as the Potions were arranged in what appeared to Tom to be a rather whimsical order, and certainly not anything like alphabetical. Catching sight, ironically, of an “Invisibility Potion” mentioned in his textbook, he began reading about that, and was dismayed to find that several portions of the recipe merely directed the reader to other texts, for the brewing of various parts that must then be added together.

Tom was lost in thought of the various potential applications of this Invisibility Potion, when Antonin came into the dormitory.

“Marca rests on the floor in the Common Room”, he said. “Is it the full body-bind curse?”

Tom was entertained by the notion that what Marca was doing constituted “resting”, but Antonin often phrased things in unusual ways. Still, at least the reminder was timely.

“Oh... yes, I came to look up the counter-curse, and then forgot about her”, said Tom.

“Let’s go get her”.

Marca having been released from the lock of the curse, she asked:

“The snakes... How did you do that?”

“Yes, I also wanted to know this”, added Antonin.

“I heard you whispering, but could not hear the words; are you a Parselmouth?”

“I didn’t do anything with the parcels”, denied Tom, “I just told the snakes to attack you; I didn’t even know if they would be able to”

Antonin and Marca looked at him like he was crazy.

“What? Tell me”, he added, growing impatient.

“Most people cannot talk to snakes”, said Antonin.

Now it was Tom’s turn for curiosity.

“What stops them?”, he asked.

“Well, we can talk to them”, said Marca, “but we might as well be talking to cushions or hairbrushes, for all they understand us, and it is certain, that we do not understand them either”

“Wizards, who can talk to snakes, are usually famous and powerful”, said Antonin.

“That suits me”, said Tom. He thought back to Dumbledore’s obvious jealousy regards the matter, when they had first met.

“One thing, that we can know”, said Marca, “we can know, that you have some powerful magical history in your family. You must be related, to one of the old families

here. Or really, to all of them, since they are all blended... mixed... connected", she concluded, settling on a word she found acceptable.

"I wish I knew how", said Tom. "So far, I've found nothing".

While Christmas had been a time for finding unexpected connections - the intangible, such as the link to the old magical families, and the tangible, such as the unexpected givers of gifts - Tom's birthday, but a few days later on New Year's Eve, was contrastingly devoid of such things. Very few people knew when Tom's birthday was, and those few who did know, for administrative reasons (such as the staff at Wool's, and presumably some here at Hogwarts), clearly didn't care. While Marca and Antonin were always happy to share company with him - often a little too readily for Tom's taste - when it came down to it, his birthday highlighted for him a fact he'd only ever forgotten for moments at a time, here and there: he was alone.

Chapter Ten

Hogwarts Hogmanay

Tom's birthday did have one perk unrelated to its status as his birthday; the Hogwarts kitchens produced a feast yet more splendid than their usual daily fare, as they bade farewell to 1938 and welcomed the arrival of 1939, serving freshly caught wild Hebridean haggises as the principal course. Winter was haggis-hunting season, as not only was it easier to spot their dark fur in the snow, but also as their curious legs, longer on one side than the other, which enabled them to more easily run around mountains, became more of a liability in several feet of snow.

The kitchens didn't appear to get the day off even after the Hogwarts Hogmanay, though, as they all but outdid themselves again the next day, albeit with hearty steak pies as the central dish. Marca regarded these large and meaty dishes disdainfully, and merely arranged herself some tiny portions of vegetable and potato dishes.

As if they had not had their fill of holidays, the first monday of the year, when all the students returned, was announced to be "Handsel Monday", a day of gift-giving to one's juniors, and Headmaster Dippet invited all students to remove their hats and check for a coin; each had received a single gold Galleon. Tom flipped his and caught it. Finally, he had some money again.

Tom didn't see Jana until breakfast the next day, when she came skipping over to him as he entered the Great Hall, and seemed about to hug him before thinking better of it.

"What do you want?", was Tom's greeting to her as usual, before continuing "Oh, but thank you for the potions", as he remembered them.

"You're welcome. Happy new year", she said.

"To you too. I didn't get you anything"

"Even with the extra time before seeing me again? Oh, Tom, you just don't love me", joked Jana.

"No, I don't", said Tom flatly. "And besides, and I didn't even have any money until I got a Galleon last night"

"Don't worry, I'm just teasing you", she said. "Hope you like the potions"

"Most of them, I'm sure. But Hair-raising Potion, really Jana? And Blemish Blitzer?"

"I use them, and all kinds of things like that. Are they too girly for you?", asked Jana.

"I could have included a Beautification Potion, but figured you didn't need it"

"Do you use one of those, then?", he asked, mildly curious. Jana's smile broke out into a broad grin.

"No, but thank you for asking", she replied, blushing slightly.

"I didn't mean it like that", scowled Tom, "I was just curious"

"You know, I bottled up a love potion as well, but chickened out and didn't include it in the package. Maybe I should have done, after all"

"Definitely not", said Tom, firmly.

Back at the Slytherin table, Tom was expecting to have to fend off interrogations about his interactions with a Gryffindor Mudblood, but it seemed they'd got used to her accosting him from time to time, and given up on assuming a secret romance. Tom was almost as glad of this as he was of the fact that Jana had (hopefully) abstained from poisoning him with a mislabeled love potion. He made a mental note to research the various potions, and check that they all appeared to be what they claimed to be, before consuming any.

After their first day of classes, Antonin came over to Tom who was seated by the fire, making notes on the expected qualities of various named potions; their colours, viscosities, and such.

"Tom, will you help me, to bring a Yule Log?"

Tom was momentarily perplexed, as it was now January, but remembered Marca's explanation of the Eastern Calendar.

"What did you have in mind?", asked Tom, reticent to commit to helping, but also not dismissing the idea out of hand.

"The forest is nearby. We can go out that night and cut a tree, to bring it back here"

"Why do you need me?", asked Tom.

"Maybe I could do it alone, but you are better, to make things fly and to direct them in the correct way"

"The Forbidden Forest is forbidden to unaccompanied students", observed Tom.

"Yes, it is because of the werewolf people and the centaurs and the unicorns and other cursed creatures. But we will only go to the perimeter. And I think, that if we go with brooms in the evening, that nobody will see".

"Unicorns are cursed creatures?", asked Tom.

"Well, the blood of the unicorn is a banned substance, for its use in Dark Arts"

"What use?"

"I do not know", said Antonin. "Only that it is powerful and illegal".

"Hmm", replied Tom. "Which evening did you say?"

A few nights later, Tom and Antonin headed to the Quidditch pitch a couple of hours after nightfall. They made for the school broom shed, which was padlocked shut. Antonin looked to Tom.

"*Alohomora*" said Tom, flicking his wand at the lock. It popped open. "Why did they even bother?" he wondered out loud to Antonin.

They went inside, and took up a broom each, after groping for them in the darkness of the shed. Upon exiting, the moonlight on the snow outside was practically glaring in comparison.

"Alright, to the forest", said Tom. "I think a straight line to that nearest patch there is best", he said, indicating. "Once there, we can go further in if you want, but let's just get there first".

Actually, Tom would be quite happy to go further in once there, and was hoping to scout the place out a little.

"Here we go", said Antonin, and they glided forwards through the night, wishing there was not so much snow for their black robes to silhouette against. It would have been better to Charm their robes white temporarily, but there was little point in stopping in the middle of the open expanse to do this, and however self-confident Tom was most of the time, he didn't trust himself to take out his wand and Charm his clothes while simultaneously flying a broom, without crashing it on account of the flurries of snow and increasingly bothersome wind.

They reached the Forest, and were quite glad of its shelter. Tom looked back at the castle, quite beautiful now that he didn't have snow streaming into his face. There were no stars visible in this weather, but the dim glowing circle in the sky showed where the moon must be. Tom was struck by a thought.

"Antonin, is it a full moon tonight? That looks like it could be"

"Yes, it is Budni Večer, definitely also full moon this year", he nodded, smiling to Tom. Upon catching Tom's face, his own face fell. "Oh", he added. They drew their wands, and turned to face the Forest. They remained silent and motionless for some moments, scanning the shadows for hidden dangers.

Tom wondered why they hadn't spent more time learning about werewolves at school, given they had this place as their back garden. Granted, the Forbidden Forest was out of bounds, but did they really think rules would keep out sneaky Slytherins, curious Ravenclaws, or daring Gryffindors? Even Hufflepuffs would only be safe so long as they didn't have a friend from one of the other Houses invite them, as a friend-following

Hufflepuff would surely not decline such a request. But then, what was he doing here? Well, he had come out in the hopes of Dark Magic, but, as he thought to himself, he had been hoping for something more useful than a werewolf attack.

“Come on, let’s do this”, he said to Antonin. “Pick your tree”

“Well I want this part”, said Antonin, indicating to a stretch of branchless trunk of a taller tree a short distance into the forest, “so if I cut the top part, perhaps, you can catch it and reject it?”

“Sure”, replied Tom. Antonin flew up to the lower branches.

“*Diffindo*”, he uttered, cutting through the trunk.

Tom took the top part of the tree in his mind, but there was nowhere to cast it aside, with the other trees around, so he lifted it straight upwards, showering Antonin in snow from its branches as he did so. Tom laughed, and threw the top part of the tree aside.

“Thank you, Tom”, came Antonin’s slightly embittered voice. He dropped down to Tom’s height, but as he did so, the top part of the tree crashed through the trees that Tom had cast it upon, startling him. It didn’t just startle him though; a previously unnoticed horse, at least as gleaming white as the snow around it, sped off into the forest. It didn’t even make a sound as it ran, it was so light-footed, and such was its speed that in an instant it was gone again.

“Unicorn”, said Antonin. “Better company than werewolf anyway. I will cut again here”, he indicated, “and this time there is not more snow, to fall upon me”

Antonin cut the trunk as planned, and Tom smoothly caught it and guided it out of the forest, with them following it.

“From what you described”, said Tom, “you’re supposed to be carrying this. Care to take it?”

“How? It is too big, to carry without magic on a broom in this weather”

“You Charm it, then I’ll release it”

“Very well. *Wingardium leviosa*”

The log lightened, and Tom let go with his mind. They sped with it back over to the broom shed. No need for Charming their robes white this time; they had accumulated enough snow on them to do the job neatly.

They slipped back inside the shed, and replaced their brooms, leaving the log hovering outside for a moment, up above the door. They shook the snow off them, and went back outside.

“What are you doing out here?”

It was Professor Diggory, who as well as teaching Herbology, also doubled up as groundskeeper. Herbology had been given a low priority on the students’ timetables, attracting only one hour-long lesson a week. With lessons doubled up, two Houses at once, even seven years’ worth of students attracted only 14 hours a week teaching for him, plus whatever extras Herbology N.E.W.T. students picked up, but that wouldn’t be many. The rest of his schedule was otherwise free time, which he used to tend to Hogwarts’ extensive grounds.

“Sorry, Professor”, said Tom, “We were just checking the broom shed”

“What? Why would you be doing that?”

“It’s... his owl, Sir”, said Tom, indicating to Antonin. “It wasn’t in the owlery, and someone said there might be a bird trapped in here”, he said, in a voice filled with concern, “but it’s not”, he added, fearfully.

“Hmm, alright then”, said Diggory, his brow furrowed, clearly sharing the concern for a lost owl in this weather.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow you to go further looking for it in this weather, though”, he said. “Back to the castle, boys. Dolohov, isn’t it?”

“Yes Sir”, said Antonin sadly.

"If you sent your owl out earlier, there's a good chance it just took refuge at the Owl Office in Hogsmeade on its way back. Owls aren't stupid - most of them anyway - and they know how to seek shelter on nights like this. Don't you worry"

"Very good, Sir", said Antonin.

And the three of them headed back up to the castle, being thankful for the fact the inclement elements meant Diggory kept his face down, and not looking up at the log floating above them. Tom resisted the urge to interfere with Antonin's spell and drop the log on Diggory's head, however funny that would be.

They parted ways at the doorway into the castle, as Diggory was now heading back the way they came, on some errand of his own. This was fortunate, as he would surely have been more likely to notice a flying log in the better lit, non-windy, non-snowy atmosphere indoors.

Once the doors closed behind them, Tom and Antonin broke into laughter.

"What are you doing out here? With a flying log? Laughing at it like Confused idiots?"

It was Dorea Black, the seventh-year Prefect, and eldest of the Black sisters, unless there were any more who had left school already. Knowing the expansive nature of the Black family, there probably were.

"Long story", said Tom, but we won't tell if you don't, and I'm sure you don't want to take points off Slytherin, do you?"

"What are you going to do with that thing?", she asked of the log floating above them, beginning to drip where the remnants of snow on it were now melting.

"*Tergeo*", said Tom, cleaning off the snow and water instantly. "We're taking it back to the Common Room, to burn it in the fireplace. It's a Bulgarian belated Christmas tradition. Nothing that'll get anyone into trouble"

"Alright, I'll escort you back there. If any teachers see us, they'll assume there's a good reason for this idiocy if I'm with you"

Upon entering the Slytherin Common Room shortly thereafter, they were greeted by Marca.

"From the forest?", she asked. "Well done, I am impressed, that you got it back here without problems"

"I'm not", said Dorea. "Get that thing in the fireplace and pretend this never happened".

She strode off. Tom shrugged, and gestured for Antonin to direct it to the fireplace, which he did. Once it caught light, they sat around it, and regaled Marca with the evening's story. As it was the weekend next, they stayed up late into the night, and made merrier than Tom usually approved of making.

When Monday came again, Tom was glad to get back to Defence Against the Dark Arts. He had been hoping for a werewolf lesson, but today's plan was a more general purpose class.

"Let us say that you have successfully defended yourself from a Dark Wizard or other dangerous creature", Professor Merrythought said to the assembled Slytherins and Ravenclaws, "What do you do next? Yes, Jabez?"

"Have a photograph taken of you standing over the corpse, Professor?"

Merrythought sighed.

"No, Jabez. Let us assume a little clemency on your part, far-fetched as that might be in your case. You have merely Stunned your attacker, and must do something quickly. The use of lethal force is not what I'm looking for here. Anybody else? Yes, Albertstone?"

"Run away quickly?"

Merrythought gave him a withering look.

"No, boy. I think we can manage a bit better than that. Highcastle?", she asked.

“Restrain the attacker until help arrives? And actually send for help, obviously”

“Thank you, Miss Highcastle. Ten points for Ravenclaw. Yes, we will restrain the attacker. Any suggestions for how? Zelyonaya?”

“The Full Body-Bind Curse, Professor”, said Marca, whose hand had been the first up.

“Not bad”, said Professor Merrythought, “and as such worth five points for Slytherin, but I’m looking for something quicker and easier, also more versatile, as the Body-Bind Curses will not work very well on a lot of non-humanoid creatures. Riddle?”

“*Incarcerus*, Professor”, said Tom, who had come across the spell while reading, but had also just now taken it from her mind, along with her mental image of a person bound and gagged tightly with cords.

“Very good, Riddle. I see you’ve been reading ahead again. Ten points for Slytherin. So today we will be practicing this, and its counter-curse. *Incarcerus!*”

Julia Nettleskip dropped her quill as the hand that had been holding it was now awkwardly bound against her chest. Her other hand was presumably lower down somewhere, but it was difficult to see with all the cords that had sprung around her. Merrythought picked up the parchment that Julia had been writing on, and read it.

“While I’m sure Lestrangle will be delighted to hear of your affections for him, Nettleskip”, she began scathingly, “the next instance of not paying attention in class will result in the perpetrator being thus bound and spending the night in the dungeons. And by that, I don’t mean your House dormitories, Slytherins, I mean dungeons still fit for purpose, with nobody but Peeves for company. Now, come here”

Julia tried to obey, but after some squirming had managed only to knock over her chair and fall onto the floor, hitting her face on the back of the chair on the way down. Some of the class grimaced in sympathy; others were trying not to laugh. Julia, for her part, began to cry through her gag.

“Oh, stop your blubbering, Nettleskip”, said Merrythought, silencing her with a Silencing Charm. The sobbing noise stopped, and tears now dripped quietly down the side of her face. She looked up at Tom, who then realized she was actually looking up not in fact at Tom, but rather at Tiernan, who was next to him. Tiernan, for his part, looked quite impassive.

“Lestrangle!” said Merrythought. “Do you know the counter-curse? I’m going to deduct ten points from Slytherin for Nettleskip’s errant ways, but I’m giving you a chance to cancel that out. No, don’t look to Riddle; he can’t help you. Take out your wand. I want to see you undo the Curse”

Tiernan took out his wand and looked thoughtfully at Julia. Tom, spying on Tiernan’s mind, saw his forthcoming good-guess-bad-option before he cast it:

“*Finite incantatem*”, commanded Tiernan. The ropes stayed put, but her sobbing was now more than audible again. Evidently *finite incantatem* was good against the Silencing Charm, but did nothing against the *Incarcerus* Curse. Merrythought silenced her again with a swish of her wand.

“Someone else? A Ravenclaw perhaps?”

The Ravenclaws clearly didn’t have an answer, though, and looked suitably unhappy about none of them being able to come up with it, not even Elvira Highcastle, who was usually ready with answers more quickly than her fellow Housemates. Tom, for his part, had heard the spell from Merrythought’s mind several times now, but she wasn’t asking him.

“Disappointing”, assessed Merrythought. “*Relascio*”

The cords made a whipping noise as they snapped away from Julia’s quivering form and vanished.

“The spell is *relascio*, also written *relashio* on account of its pronunciation”, said Merrythought, spelling it onto the blackboard. “Nettleskip, back to your seat please”.

Julia, who was already clambering back to her feet, set her chair upright again and sat down, wiping her face, which she now shielded by bowing her head slightly and allowing a curtain of hair to obscure the view on each side.

For the rest of the class, they practiced these two spells on each other, with most of the class regaining any good spirits that had been lost in the foregoing incident.

Back in the Slytherin Common Room, Tom was pretending to read *The Dark Web: A Study in Magical Criminology*, which he had taken out of the library to actually read, but he had made the distracting mistake of glancing into Tiernan's mind, as he had looked quite pensive. He was, as it turned out, trying to work out what his own intentions were regards Julia; if he was interested in her, if he was merely feeling opportunistic about it, if he would win yet greater favour by offering support after her very bad day since Defence Against the Dark Arts and then sporting a bruise across the side of her face thereafter, not to mention however embarrassed she was feeling. She hadn't shown up at dinner, and was now hiding in the girls' dorm. Tom imagined that he could help Tiernan out in this regard, by offering something from his potions collection. But his resources there were finite, so he wasn't going to offer them on a merely speculative friendly investment.

"You're thinking about Julia?", asked Tom, though he already knew the answer.

"Yes", said Tiernan. "What do you think I should do?"

Tom didn't mind managing Tiernan's classroom activities when they worked together, but was certainly not going to start managing his love life. Or if he was, he'd make it as simple as possible.

"What do you want to do?", asked Tom.

"I don't know", came the reply.

"Do you even like her?"

"I don't know that either", said Tiernan, measuredly.

"Forget about it, then", advised Tom.

As the date of the first Quidditch match of the new calendar year approached, Gryffindor vs Ravenclaw, the school was abuzz with discussion on the topic. It seemed that the outcome of the match was a foregone conclusion; Ravenclaw clearly had a very strong side this year, skilled, well-equipped, and a match in hand. Gryffindor, on the other hand, had lost their first match. To compound matters, their Seeker, mostly recovered from his injuries, still had slight double-vision and no broom. The Gryffindors seemed sure his mostly-restored vision would be fully recovered in time for the match, but a school broom wouldn't be nearly as fast as his own had been. Perhaps another Gryffindor student would lend a faster broom. Perhaps Lucien's parents would buy him another; they hadn't over Christmas, but then, they had been more preoccupied with his recovery, and perhaps a little reticent to encourage him immediately back into the air. He was feeling much better now, though.

The morning of the match, Tom had armed himself with Steadywarm Lotion and taken to the stands with his fellow Slytherins. The match was expected to be quite short, as Ravenclaw's Seeker, Ossapheme Fame, would hardly be matched by her Gryffindor opposite number, and though the ground was still covered in a frosty sheen, it wasn't actually snowing today, for which Tom was thankful. Snow would probably add a few hours onto the match if it were falling, since the match would not end until the Snitch was caught. Seven figures clad in blue zoomed out onto the pitch, flying in formation. Lucretia Black pointed out Fame, who was recognizable by her olive tan complexion and black braided ponytail. Ravenclaw were cheering loudly and chanting "Ozzy Ozzy Ozzy! Fame Fame Fame!"; others were mostly applauding, with some enthusiastic boos and hisses from the non-Ravenclaw stands.

Gryffindor arrived onto the pitch in a different formation; Chasers first, Beaters, Keeper, Seeker. Each received cheers and applause as they made their appearance. When the last player flew on, the applause dipped for a moment and then made a reprise, as the spectators were taken by surprise as the Seeker wasn't Lucien; the Gryffindor team had fielded someone else as Seeker. Namely, Jana.

Belinda, just below Tom in the stands, was speechless for perhaps the first time since Tom had hit her with a Silencing Charm back in her dormitory in September, and was at first too shocked to even boo her.

The commentator, an older Hufflepuff student, didn't immediately know who Jana was, until someone nearby told him. Evidently it had been a surprise to all but the team and maybe a very few others. He identified her broom more easily than he had identified her, as a Cleansweep Three. Slower than Oscar Lucien's Comet 180 - or Ozzy Fame's, for that matter - but almost as fast and marketed as being more maneuverable.

When the game began, it became quickly apparent that the teams were far more evenly matched than had been assumed. Tom soon stopped paying attention to the Quaffle as it changed hands every few seconds and periodically made it to one end of the pitch or the other to score goals when not stopped by the respective Keepers.

Tom's thoughts drifted to Belinda's, which turned out to mostly be on unlikely acts of violence towards Jana. Unlikely not on account of any lack on the part of Belinda's volition, but rather, as they'd surely attract serious discipline from the school should she go about them. Tom doubted, for example, the practicality of stuffing Jana's head into a boiling cauldron, as Belinda was fantasizing about doing.

Tom's attention was caught by an "oooh" from the crowd, as both Seekers sped across the pitch, ostensibly having seen the Snitch. The scores were close, and so were the Seekers, albeit with Fame in front, putting distance between herself and Jana. A timely Bludger delayed her, but by the time Jana was almost upon her, the Snitch was lost again, and they both went back to circling like sharks, as the game pressed on around them.

The score was tied, and Tom was getting hungry, when Jana again appeared to have caught sight of the Snitch, and streaked after it. Either Fame saw it too, or else just didn't want to take the chance of it being for real, because she rocketed in the same direction, closing the gap. Neil Oswald, a Gryffindor Chaser, took advantage of the distraction to steal the Quaffle and head for the Ravenclaw goalhoops, the Ravenclaw Beaters Ingram and Merle closing in on him, ready to send the next available Bludger his way.

Meanwhile a Bludger shot towards Jana, who made a barrel roll to dodge it; the Bludger doubled back to try for Fame, glancing her shoulder and sending her slightly off course. The Bludger whizzed around and rocketed straight upwards after Jana, who was now rapidly gaining height and reaching ahead of her for the Snitch, gaining on it as the Bludger gained on her. Suddenly the Snitch changed direction and flitted back down, but Jana was too quick for it, flipping first one way, grabbing the Snitch, and then the other, to let the Bludger sail past, before she came to rest triumphantly, Snitch in hand.

The Gryffindor stands exploded into applause and cheers.

"I'll kill her", said Belinda. "I really will kill her".

Chapter Eleven

Making Peace

However, several days went by, to include some shared classes, and Jana still lived and breathed, despite even a shared first-year duelling night.

“Good morning, students!”, began Professor Slughorn in the subterranean Potions classroom, when everyone had taken their seats. “Today, I have quite an exciting lesson for you”.

He indicated to an overhead projector, which flickered into life. On a screen at the front of the class, appeared two pages of instructions for a potion entitled “Draught of Peace”. He fiddled with the controls of the projector, and two more pages of instructions appeared, alongside the first two. The screen stretched itself out to accommodate the extra pages. Tom wondered as to how exciting a potion named “Draught of Peace” could be.

“This is quite a complicated potion, and I usually teach it to second years, and only then if the class is doing well. However, as I’m sure you all know, we’ll be playing host to the International Potions Championship next year, after the unfortunate accident that resulted in its delay”

Most of the class looked blankly at him. A few were nodding. Tom would have been willing to bet that Marca was the only one to have actually known, or maybe Jana; she might be a Mudblood but she had spent the summer and Christmas holidays with a Potioneer. Given the opacity of Marca’s mind to Tom, he cast his mind to Jana, who appeared to be daydreaming about a walled garden. So much for that, then. Skipping his mind to that of Antonin’s, he saw an image of someone screaming, blistering, perhaps dying. Possibly this was the “unfortunate accident”. But there was no time to dwell on this, as Slughorn moved on:

“So I’m going to be pushing you all to your absolute limits!”, he said, cheerily, “although usually Potions Champions are a little older, it’s certainly not unthinkable that you might get in. After all, giving up-and-coming potions-masters, and, er, -mistresses (he cast his eyes over Marca and Jana) a chance to test their mettle and prove themselves is what the event’s all about”.

By and large, the Slytherins seemed keener on this than the Gryffindors. Even Abraxas was nodding thoughtfully to himself.

“Now, about this potion; if you are going to err, you’ll almost certainly have erred before you get to the stage of drinking it, and most opportunities for making mistakes will result in very obvious signs of such - over-boiling, foaming, noxious smells, wrong colour or texture, or more, ah, dramatic signs that I’m quite sure you won’t miss if they occur. Really, the only thing you could do incorrectly that wouldn’t be obvious is overdoing various ingredients; for example, adding too much syrup of hellebore can cause the heart to stop and require a swift dose of Foxglove Decoction to restart it; overdoing powdered unicorn horn will give you a very deep and temporarily undisturbable sleep; overdosing the powdered moonstone will do the same and can also be irreversible, with effects similar to those you may have read about from the Draught of Living Death. So... measure things *carefully*”

He spoke these last words very clearly and distinctly, as he often did when wishing to emphasize a point.

“Now, you have the rest of the morning, so don’t rush, do make sure to read and understand everything before you begin, and do come to me with any queries, or rather, attract my attention, since you probably won’t want to leave your brew to fend for itself. Ten House Points will be earned for each correctly brewed potion”.

Tom began mentally working through the instructions. He was momentarily distracted by Belinda passing by behind him, on her way to the store cupboard. Either she was a

faster reader than he was, or already knew the potion, or just wanted to get first pick of ingredients. Tom suspected the latter, but considered this class in general to be more about instructions-following than anything else, so contented himself with scanning the text on the big screens, line by line. Next to him, Tiernan was drumming his fingers, waiting for him. On the one hand, Tom could at times find it frustrating that Tiernan looked to him to lead everything they did, rather than trying to work out what to do himself, but on the other hand, Tiernan was right; things did go best when Tom directed the show.

For all everything had to be added carefully at various intervals, stirred the correct number of times this way and that, adjusting the heat according to timings and observations of the brew, not adding ingredients too soon or too late or in the incorrect order or quantities, the preparation stage of this potion was actually quite easy. No Bouncing Bulbs trying to escape, no frogs' livers to dissect, no flobberworms to try to slice into precisely measured portions when they really don't come in standard sizes. After the initial base potion, the primary ingredients were all powders or syrups, and mostly came in ready-to-use form from the store cupboard. The only thing that needed to be ground into a powder now was porcupine quills, so Tom set Tiernan doing that while he measured out little phials of the other ingredients in advance, so that they could just add them at the right time instead of trying to do it as they went along.

By the time they were actually brewing the potion itself, Tom had become quite focussed, and had Tiernan shaking powdered porcupine quills while he for the first time started looking around the classroom again at other people's potions, as their own simmered. Tom was trying to work out exactly how purple the potion should look before the first batch of powdered porcupine should be added. He looked at Jana's, and judging from appearances, her and her partner's potion was more along than his and Tiernan's, so that was no use. He saw Slughorn, and remembered they had a teacher for reasons other than just setting work and testing them, and attracted his attention.

"That looks like it's coming along nicely, Riddle. Getting plenty of exercise there, Lestrangle? I think that'll do now with the shaking".

Tiernan stopped shaking the powdered porcupine quills, and offered them to Tom.

"Sir, how purple should this be before we add the first batch?"

"Ah, good question, more purple than this. Think less violet, more plum", and he wandered off, to attend to a cauldron of two Gryffindor boys, that had begun to produce a sulphurous steam.

Tom continued to watch the potion, and was surprised to hear Belinda's voice behind him.

"Wow, that looks great; is that almost finished?"

Tom turned around, and saw she was actually talking to Jana and her friend Valerie Clemence, on the workbench behind them. They looked as wrong-footed as Tom did, that Belinda was addressing them in such a polite and friendly manner. Tom saw the crystal phial of shiny powder that she was palming in her hand, and rolled his eyes. Looking into her mind, her intent was indeed to surreptitiously introduce extra moonstone to the brew, in the hopes of producing the irreversible sleep that Slughorn had mentioned.

"Do you think ours looks alright?", Belinda added, gesturing widely with her left hand, back towards her own cauldron with Emlyn Avery at it. As the Gryffindor pair's eyes followed her indication with her left hand, her right hand emptied the phial into the cauldron, in the same smooth motion, before dropping the phial into her pocket.

"I don't know", said Jana, "Can't see from here, and don't want to leave this unattended, sorry. Ask Professor Slughorn"

"Oh alright, I was just asking", replied Belinda, in her more usual surly tone, before heading back to her own cauldron feeling pleased with herself.

"Tiernan, you can add that now", said Tom, indicating to the powdered porcupine quills. "Pour it in as slowly and carefully as you can". That should keep him entertained for

a minute, thought Tom. He stood behind Tiernan for a moment, and casting a glance first to Belinda, who was now berating Avery for something, he then part turned backwards, and tapped on Jana's workbench to get her attention. Jana looked up, with a "don't bother me now" expression. It was the first he had seen her wearing such. So, that was what he looked like every time she greeted him. He spoke quickly and quietly:

"She added moonstone to your potion".

Jana immediately frowned and looked down at the potion, across to Belinda, and back to Tom, who nodded, and ostensibly went back to watching Tiernan. He was curious as to how Jana was going to handle the problem, though, so he cast his mind back to her.

He had thought she'd perhaps just resign herself to the potion being undrinkable, but from her thoughts, she was actually trying to work out how to save it. Tom had hoped to avoid his duelling partner and giver of gifts from being poisoned, and here she was planning to drink it anyway.

Jana's thoughts now seemed to be focussed on trying to work out how much moonstone had been added. Tom couldn't help her there as he wasn't sure how much it was himself. Belinda would know, but to get the information he'd need her to be thinking of it, and right now, her thoughts were flitting between images of a comatose Jana, and hers and Avery's potion that was still bubbling menacingly and beginning to spit slightly, despite them having turned down the heat. Besides, Tom didn't care for actually helping Jana to save the potion; he was only interested in her not becoming a boring long-term installment to the Hospital Wing. In addition to this, he commonly learned almost as much in Potions class from her mind as he did from Slughorn's. He was getting quite a bit better at it himself, but still often relied on her thought process to guide his own brewing. Without her unknowingly helping him to be amongst the top three of the class, he might no longer be top of the class along with Marca, as he'd be reduced to learning from the teacher alone.

No, he thought, he'd still be next best after Marca, but why lose an advantage?

"Tom, this is looking quite red now", said Tiernan with a tone of concern.

"Yes, keep back the rest of that batch now", said Tom, stirring the potion; "we add the remainder later".

By the end of the class, most students had failed to perfectly brew the potion.

"Well, it looks like our usual top students have come through again", said Slughorn, appraising the scene, "but Teires, and Clementine ("Clemence, Professor"), why on Earth did you make one each, when you were still supposed to be working together?"

Tom looked around, and all eyes were on the pair.

"Oh, we didn't, Professor", said Clemence, "this is, er, all ours"

"It's my fault, Professor", said Jana, "I added too much Moonstone, and had to multiply the other ingredients, make more of the base potion, and use an extra cauldron.

This should all be the same now, and should be fine", she concluded, pointing to the pair of cauldrons, from which a silvery steam was rising, just the same as from Tom and Tiernan's, and Marca and Antonin's.

"Well, I am surprised at you making a mistake in the first place Teires, it's not like you at all, but let's test it, shall we?"

He took a small pipette and added a single drop of a blood-red liquid to the brew. It fizzed for a moment, and disappeared in a little cloud of red vapour. After this latter had dispersed, the potion looked just as it had done before Slughorn's addition.

"It's perfect", pronounced Slughorn approvingly, "or maybe a tiny touch on the strong side, but excellent job of saving it, Teires".

He spoke up now to the class at large:

"Always best to avoid mistakes, of course, but if you do make them, the most important thing is keeping a cool head and being able to fix whatever you've done wrong. Twenty points each to Slytherin and Gryffindor, for having successfully produced two potions each".

Tom was irked to have inadvertently assisted Gryffindor in winning points, but not nearly so irked as Belinda for her part.

“Now, I had intended any successful potions to be bottled and go to the Hospital Wing stock”, said Slughorn, but since you’ve produced two, Teires (he was ignoring Valerie Clemence now, as was his habit when addressing pairs; he’d often only bother with the more capable of the two), why don’t you go ahead and sample one; I daresay you’ve earned it after all that extra work”

Jana raised her eyebrows as though she wasn’t quite sure, but Slughorn seemed quite confident so she went ahead and carefully decanted a small flask of the liquid.

Upon drinking it, she quite visibly relaxed more; her shoulders dropped, and she smiled benignly.

“Yes, that’s it, well done”, smiled Slughorn.

“Mmhmmm”, replied Jana, gently.

After lunch and out on the snow-covered Quidditch pitch, Professor Vassy had assembled a large obstacle course for today’s flying lesson. It had some shorter versions of the Quidditch hoops to fly through, some broad tubular pipes in bright colours, some vertical poles arranged in a line, for them fly in and out of, and some boards oriented horizontally at various heights, presumably for them to fly over and under.

“Good afternoon everyone”, began Vassy, “today as you can see we’ll be doing an obstacle course. Now, as I’m sure you’re all perfectly capable of doing this as it is, I’ll go straight ahead and set it in motion for you”.

She waved her wand, and the giant colourful tubes now moved slowly about, turning themselves around like earthworms poking out of the ground after rainfall. The hoops were doing a slow dance around each other, and the over-and-under boards were taking turns to switch roles. As the class lined up to go again, some hustled to get to the front of the queue; others hustled to get to the back. Tom remained where he was, which with the efforts of those around him, meant he ended up being somewhere in the middle.

Belinda Jabez was the first to rocket off, and aside from clipping a vertical pole - one of the few components of the course to not be in motion - completed her round swiftly and otherwise without error.

Jana, for her part, was still under the influence of the Draught of Peace, and flew as though she were peacefully unaware that broomsticks have variable speed, and that the main way of controlling speed is by adjusting the angle at which one sits on the broom.

Sitting entirely upright would be slowest, and Jana appeared to be content to lie flat to the broomstick, going so far as to rest her chin on it, and hurtle peacefully through the course at the broom’s absolute top speed without slowing for anything at any point, until she came to the end of the course. Having come to a halt, she dismounted, and snuggled her broom contentedly.

“Are you ok, Jana?”, asked Vassy, half shocked, half concerned.

“Yeah, fine” said Jana faintly, smiling.

“She had a Draught of Peace, Professor”, said her friend Valerie, “We had Potions before lunch; I think she got quite a strong dose”

“Hmm”, said Professor Vassy, thoughtfully. “Perhaps better if you sit out of the rest of today’s class, Jana. I daresay you’ll be comfortable with that anyway?”

“Mmmmmm, of course”, said Jana, floatily.

The class went on, and by the time Tom had done his first round of the course, the Gryffindors’ new Quidditch hero of the month was drifting lazily, hanging from her broom like a sloth. Towards the end of the class, Professor Vassy had enchanted snowballs to also fly around the course aiming themselves at passing students, like harmless Bludgers. A few times one shot at Jana, despite her being a little bit away from the others now; each time this happened she simply rolled her broom out of the way, on at least one occasion with a faint “wheeeeeee”.

After a Herbology lesson and dining in the Great Hall, Tom had his mind set on a more important goal that had been in his thoughts for the past couple of weeks; that he really should find out more about unicorn blood, the illegal substance that was wandering around freely in the forest next to the school.

It seemed to Tom that potions books, unless very old and probably in the restricted section, would not tell him what he needed to know. After all, if it was a banned substance, he was hardly going to find recipes involving it in school Potions books. To this end, he thought he'd try a different tack, and instead perused the "Bestiaries" section of the library. Oh, how this was a far cry from the one small (and, as he had learned, woefully inaccurate) bestiary at Wool's.

Glancing over the book titles, Tom looked for any reference to unicorns. He found a small section with such, and next to them, a much larger book entitled "Beasts of the Scottish Highlands". As he was curious about other beasts in the area in general and the Forbidden Forest and Black Lake in particular, and he had plenty of time available, he took down this book and checked it had a section on unicorns (it did). He transported it to a table, and settled down to read.

Tom skimmed through the opening pages of the section, which were mostly about the family lives of unicorns and the various stages of development of unicorn foals. He became more interested in the next section about the qualities and abilities of the unicorn, but what he was really looking for came soon enough thereafter; a discussion of the ethics and controversial legislation regards unicorn-hunting, for its various body-parts. Of course unicorn tail-hairs could be taken without harm to the animal, but its horn was rather integral to its being; without it, the unicorn would pine for it and waste away, to its demise. For this reason, unicorn horns by modern international convention could only be taken from unicorns who died or were killed in unpreventable circumstances. Of course this had resulted in a black market fueled by poaching, but by and large had probably also saved the species from extinction (and simultaneously raised the price of unicorn horn a great deal from its previous lower cost).

As for blood, the taking of this would also usually result in the death of the animal, due to an inability to stop bleeding once a vein is opened. Unlike with the horn, however, to maintain its magical properties, unicorn blood must be collected while it is still fresh, so harvesting from naturally deceased animals never became an option like it had done for the horn. Efforts had been made to farm unicorns in captivity for their hair, horn, and in some jurisdictions, blood, but the freedom-loving animals invariably languished and died so quickly, needing to be replenished with new stock from the wild, that this was really just hunting again, with an extra inconvenience of housing them for a few weeks. To this end, it came to be widely accepted that the only way to get unicorn blood was from unicorns living wild, and that it would mean their death.

The book described how unicorn blood was, despite the apparent fragility of the creature, essentially an antidote to death itself when consumed by another. Tom's eyes widened a little, and he looked up, as though to see if anyone else had seen him reading this. He went back to his reading eagerly. He read that unicorn blood could keep the drinker alive no matter what their ailment, but that the modern world shunned such use of unicorn blood even for life-saving medical treatments, as it carried with it a fell curse. The curse saw to it that the drinker, having so terribly wronged a creature so pure and defenceless (were the horns purely for decorative purposes and potion-making? How about the hooves, thought Tom), would from that moment forthwith live but a ruined half-life, as the Elements of their soul decayed.

Tom was far from being a qualified Mathemagician, but if his understanding of the matter served him correctly, then an ever-cascading half of eternity seemed like a good deal - and a lot better than a mortal lifespan.

He closed the book and looked up thoughtfully. As he wasn't sure how "ruined" this half-life would be, as the book described it, drinking unicorn blood didn't seem to be an immediate best option. It did, however, seem to be an incredible second-to-last option, and a remarkable lot better than the very last option, that is to say, actually dying. Yes, he decided, he would find a unicorn, extract the blood, and secretly keep it. Just in case.

Chapter Twelve

Keeping Clean

Tom woke up to a shrill whistling sound. He rubbed his eyes, and identified Antonin's Sneakoscope spinning and making a racket beside Antonin's bed. He grabbed his wand, and Antonin did likewise.

"*Finite incantatem*" uttered Tom, at the Sneakoscope. The noise grew louder.

"I think, it is defended from that", said Antonin, unnecessarily. He switched off the sound with a touch.

"Well, whatever set it off seems to be gone, or else it'd start up again, wouldn't it?", said Tom.

"I think so"

They both looked around their dorm. The other Slytherin first-year boys were also waking up, presumably on account of the noise.

"What time is it?"

"Too early", yawned Abraxas.

"Too late to be bothered going back to sleep though", said Emlyn Avery. "I'm getting up".

At breakfast, a few places down the table and on the other side, Meredith Keenhaven let out a small cry. Tom saw that she had simply squirted herself while cutting into a grilled tomato, and smirked.

"Argh" she said, looking down at the damp red stain on her cuff. "Mess remover, anyone?"

"Yes, I have some right here", said Abraxas, reaching into his robes. "Oh wait, no I don't, because I'm not a House Elf", he added, sardonically. "Try asking a Hufflepuff". Some people laughed, and Meredith looked annoyed.

"I heard that some Muggles kept other Muggles as House Elves", said Belinda. "Is it true, Tom?" - Belinda tended to treat Tom as an expert on Muggles. His contempt for them was matched only by her ignorance of them. In this case though she was near the mark, at least.

"In some places they keep other Muggles as slaves, to do whatever they command", said Tom. "They're considered like any other property, so I suppose they're a bit like House Elves only less useful. And less loyal; I don't think House Elves can run away or rebel, can they?"

"No. How do they keep them enslaved at all without any magic? Is it just that they know their place?"

"I don't think so", said Tom. "I think it's just a matter of power. Guns, threats of death, threats to do bad things to their families if they run away. Laws that support having slaves. They can't run away if they'll just be arrested and taken back."

"How can Muggles tell if another Muggle is supposed to be a Muggle-slave-thing or not?"

"Oh... That's easy", replied Tom. "White-skinned Muggles own dark-skinned ones"

Belinda frowned for a moment while the implications of this sank in. Whatever sheltered life she'd had so far, she had clearly been blissfully unaware that the colour of one's skin conveyed a fair degree of one's social worth in the Muggle world.

"And the other way around?", she asked, looking up from her hands that she had been gazing at while thinking.

"No"

"That's weird", she said.

"Well, I think Muggles stopped actually owning other Muggles in most places a long time ago. The darker ones still usually serve the whiter ones though."

“What, out of habit or something?”, asked Belinda, her nostrils flaring slightly in disgust.

“I don’t know”, admitted Tom. “You’d think they’d want to get their own back. I think dark-skinned Muggles are feared by the others for that reason, though. It’s said that they’re savage, but the only ones I’ve met have been servants, or else sailors who seem to be just as rough as any other sailors”

The conversation was interrupted by Meredith accidentally squirting water onto the table, while trying to do something about the tomato juice on her cuff, with an *aguamenti* spell.

“You know, that you can use a Cleaning Charm like we used in Charms class?”, offered Marca.

“Hmm. *Tergeo*”, said Meredith, uncertainly, pointing her wand at the stain. There was a brief glow, and the stain began revolving slowly around on the spot.

“Well that really helped, thanks a lot Marca, it’s much less conspicuous now”, she said, her voice laden with bitter sarcasm.

“It is only, that you did not do it correctly”, said Marca matter-of-factly. “*Tergeo*”, she added, pointing with her own wand. There was a brief glow, and the stain vanished. Meredith did not thank her. Rather, it was Emlyn who spoke:

“Well, you’d make a good House Elf then, Marca”

Marca was not impressed with this assessment, and addressed him coldly:

“I am by no means like a House Elf. I simply am good at everything, and that may include a simple Cleaning Charm. I like things to be clean and pure, and I certainly do not like to be dirty”

“That’s a pity”, smirked Emlyn, and seemed about to say something more, when he clasped a hand to his face as a violent nosebleed erupted with a bang, after a flick of Marca’s wand.

“Since you like mess”, she said, contemptuously.

Emlyn stared at her wildly for a moment, but did not retaliate. He scowled, dripping blood from between his fingers and snorted slightly. He then clearly wished he hadn’t done, as doing so got much more blood down his front. He made a muffled moaning sound from under his hand.

“Looks like the Bloody Baron has competition”, opined Tom with a smile. Some of the others sniggered slightly at the comment.

“Dud up, Dom”, spluttered Emlyn. “Dobody assed dur opindon”

This was too much for the Slytherin first-years, who now broadly broke out into proper laughter.

“Sekhmet’s bathtub, Avery, what on Earth are you doing?” - it was Slughorn, who had come to investigate.

“Id wadn’ me, id wad ‘er, da mad widge, dud bekud I made a doke” snuffled Emlyn very quickly, and Slughorn looked at him with concern, but clearly no idea what he had said.

“I’ve no idea what you’re playing at, Avery, but go and get yourself cleaned up at once”, he chided.

“Bud I...”

“Now”

Avery got up and left, while the others tried to look serious, mostly failing and sniggering slightly. Tom, for his part, looked mildly amused, and Marca had found a presumably well-practiced look of perfect innocence.

“And you lot, encouraging him”, said Slughorn, rounding on the others. “This kind of clowning around is not befitting of Slytherin House. It’s all very well letting your hair down in the Common Room, but not here in the Great Hall with the others! I expect you to set an example, not let your classmates make a scene like that.”

They were now succeeding much better in the endeavour to appear serious.

“Twenty points will be deducted from Slytherin”, said Slughorn. “I let things slide where I can, but behaviour like this in front of the other Houses leaves me with no choice.”

He walked off, muttering to himself. At the end of the Hall, Tom saw a bunch of emeralds fall back up Slytherin’s House Cup Hourglass. The Slytherins, meanwhile, maintained a silence, as it seemed nobody wanted to be the first to volunteer whether they thought it had been worth it.

“Thank you for undoing the tomato stain on my cuff”, said Meredith, breaking the silence.

“You are welcome”, replied Marca, with a smile.

Emlyn arrived late to Charms; it was apparent that “cleaning up” had taken a little more than changing (or perhaps Charming) his shirt.

“Sorry I’m late Professor... Had to go to the Hospital Wing”

“You’re alright now then are you, Emyln?”, asked Professor Vassy.

“Yes Professor”

“Good”, she said with a smile. “I see Belinda and Marca have saved you a seat between them” Vassy pointed out, somewhat euphemistically. It was simply the seat that happened to be unoccupied. Emlyn did not seem thrilled to be sitting next to Marca again quite so soon.

The class had been practicing putting words into parchment; not by writing on them, but by speaking to one’s wand as though it were a phonograph recorder, and then projecting the spoken words into the parchment with the wand. When done correctly as demonstrated by Professor Vassy, this resulted in the parchment becoming quite audible with whatever words had been set into it. However, in terms of complexity, the magic was the most difficult thing they had attempted in Charms by a very long way, and it had made today’s class at least as difficult as a Transfiguration lesson. None of the students, not even Tom, Marca, or Elvira Highcastle, had managed it yet.

Professor Vassy gave a brief recap for Emlyn, but as everyone else was already struggling, he really had no chance.

“You need to be aware of the presence of your words”, she told the class. That was all very well and good in theory, but actually doing it was another matter.

Tom did find some interest in noting what his various classmates were using as their sample words, ranging from names or salutations, to “here is a sample sentence” and suchlike phrases, to “I wish I could do this”, to an instantly regrettable incantation from Belinda, which blew apart her desk and resulted in a need to repair it.

By this stage in the class, Tom’s own best effort had resulted in burning the written words “Get onto the stupid page, words” into the parchment, and, for good measure, into the desk beneath it. He took a moment to smile at how the spell had faithfully reproduced his own handwriting, before attempting to undo the burns. True to Vassy’s introductory lesson when they had first arrived at Hogwarts, much of their class time was spent undoing their mistakes. Professor Vassy spent most of her teaching time cheerfully helping students with such. She reminded Tom of one of the smiling figures seen in colourful advertisements aimed at selling an idea of domestic bliss to housewives; perhaps some new kitchen knife set, family meal recipe, or cleaning product.

He thought back to the events at breakfast, and realised that jibes about House Elves aside, Marca was right; it was important to be able to clean things up. Not just for cleanliness’ sake, but also to hide his bad self, as he termed his general tendency to accumulate evidence of wrongdoing that he needed to make go away.

For example, he didn’t plan on murdering someone, but if he did, a right idiot he’d look covered in blood like Emlyn.

Ah.

Tom had a moment of realization: he might not be planning to kill anyone, but he did want to get unicorn blood. From a unicorn, which could get messy as the beast probably wouldn't come fitted with a tap. He smiled to himself as he imagined that Transfiguration probably had an answer for that, and he was entertained by the silly image that resulted from this potential application of Dumbledore's very serious subject.

"What are you smiling at?" asked Tiernan, who had now taken to sitting next to Tom in Charms also. The question clearly wasn't intended aggressively; it seemed he was just in search of sharing the joke. Tom didn't want to answer that he was smiling to himself like an idiot thinking about a unicorn with a tap.

"Oh, just lost in thought", he replied. "I mean, in concentration, and smiling because I like Charms class so much", he said, with mock seriousness. Tiernan laughed, and went back to his efforts with the lesson's task.

Tom was frequently glad that people didn't seem able to read his thoughts as he often could with others. Sometimes this came to mind because he was thinking "bad things" that would get him into trouble, and presently, it came to mind because he had been thinking about a unicorn with a tap.

Then again, it was all very well that it didn't appear that others could read his mind. *Tom* didn't appear to be able to read *their* minds either, from their standpoint. What if others were reading his thoughts and simply keeping it to themselves? Naturally, he'd just have to find such people, and kill them.

I mean, and congratulate you for your skills, and I mean you no harm, he thought quite consciously to himself, in case anyone was listening.

Tom had never killed anyone, but he had thought about it quite often. Many fleeting thoughts on account of minor transgressions against him, some more serious lingering thoughts, about persistent nuisances or otherwise problematic people.

"Alright, that'll be enough for today; the bell will be going any minute now", said Vassy. "However, don't run off just yet. Those of you who have parchment that is currently doing something unnatural, please stop it, so that you can pay attention for a moment. Thank you. Now, see this parchment here", she said, and held up a piece of parchment.

"You can practice this for homework", she said, but to her wand as much as to the class. She seemingly effortlessly put those spoken words into the parchment with a tap of her wand, and the parchment began repeating the words in her voice.

"Watch this", she said, folding the parchment neatly in half. The voice stopped. She opened it. The voice started again. She closed it. The voice stopped.

"That's not a separate Charm, that's a useful side-effect of the Charm you've been learning today. You put the sound into the parchment via a given side, and that's the side it'll come back out of. If the parchment is folded, the sound will just wait. Any ideas why this would be useful?"

Tom got the answer from her mind immediately, but didn't offer the answer. There was a brief silence, before Naomi Howard spoke up tentatively:

"Valentine's Day cards, Professor? We could make them say things"

"That's right, Naomi, ten points for Ravenclaw", said Vassy, distributing the first House Points of today's class. "You could make them say things, recite poetry, even sing, if you're feeling brave".

Tom was hoping she would not tell them to actually make Valentine's Day cards. His mind was already racing to possible ways of dealing with such an instruction. The first solution to come to mind was not very practical at all, as Tom briefly envisaged himself hexing everyone in sight and jumping out of the window. He then considered simply not doing the homework. He'd never seen her angry yet. She didn't threaten people with torture like Merrythought did, or at least, had not done so far. And Tom hoped she wasn't about to start.

"I'm not going to ask you to make Valentine's Day cards", she began, much to Tom's relief, "though of course you can if you want. I will, however, ask you to practice this between now and our next lesson, with twenty House Points for each successful student".

The bell rang at this point, and Vassy sent the students on their way. Tom hung back to speak with her briefly.

"Yes, Tom?"

"Professor, something I was wondering if there's a Charm for. In Potions, sometimes it'd be really useful to transfer a messy liquid from its container directly to where it needs to be, without risking getting it anywhere on the way. Is there some easy spell for that?"

"Hmm. Yes, I suppose you could use a Charm for that, not too difficult either. I'll see if I can work it into a future lesson, since you're asking. There's syllabus content I want to be sure to cover first, but the class is doing well, so it shouldn't take too long"

"Not so well today, I think, Professor", smiled Tom.

"Oh, don't worry about that, Tom. Today's lesson was just a special treat, what with Valentine's day being next Tuesday and all. I'd have been surprised if you hadn't found it difficult - it's a bit ahead of what we've been doing so far"

"Well, thank you for the lesson, Professor", said Tom. "I look forward to learning about the Charm we can use for transferring liquids safely in Potions"

"You're very welcome. You'd better hurry now though, or else you'll be late for your next class"

Tom nodded, and, once out of the classroom did indeed hurry off and down the stairs after his classmates, hoping that nobody would send him a singing Valentine's Day card. He didn't like that he couldn't think of anything useful to do to ensure he didn't. Still, hopefully Vassy would soon teach the Charm he needed to get the unicorn blood safely out of a unicorn and into a container. If not, he'd remind her. Or maybe ask Slughorn; he should know.

Come to think of it, thought Tom, maybe it'd be possible to transfer liquids like that using mind alone; he could move solid objects easily enough, why not liquids? Definitely something to experiment with using water, before graduating to Potions and unicorn blood, though.

That evening, he had plans. Slytherin House Dormitories had well-equipped bathrooms with both baths and showers. The baths here were a lot more luxurious than the ones at Wool's. Not only were they unreasonably large and adorned with silver embellishments around the dark bronze tubs, but also they filled in a matter of seconds, and came with a selection of options for bath oils, soaps, and bubbles. Quite a difference from the simple tub he had used at Wool's, and even that he had used more often than most of the other orphans. Here he bathed more often still, but usually just for bathing's sake.

Tonight however he slid into his bath without adding bath potions of any kind, and his focus was on what he could make the water do with his mind.

He soon found that he could make small waves easily enough, but when he tried to make the water rise up like a waterspout, as though to collect it in a bottle or jar, he succeeded only in making a section of the water bulge upwards before splashing back down. He tried again, and wondered how much control he could exercise with it so far. By the time he'd managed to give the bulge some features, it looked somewhat like a slightly horrified face with sunken eyes. Not what he'd been intending, but it made him smile. He released it back into the main body of the water in the tub.

Alright, time to try with a shower, he thought. He got out, and without thinking, dried himself with one of the towels hanging by the tub, a feat made possible to do in a moment of absentmindedness by the magical drying properties of the towels meaning that it was possible to be perfectly dry almost immediately with them.

He still headed for a shower though, and closed his eyes as he stepped in. He hadn't done this the first time he'd had a shower, and had been surprised by the jets of water automatically pounding him from all directions. He'd never had a Muggle shower, but he was sure they only rained water down, not also up and across.

He had initially wondered why anyone would build a shower to squirt water in someone's eyes no matter which way they turn, but he had learned that the answer was that the horizontal jets were supposed to stop around neck height. The showers simply hadn't been designed for eleven and twelve year-olds. Tom was of average height for his age, or perhaps a little taller, but he still got water showering into his face, so showers were always a quick and eyes-closed affair until he had realised he could safely cast a water-repellant charm onto his face before showering.

Tonight he hadn't done that though, and slowly opened his eyelids, determined to keep the water out of his eyes by force of will.

This was it, he thought! He'd done it! He smiled at the strange vision of the water jets halting just before contact, and then immediately stopped smiling as the jets of water streamed into his eyes again when his concentration broke because he had started thinking about whether he'd be able to use it to keep spurting unicorn blood off him if necessary. He clambered out of the shower and groped for a towel.

Alright, he thought to himself, there was still work to be done, but he was having ideas and making progress, so all was good. For now though, Tom contented himself with getting dry - again - and heading off to bed, his mind full of grand ideas of mastering the elements.

Chapter Thirteen

The Wager

“Come on, any Ravenclaws think Hufflepuff stand a chance? Five to one odds, here’s your chance to make good money”

A Gryffindor fourth-year seemed confident of his House’s chances in the day’s Quidditch match, Gryffindor vs Hufflepuff. He was at the next table along, shaking a tray that had, by the sounds of it, a few silver Sickles in it. It seemed that support for Hufflepuff was lacking, given that they had lost their only match so far, and Gryffindor had lost one and won one, but their most recent game, the victory, was also the one with their new Seeker, and had also been a win against the Ravenclaw team that had outclassed Hufflepuff already. Seekers were of course usually the most decisive players, with other players jostling for increasing or decreasing the margin of victory - often important for the Quidditch cup, Tom had learned from conversation, as in an all-play-all format with only four teams, ties were otherwise common.

The Ravenclaws being hassled by the Gryffindor book-keeper were clearly trying to find a logical course of action. One of them was mouthing something under her breath. Tom wondered if it was some incantation, and peeked into her mind.

“Five to one so Ravenclaw, no, Hufflepuff would need to win one match in six to break even if this were a bet every time, we have eight, no, six matches in total, will they get one win over the course of the season, well, probably yes, but will it be this match, no idea, so one chance in six with five to one odds would break even, but no because they didn’t win against us, so that’s a known result, but past results don’t affect future performance, and, no hang on, scrap all that, because Hufflepuff only play in three of the six matches because there are only four Houses, so... oh, forget this, I’ll work it out for next time, come up with a system”

So much for the famed sharp wit of Ravenclaws. Still, at least she was trying to be logical. Tom, for his part, had no intention of trying to do the sums.

“Hey, Gryffindor”, he called over, taking his shiny Galleon out of his pocket, where it had been living since he had received it on Handsel Monday afore the start of term.

The Gryffindor looked over at him, and Tom flipped his coin, presenting it.

“I’ll bite”, he said, with a smile. The Gryffindor made his way around to the Slytherin table, where Antonin leaned aside a little to avoid him.

“Alright, in for a Galleon, is it?”

“That’s right”

“Five to one odds, so if Gryffindor win, I keep the Galleon; if Hufflepuff win, I return your Galleon and give you four more to keep it company, deal?”

“Yes” said Tom, unsure if he could make it any clearer.

“Name?” asked the Gryffindor, who was noting the bet down on a parchment.

“Tom Riddle. What’s yours?”

“Harry Weasley”

Harry. A nasty, common name. Like his own. Oh well, he was making a bet, not marrying the boy. He handed over his Galleon.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Tom Riddle” said Harry, “Anyone else?”

“No chance”, said Abraxas. The other Slytherins at this part of the table were either shaking their heads or ignoring the offer, so he moved on to offer his bets to the older Ravenclaws.

“You really think the Hufflepuffs have a chance, Tom, after the way they were flattened in the last match?”, asked Tiernan.

“He wasn’t there was he?”, offered Belinda as an explanation. “Hufflepuff were bumbling around like lost bees; Ravenclaw were breezing through them like they weren’t there - you’re not going to see that money again, Tom”

“You’ve confidence in your favourite Mudblood, then, Belinda?”

“Oh come on, it’s not like that. She can obviously fly - not as well as I can, and she certainly doesn’t deserve her place - but the Hufflepuffs were just making fools of themselves, and besides, I bet their standards are no better than the Gryffindor team’s standards when it comes to magical lineage”

“What’s your plan, Tom?”, asked Tiernan. “You see her all the time; I see your game. You going to pay her off? Split the winnings? If so, I’m going to call that Weasley back for a bet”

“No”, smiled Tom. “Just feeling lucky”

“Are you going to Curse her before the match?”, suggested Belinda.

“No”, replied Tom. “Are you?”

“Do you think I’d be suspected?”, asked Belinda.

“Yes”, came the unanimous reply. Belinda looked a little put out.

The truth was, Tom had considered that if Jana came close to catching the Snitch, he could almost certainly bat it out of her reach. Spectators couldn’t usually interfere with Quidditch matches, as it’d draw far too much attention from their neighbours if they raised a wand, and wands also require at least a degree of aiming, but Tom could do it with just his mind. Looking over to the Gryffindor table, Tom caught sight of Jana cheerfully Enchanting fruit with her friend Valerie. Clearly full of pre-battle nerves, then.

Later that morning, out at the Quidditch pitch, there was a hard frost about but fortunately it was not snowing. This pleased Tom, as the match could go on for a very long time indeed if waiting for a Hufflepuff to catch the Snitch in a snow flurry. Tom didn’t mind if he had to swat the Snitch away from Jana, but he didn’t want to have to guide the Snitch up the Hufflepuff’s sleeve. Tom knew nothing about the Hufflepuff Seeker beyond his name, Ben Mellifer, but it was clear that he hadn’t exactly distinguished himself so far.

The game began, and progressed more or less as expected. Hufflepuff scored a few goals, but for every goal Hufflepuff scored, the Gryffindor Chasers scored two or more.

The game became quite tedious for Tom, with only fleeting signs of the Snitch, and it was always lost again long before a Seeker got to it. Every now and again a Bludger would nearly get someone, but the Beaters were a little more even in terms of attack and defence than for example those on the Slytherin team, so an entertaining injury didn’t seem likely, nor had anyone even been knocked off their broom, be it by Bludger or player. Tom was far more interested in following the Bludgers than the Quaffle, even with Gryffindor racking up goals, it didn’t seem likely to outweigh the value of the Snitch yet. He wondered if the Snitch ever just hid. Probably not.

Fergus Laghlan, of the Gryffindor Beaters, shouted out a warning to Jana, catching her attention and also Tom’s. She flipped and turned towards the shout, only quickly enough to catch full in the face the Bludger that would otherwise have struck her head or perhaps shoulder from behind. Clearly Laghlan had been powerless to help more directly as the Bludger had been some way ahead of him. One would think that two Beaters would be able to keep track of two Bludgers between them, but then, thought Tom, it would only take a instant of miscoordination for them both to be tracking the same Bludger for a moment, leaving a Bludger stray.

Jana, meanwhile, had been knocked off-course but had somehow clung to her broom and was now flying in slightly spiraling direction like a tight corkscrew, with her hands to her face. Having her hands to her face and clinging to her broom at the same time was of course resulting in the broom accelerating, as the broom knew nothing of her condition, only the position of her body, which was - naturally - leaning forwards. A couple of seconds of oblique descent later and she had ploughed into the ground at maximum speed and finally departed from her broomstick, as it stopped immediately upon hitting the frozen ground and she carried on forwards to slam into the ground herself, her body rolling a few

yards more on impact and leaving a trail of bright crimson blood shining against the whiteness of the frosty grass.

Whoever had stopped Oscar Lucien's momentum before he had hit the ground in the match against Slytherin clearly hadn't been present, inclined, or otherwise sharp enough to do the same in time for Jana. Neither had Tom, for that matter, and now he wondered if she was dead, as Healer Tegner rushed out to her, and Professor Vassy dropped both Bludgers out of the air with some spell or other while simultaneously whistling to indicate time out - Tom wasn't sure what spell she'd used, because he was trying to focus on Jana's mind, but it seemed to be gone. That didn't tell him anything, as she could be dead or out cold.

Tom tried to work out to what extent, if any, he cared, but broadly failed. He did know however that he wanted to know, and given the choice, would rather she be alive, so long as she was still usable. By "usable", Tom hoped she would still duel, be around for Potions class, and do whatever else she was good for. Maybe she had other uses, but right now Tom didn't explore what they might be any further, as he was distracted by Belinda's jubilant state, which made him laugh to see her so happy while most of the crowds were clearly shocked at what, from people's reactions, was looking like a worse-than-usual Quidditch accident. Several of Jana's Gryffindor classmates, including Valerie and Xavier, were being kept at bay by Dumbledore. Both Quidditch teams were also trying to get as close as possible and periodically being ushered back.

As Jana (or at least her body) was transferred to a stretcher and hovered off the pitch, Vassy was now talking with the team captains. Tom ignored them and tried to focus on Tegner's mind. It was difficult with all the commotion going on, but even when he made some sort of contact, all he got was a flash of what was presumably the Hospital Wing. Even that didn't tell Tom anything beyond what the Hospital Wing looked like; after all, she'd probably be taken there regardless.

The commentator, who had been talking incessantly, stating the obvious without actually having anything useful to say, now advised that word had come up that Jana Teires was in critical condition and had been rushed off for treatment, so, alive at least for now. He also had news that the Gryffindor captain, Keeper Hector Egmont, had opted to forfeit the match, owing to not having a reserve reserve Seeker. This caused some amusement amongst the Slytherins immediately around Tom, who observed that Gryffindor were really getting through their Seekers this season. The score which had been seventy points to Gryffindor and thirty to Hufflepuff, now closed with seventy points to Gryffindor against a hundred and eighty to Hufflepuff. The commentator observed that strictly speaking, Gryffindor could have played on to try to close the gap before Hufflepuff eventually caught the Snitch, but perhaps they would not play nearly so well now as they had been playing, while distracted worrying about their Seeker.

This made no sense to Tom; this was Gryffindor's last game of the season, so even if Jana died or was otherwise rendered useless, they didn't need to worry about a new Seeker until next year, no matter if Lucien wanted to take the position back up or not, so there was no reason at all that Tom could see for them to be distracted.

However, while talk around him shifted from the accident to the score, Tom realised this now meant that he was owed five Galleons. He laughed to himself at having forgotten about it in the excitement of the moment, and the unpredictable circumstances that had brought him a win without him having to interfere with the game.

In the Great Hall that evening, there was not much in the way of cheerfulness through most of the assembled student throng, not even from the Hufflepuffs who had won - perhaps they recognised that they had not done anything to deserve the victory. If anything, they seemed nearly as bothered by the turn of events as the Gryffindors did. The closest to jubilation was amongst the more Blood-purity obsessed Slytherins, who presumably did not know that she was estranged from her filthy Muggle parents, and thus

really no more to blame for her former connection to them than Tom was for his time in the orphanage, or his presumably Muggle mother. That said, of course, having a Squib in the family was generally considered a shame, so having the Squib as one's only familial connection to the magical world wasn't exactly a stellar situation. Even Tom's mysterious situation, being unknown, was preferable to Jana's known situation. Thus, many at the Slytherin table were simply pleased to see a Mudblood critically injured and possibly about to die, particularly one with such hubris as to have aspired to greatness for thinking herself good enough to play in the Quidditch Cup.

Others at the Slytherin table were trying to take the moral high ground on the matter. Not that they had the morals they were aspiring to, as far as Tom could tell, but some clearly wanted to project different images than others. Still, about the most friendly opinion being touted amongst House Slytherin seemed to be a mixture of pity and contempt, that it had been a tragic folly of Gryffindor House to field a Mudblood first-year as Seeker, as though she could hope to compete against real Pureblood Wizards.

"Where are you off?", asked Tiernan, as Tom rose from the table.

"To add to their misery", replied Tom, heading over to the Gryffindors, who seemed to be in a state of mourning (it was hard to tell how much was concern for Jana, and how much was concern for their Quidditch Cup chances).

"Hello, Harry Weasley" said Tom.

"Ah, yes, you", said Weasley.

"Yes, me"

"Er..." - Weasley clearly looked uncomfortable doing business at the Gryffindor table. He hadn't seemed the least bit uncomfortable when doing it at the Ravenclaw and Slytherin tables (and presumably the Hufflepuff one too, not that Tom had noticed him hawking his bets there - but it would be only logical to try some Hufflepuffs to bet on Hufflepuff).

"Four Galleons, isn't it?", said Weasley.

"Plus the one I gave you, making five in total, yes", replied Tom, already thinking through drawing his wand, but not actually doing so yet.

"Yes... right" said Weasley, shifting slightly in his seat. Tom's thoughts went to Weasley's mind, and Weasley's thoughts went to his pocket, where there was almost but not entirely enough money. Tom raised an eyebrow.

"Of course", began Weasley, promisingly. "The thing is, little embarrassing, I don't quite have five Galleons. Can I give you four, and owe you one?"

There was a pause where Tom frowned just a tiny fraction, but did not reply yet. He wasn't completely averse to being owed a Galleon, and four Galleons was still an improvement on the one Galleon he had previously. But he also knew that Weasley had almost five Galleons on him, and would rather clean him out.

"Or", continued Weasley, "I could give you... (here he took coins out from his pocket and counted) four Galleons, thirteen Sickles, and..." - he trailed off while counting little bronze Knuts.

"Keep the Knuts", said Tom.

"Right", said Weasley.

"So...?" Tom held out his hand. Then added his other hand to it, to avoid spilling Sickles. He tipped the proceeds into his own pocket, and his robes were now somewhat weighed down on that side.

"See you around", said Tom, and headed back off to the Slytherin table, intentionally leaving Weasley unclear over whether or not they were now square. Either way, Weasley would now feel indebted to Tom; either directly, in the sense of owing another four Sickles, which Tom would readily accept if presented, or indirectly, in the sense of having been let off regards the debt of four Sickles, which Tom did not plan to do explicitly, but secretly did

not mind if Weasley simply remained hanging on the matter. Tom had no idea if this would prove to be useful at some point, but it seemed like a pleasant prospect to have, for the cost of four Sickles that had never been his and would have been difficult to extract by force from someone who didn't have them.

Over the course of the remainder of that weekend, Tom used most of his free time to try to research Charms to get a liquid from one place to another without touching other things between, but also decided, out of curiosity, to go visit Jana in the Hospital Wing.

Upon entry, there was nobody around, but there was a countertop with a bell on it, with the words "ring for attention".

Tom rang it, and it made a very quiet *ding*, and followed up with a light musical voice saying "Please do not ring this bell again. Thank you". Tom put it down and waited, and only a moment later, Healer Tegner arrived, and looked him up and down.

"Come in", he said to Tom, leading him into a small adjoining room. It had a table and three chairs in it. "Have a seat", he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Actually, I'm just here to visit Jana Teires and see how she's doing"

"Oh", said Tegner, clearly surprised. "You're in good health, then?"

"Perfectly", said Tom.

"And you're a... friend of Miss Teires?", asked Tegner with a frown.

"Yes", said Tom. Privately, Tom wasn't sure whether he qualified as a friend or not, but opted for the simplest answer. Tegner's eyes were lingering on Tom's Slytherin tie.

"Right... I see", he said slowly. "Well, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid Miss Teires is not in a condition to receive visitors at this time".

"Hmm", replied Tom, dissatisfied. "When will she be out?"

"I can't tell you that", said Tegner, flatly. "In part because it's early days yet and I myself cannot say for sure".

"Only in part because of that?", asked Tom, picking up that something more was missing.

Tegner gave a small smile.

"There is also the matter of Healer's Privilege and confidentiality. Of course I cannot give details of any patient to just anyone who wanders in and claims to be a friend"

"You doubt me because I am a Slytherin?", asked Tom, perhaps a little boldly, but not rudely.

"I doubt you because I have no reason not to", said Tegner. "Potential House-related animosities are merely a compounding factor. Now, if you've no medical concerns that need addressing, I shall bid you good day and return to my duties".

Tegner rose from his seat, and Tom did likewise. As they exited the small consultation room, Tegner turned to Tom, and asked:

"What's your name?"

"Riddle, Sir"

"Hmm. I haven't seen you up here before, have I?"

"No, Sir. You've seen me at duelling though".

"Right, duelling, you're the first-year who duels with the older students. Wait... You fought with Miss Teires at the start of the year, did you not?"

"Well, we duelled", replied Tom, hesitantly.

"An odd basis for friendship", said Tegner, scrutinising Tom anew. Tom looked into Tegner's mind, and saw a stung and swollen hand, and a flash of Jana's then-smouldering hair. "If you are a friend though", he added, "if you brought any card or token or such for her, I'll be happy to deliver it"

"No, I didn't", said Tom. He was annoyed at the insinuation, and also partly wished he had, just for the pleasure of demonstrating to Tegner that he hadn't, in fact, malevolent intentions.

“Well, good day to you then”, said Tegner curtly, with a fleeting polite smile, before turning back to the rest of the Hospital Wing and disappearing through some double doors.

Tom’s thoughts followed him and his; Tegner’s thoughts seemed to have turned to another patient whom Tom did not recognise, so Tom ditched the connection, as he clearly wasn’t thinking about Jana, who had been Tom’s only reason for making the wasted journey up here.

Oh well, thought Tom. At least he had got plenty of exercise, due to Slytherin House being below ground level, and the Hospital Wing being inexplicably one of the highest parts of the castle to not actually be one of its towers. Who puts a hospital up this many flights of stairs?

Perhaps in an effort to cheer up the Gryffindors, or perhaps because it was simply part of Slughorn’s curriculum, the next Potions class had them preparing Euphoria Elixir. Valerie Clemence, who usually sat next to the still-absent Jana, was clearly quite upset to be working on her own; her thoughts, so far as Tom saw when he looked into them, were of nothing but Jana, and she was ruining her potion as she went along, either out of incompetence, despondence, or, most likely, a combination of the above.

As things went worse and worse with her potion-making, she got correspondingly worse and worse at keeping back tears. The way she was leaning over her potion, it looked as though she was trying to steam her face. Tom wondered what effect “tears of a young Gryffindor” would have if they dripped into the potion. Students with long hair were expected to tie it back for the same reason, as human hairs ought not go into many potions. Students were also advised to wear hats while brewing, though this rule did not seem to be enforced.

Most of the class struggled with extracting juice from the pearly-white Sophoporous beans as per the instructions; cutting into them often caused them to spring aside; not nearly so violently or persistently as Bouncing Bulbs, but enough to present a challenge. Tom’s rocking knife that he had received at Christmas from Tiernan made the job somewhat easier for them, as it did the job of a third hand, given it didn’t require help to continue slicing, so Tom could use both hands to control both sides of the bean, while simultaneously commanding it to stay still. Between his wandless magic, the rocking knife, and being able to use both hands, he did a fairly good job of it.

Tom let Tiernan peel the Shrivelfig despite it being a somewhat delicate task. Tom, too, was missing Jana’s presence somewhat, and could have done with a second demonstration of the best way to peel them; Slughorn had shown the class once, but it had been difficult to watch with the jostling throng of his classmates. He didn’t want to ask Slughorn to demonstrate a second time, and it was better for Tiernan to mess something up than him. Tom, meanwhile, flicked the rocking knife to effortlessly mince the Wormwood.

Tom and Tiernan had finished their Euphoria Elixir before any other pair, and Slughorn investigated it, and upon testing a sample (by taste), joyously proclaimed:

“Merlin’s Bearded Dragon Eggs, it’s excellent! Fifty, no, I mean twenty points for Slytherin!”

Beaming happily, he went over to Marca and Antonin’s workbench, where they were just finishing up (or rather, mostly Marca was). They were a little behind Tom and Tiernan because they had struggled a little more with the Sophoporous beans, owing to having to use a more ordinary knife than Tom’s.

“That’s it, yes!”, announced Slughorn when it was done, but sampled it as well just to make sure.

“It’s brilliant!”, he exclaimed, grinning broadly now. “Another twenty points to Slytherin! Any Gryffindors feeling competitive today?”, he asked, opening wide his arms and raising his voice like a showman asking volunteers up onto the stage.

He was met by a resounding silence, broken by a single sob from Valerie, and the word "Trollscat!" as an exclamation from Belinda as her cauldron spat some hot liquid at her. Even a couple of Gryffindors laughed a little.

"That is not an ingredient in this potion, Jabez, and you'd know about it if you added that in!", laughed Slughorn. "Come on, any more for any more?"

He set set about doing the rounds of the classroom again, looking for any potions that seemed to be nearly finished. After a few more potions had been brewed successfully, tested, and points handed out, Slughorn took up Tom and Tiernan's carefully decanted potion.

"Don't mind if I borrow this, do you boys?"

"Of course not, Sir", said Tom, wondering if he was going to drink it all now. He was already seeming like a very happy drunk, so Tom was curious to see what he'd be like if he drank it all. Instead, however, he took it and magically transferred it to a score of test-tubes standing in a rack (yes, thought Tom, that's exactly the spell I need), and invited the class to each come and take a small dose. It was quite entertaining, seeing the transformations of character taking place. Even the mournful Valerie dried her eyes and smiled after taking hers, though she looked rather like someone who'd just lost a Galleon and found a Sickle.

Tom, for his part, found the potion seemed to exaggerate his excitement about the Charm he needed, and also made him feel like he wanted to hit the duelling club right now. He felt surprisingly happy, something quite strange for him, and it occurred to him that he might be able to produce a Patronus in the state. He wouldn't have a chance to try yet, but he was thrilled by the notion of trying it later, regardless. No matter if the effect wore off; he could use the bottle that Jana had given him for Christmas.

Of course, the use of performance-enhancing potions was forbidden in competitive duelling, but it wouldn't hurt to get the experience of casting the spell regardless, surely.

Meanwhile, they made they way up from the classroom, many actually skipping from the room, and others just in unusually good cheer, with even Valerie being at least on the positive side of neutral, and then headed down to the Great Hall for lunch. Tom took the last few staircases several steps at a time, despite the large size of the great stone steps of the grand staircase that lead into the Entrance Hall. As he did so, a few coins bounced out of his pocket and through a gap between the narrow columns that supported the outside bannister. At the bottom of the stairs, he turned to go get them, while his classmates went on into the Great Hall.

Tom's coins had rolled a little way down the corridor, and as he reached the furthest one and pocketed it, he heard Dumbledore's voice, and stopped to listen, as he realised Dumbledore was talking to someone that sounded important, just around the corner.

"My dear Minister, I really don't know what you hope to accomplish by coming here"

"But if you could just talk to him, maybe you could get him to see sense"

"You've an unreasonably high opinion of my ability to get others to see sense, despite me presently failing so abjectly to do so with you"

"Albus, please. A lot is riding on me bringing these negotiations through successfully"

"Your career, I think you mean?", suggested Dumbledore.

"Oh, really now!" exclaimed the Minister, clearly flustered. "There's a lot more at stake than that, and my priorities are not nearly so personal. You cannot possibly be blind to what he's doing, the extent of his intentions"

"Yet you have, all this time"

"I'm a lover of peace, Albus, is that so bad? I have worked tirelessly, more than any other, to avert this war that now appears to be almost unavoidably upon us. I need the help of people like you now. And we both know there aren't many people like you."

"I refuse to believe that I am indispensable, Hector. You have an army of diplomats. You do not need me."

The other man sighed.

“A letter, perhaps?”, he asked, with a pleading tone of desperation. “Could you at least consider writing to him? Rekindle some element of the person you knew?”

“I cannot help you”, replied Dumbledore. His last words seemed to carry an odd note of weakness with them, strange from such an arrogant Wizard who usually seemed to have everything around him under control.

“Albus!”

The sound of footsteps followed, and the voices became quieter, and now seemed to be arguing a little more heatedly, as they were clearly walking the other way. Ordinarily, Tom would have followed the conversation by intruding into the second man’s mind if he possibly could, but he was having trouble concentrating on anything, probably due to the Euphoria Elixir that was still giving him a sense of elation regards everything, never mind that he had just heard his least favourite teacher arguing with what was presumably the Minister for Magic.

If there was a war coming, and Dumbledore could stop it and was refusing to do so, then this would be a fun thing to know about the man, Tom thought to himself, smiling, as he headed back towards the Great Hall.

Chapter Fourteen

Jana's Return

Valentine's Day arrived, and Tom was not assaulted with a singing Valentine's Day card from anyone, nor anything at all, for that matter.

Many students had sent cards to each other, sent gifts to the objects of their affections, or had flowers delivered anonymously by owl-order. Secret Valentine's Day greetings and flowers seemed to Tom to be even more pointless than the named kind.

What was the point in a sending a courting gift if the receiver didn't know who had sent it? Where was it going to get the sender? What could it achieve?

That said, in many cases it was clear that almost everyone but the receiver knew who had sent a given thing, and there was also the odd practice of people confiding in people of their own gender, and not the other. As for the Slytherin first-years, Tiernan had received a card that was quite obviously from Julia. Marca received a single rose that Tom knew to be from Antonin. Belinda was keen to mention about the expensive chocolates she had received, and did not know that they were from Emlyn.

That evening, there was much speculation in the Slytherin Common Room over how badly disfigured Jana would be if she eventually made a return.

"She'll be ugly as a troll", proclaimed Belinda with a half-grin, "she got it straight in her stupid face; there's no way her nose wasn't crushed, for a start"

"I don't know", said Emlyn, "Healer Tegner's pretty good with noses". He spoke from personal experience, of course.

"You just had a nosebleed though", countered Belinda reproachfully.

"Quite an impressive nosebleed, to be sure", interjected Abraxas with a smirk, "but just a nosebleed, all the same"

"Surely a broken nose can be fixed easily enough?" asked Emlyn.

"I don't know", said Tom, "Look at Dumbledore's; it's practically a zig-zag"

"Curses are different than percussive injuries", said Marca, "I do not know, how Dumbledore got its nose into its current situation". Either Marca disliked Dumbledore as much as Tom did, or she was having a bad grammar moment.

"He was probably sticking it where he shouldn't", offered Abraxas.

"Why do you say that?", asked Tom, curious.

"For a lowly schoolteacher, he's always getting mixed up in things", said Abraxas, dismissively. Tom wondered what kind of things, but the conversation was shifting back to Jana, so it seemed he'd have to pursue it later.

"She does not have a long nose, like Dumbledore", said Marca. "She has, or at least had, a small cute nose"

"Cute?!", retorted Belinda, looking disgusted.

"Is that not the right word?", asked Marca, frowning, clearly unsure of her English. "A little one, like mine", she added, indicating to her own nose, as though they might not have known where to look for it otherwise.

"Well, true there wasn't much there to ruin, but anyway, Teires must be a right mess or else she wouldn't be out of classes this long", observed Belinda. "I bet she's lost the use of an eye or something. Ha, I'd love to see her try and catch a Snitch if she's only got one eye"

"You talking about Jana Teires?", asked Milton Mulciber, calling over from an armchair in a nearby area of the Common Room.

"Yeah, why?"

"Lucretia went up to the Hospital wing - she'd been fighting with Walburga again, but that's another story - anyway, she passed by the ward, and one of the beds was all curtained off. You know how the screens have Imperturbable Charms on them?"

The first-years shook their heads.

“Well, they do, stops people outside from disturbing patients with their noise, or from hearing any private stuff going on inside. But anyway, Tegner was coming out from what must have been Teires’ bed area when Lucretia went by, and as the screen was partly open because he was coming out, she heard him saying that that was all he could do for her for the moment, and when Teires replied, the voice was weird and distorted, not like a Charm, but like she had something in her mouth or some deformity stopping her from talking properly”

“Cool”, said Belinda, pleased at the news, however vague.

“Yeah, maybe she got a broken jaw or something”

“Knocked her teeth out”

“Swallowed them”

The speculations went on, getting gradually more grisly. Tom tried to let his mind wander to the Hospital Wing, in an effort to find Jana’s mind, or Tegner’s for that matter, for a more conclusive assessment. However, there was far too much interference from all the suggestions immediately around him, that he just had no chance; his own mind was too clouded with far too many images of various forms of gruesome carnage to be able to tell which given image was accurate.

It was not until Friday that, upon entering the Great Hall in the morning, the truth of the situation was revealed.

As Tom and a handful of other Slytherin first-years arrived into the room, he - and they, almost as quickly - discovered that Jana had recovered sufficiently from her injuries to have returned to her Housemates. Over at the Gryffindor table, she was surrounded by friends, and looked absolutely none the worse for wear whatsoever. She still had both eyes, one nose, and judging from her grin when she saw Tom, hadn’t lost teeth. In fact, she didn’t have so much as a black eye, never mind the various states of glorious horror that had been predicted. She excused herself from her friends, and came over to see Tom, whose fellow Slytherins varyingly stared and muttered, as Tom hung back to find out what Jana had to say for herself.

“Hey Tom”, she said, brightly.

“Welcome back to the land of the living”, he replied. “Let me guess, just out of the Hospital Wing and already you want to duel?”

“Heh...” replied Jana. “No... Actually, probably best if I avoid duelling for a week or two, and keep myself in one piece. Don’t want Healer Tegner to think I’m trying to move in. And I’d certainly like to see less of him”, she said.

“That bad is he, despite his apparent miracle-worker status?”, asked Tom, gesturing to Jana’s fully recovered form.

“No, not at all, I just mean that I could do with fewer injuries that cause me to visit him. He’s alright, himself. He’s really looked after me. Very charming, quite handsome...” Jana trailed off, and Tom raised an eyebrow. “But underneath the bedside manner, I think he mainly thinks of me as a quirky slab of meat to keep alive”, she concluded.

“He didn’t seem to like me coming to visit you”, said Tom.

“He mentioned you tried to visit, that was very sweet of you”, said Jana, smiling. “I think he assumed a Gryffindor couldn’t possibly have a visitor from Slytherin who didn’t want to poison her”, mused Tom.

“Well, he’s managed to resist the urge himself - he was in Slytherin, you know - but I guess your House isn’t famous for its love of Muggle-borns”

“I didn’t know that”, said Tom, “about Tegner, I mean”.

“Well, anyway, it honestly was just that I was in no fit state to be seen by anyone, even Valerie who tried every day, bless her”

Overlooking the sentimentality, Tom frowned slightly.

“Really? Yet you’ve made such a perfect recovery. I mean... Seriously... Flawless”, he said, incredulously scanning for any sign that she’d been even slightly injured.

He regarded her nose, which surely had needed complete reconstruction. He tapped it with his forefinger, to see if it was real. She blushed slightly and smiled, and Tom realized she might have mistaken his assessment and skeptical investigation for affection.

“How badly were you injured, to come back looking like this?”, he asked, a touch accusingly.

Jana’s smile faltered slightly, and she looked a little like a trapped animal.

“Badly enough to make quite a mess of me, but Healer Tegner has done a good job of fixing me up”, she replied, and her thoughts backed this up; Tom looked into them and found her reliving a memory of struggling to open an eye, caked in blood, dizzy and nauseated, with a splitting headache and far too weak to move.

“Hmm”, said Tom, privately deciding to take an interest in magical medical methodology. While he didn’t plan to have his face flattened, it seemed that magical medical arts would be a good string to his bow in his personal quest for invincibility. “I’m sure your fellow Gryffindors are missing you”, he said, by way of a dismissal. Jana looked relieved that he had dropped his questions regards her medical treatment.

“They certainly swamped me when I got back into Gryffindor Tower last night. Valerie hugged me so tightly, I thought she was going to put me back in the Hospital Wing! And Xavier, he kissed me on my cheeks twice”, she said, as though she were telling Tom something that would in some possible world be of interest to him. “But I think that might just be a French thing, I don’t know if he likes me, likes me”

Oh, good grief. Why did people seek his opinion on their love lives?

“It is a French thing, yes”, replied Tom. “I’ve seen sailors doing it down at the docks in London, and I don’t think they’re in love” .

Jana looked pensive.

“Hey, by the way, I got a Valentine’s Day card while I was in the Hospital Wing, and a rose. Do you know who they were from?”

“No”, said Tom. “Why would I?”

Jana looked momentarily disappointed. Perhaps she, like others, had expected him to be the fount of all knowledge.

“I’m sure you have plenty of admirers”, said Tom, “I’ll let you get back to them”.

“Yeah, right”, she said. “Good seeing you again”, she added, seeming sincere.

“Indeed. See you around”, said Tom with a smile, nodding curtly and turning back to head over to the Slytherin table.

Tom took a seat, and the others were already looking at him expectantly.

“Well?”, asked Belinda, clearly the keenest for news.

“Well what?”, asked Tom, in return.

“Why is she fine? Was she faking it?”

“I don’t think so”, said Tom. “I guess Tegner’s good at his job after all”.

“But she doesn’t have a scratch on her!”, objected Belinda.

“Well, I wouldn’t have thought that scratches would be the difficult part to fix”, reasoned Tom.

“What was the deal with her nose?”, pressed Belinda.

“I’ve no idea”, replied Tom, honestly.

“No, I mean, you touched it”, said Belinda, with a note of distaste.

“Oh, that. I was surprised, and trying to tell if it was real”

“And?”

“Well I’m not sure how in-depth you expected my investigation of her nose to be, but I didn’t observe anything wrong with it”, said Tom, somewhat amused.

“It’s not fair”, grumbled Belinda, turning her attention back to her food, occasionally shooting murderous glances over towards the Gryffindor table.

“Good morning everyone”, said Professor Vassy when everyone was seated in the Charms classroom. “Today we’re going to be adjusting the sizes of things; it’s critical that you have these spells mastered before we move on”.

Before long, they had all taken buttons and - a single incident of accidental desk-shrinkage aside - the class had picked up these two Charms quite well. Tom wondered if they could be used on people, but now did not seem to be the time to try. The Charm to make things larger, “*engorgio*”, was countered by “*reducio*”, to return engorged objects to their original size. To make things continue to get yet smaller, “*diminuendo*” was the Charm they practiced, but this one seemed ill-suited to use in duelling, even if it would work on people; it was far too slow.

“Excellent work, class”, enthused Professor Vassy, about halfway through the lesson. “We’ve now time to look at another spell, by special request”.

She summoned everyone’s buttons - the ones they had been working on, anyway - back to her, and vanished them. She now produced a goblet from thin air. She multiplied it such that she now had a second goblet, and filled the first with an *aguamenti* Charm.

“You of course all know by now how to move solid objects about, by using Hover Charms, including *wingardium leviosa* and the *locomotor* set. However, if you try to use those to move a liquid, you’ll run the risk of making a tremendous mess. So, how to move liquids about safely and securely?”

She looked at the class expectantly. Nobody knew the answer; Tom got the name of the spell from her mind, but declined to answer, as he had asked her to teach it, so couldn’t very well now pretend to know it; or rather, if he did, he’d lose any privileges regards being taught it.

“*Asifon*”, she said, pointing to the goblet with the water using her wand, and with a twist of her wrist, the water spurted as directed into the other goblet, producing a little waterspout like the *aguamenti* Charm, but from receptacle to receptacle, instead of from the wand.

“The incantation is easy enough”, she said, “as pioneered by Geberus Rhazes, mostly better known for his Alchemical works, but what I want you to pay most attention to is to watch my hand carefully; it’s all in the wrist”. She swished the water back into the first goblet. “Pleeease try to aim carefully”, she added, now distributing goblets amongst the class, two for each student, and letting them fill one each themselves.

In no time at all, the class was full of much mirth and merry-making, as water was sloshed to and fro, mostly missing goblets. But when people missed goblets, of course they used the Charm to try to put the water back in a goblet, if not Charming it to sploosh onto their neighbours. Tom found that a Shield Charm could be used to protect against such assaults, causing water to hang in the air for a moment before dropping down.

Vassy, meanwhile, seemed to have given up on any semblance of maintaining order, and with an if-you-can’t-beat-them-join-them attitude, had Charmed some water into the form of a frog, which was now hopping about the class, periodically being siphoned into a goblet and hopping out again.

Tom, for his part, was torn between taking the lesson seriously - after all, he had reasoned that his life might depend on mastering this one - and succumbing to getting into water-fights with his neighbours. He rationalized that winning such fights was also important, in its own manner, as he redirected Antonin’s latest projectile back at him with some vigour, and cheated slightly by following it up directly with *aguamenti* spell that Antonin only just managed to deflect.

After the descent from the Charms building, Herbology was of a rather different pace, though Tom took care to practice the accuracy of his Siphoning Charm in a non-battle environment, as they learned about the care of aquatic cacti that had been grown in specially insulated tanks.

At lunchtime, upon reentering the Great Hall, Tom saw the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor first-years already seated, brandishing bunches of flowers of various kinds. Jana waved a bunch of begonias at him from across the room, with what looked like crocuses sticking out of the side of the bunch. Nearer her hand were oversized daisies, or perhaps, as Tom strained his mind to remember medicinal herbs, perhaps they were camomile flowers.

As Jana waved, Valerie Clemence turned to see who she'd waived at, and Tom saw that she for her part definitely had daisies on her bunch, which was otherwise a bundle of scarlet fuschias.

"Did we miss something?" asked Julia Nettleskip, a step or so behind Tom. "Were we supposed to bring flowers?"

"The Hufflepuffs don't have flowers either", observed Tom, "and we're the ones who just came from Herbology"

"Oh well that's just fine then", said Julia, "I always wanted to be as well-prepared as a Hufflepuff"

"I can't imagine what we would need them for", thought Tom out loud.

By the next lesson, Defence Against the Dark Arts, which Slytherin House shared with Ravenclaw, the Ravenclaw students had lost their flowers, apart from Enid Albertstone, who was sporting a single large marigold attached to his lapel.

"Albertstone, is that supposed to be a target for people to aim at?", asked Professor Merrythought, brusquely.

"No, Professor, sorry", he replied, fumbling to remove it as quickly as possible before she followed up with that idea.

The days lesson was, however, one of Merrythought's rarer theory-based lessons, and actually quite sedentary, as they learned about vampires. The classroom being devoid of such creatures, the closest thing to excitement was examining a vampire-hunting kit.

"This one's my personal kit, so don't think you're going to get to mess with it", Merrythought warned. She explained how it was sensible to have such a kit in any Wizarding household, but that there may soon be restrictions against such, as the Ministry of Magic argued over guidelines for the treatment of non-Wizard part-humans. She addressed this with something of a scoff, and it was clear that her own opinions rested on the side of security for humans.

Given that historically more Muggles had killed Wizards and Witches than vampires had, Tom wrestled with why it was currently legal to kill vampires, but not Muggles. He supposed it had to do with how dangerous each was in the current world, rather than any ancestral conflicts.

Following Defence Against the Dark Arts came Transfiguration, and they learned why the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors had been sporting flowers at lunch.

"Good afternoon, Hufflepuffs and Slytherins", began Dumbledore cheerfully as he arrived into the Transfiguration classroom. "Inspired by the flowers I've been seeing around the castle this week, today we will be turning wood kindling into flowers, with the *florifors* spell".

An astonishingly useful application of magical power, thought Tom to himself. *I'm sure I'll use that every day.*

"Now, the *florifors* spell is used to transform things in general into flowers. We could be practicing with teapots or chickens, but for simplicity, let us start with wood kindling." If there was something that could make this lesson worse, thought Tom, it would have been a roomful of chickens. Dumbledore stood three pieces of kindling on his desk.

"If we were to have a passing fancy for a particular kind of flower, the magic required would be vastly more complex than what we will do today, or indeed, this academic year. For example, roses... forget-me-nots... sunflowers" - with each of these words, he tapped a

piece of kindling, and it became a bunch of the flowers he mentioned. They did not fall over, despite surely not being anywhere near so stable as the kindling.

“However, the transformation should not be too taxing if you are content to simply think flowery thoughts while working, and allow the kindling to become whatever flowers come naturally for you”.

He stood another piece of kindling on his desk, and tapped it. “*Florifors*” In an instant, the kindling became a bunch of white star-like flowers. “Alas, asphodel”, said Dumbledore. He regarded it for a moment, and vanished it with his wand.

“Well, I think it’s time for you to all have a go”, he said, smiling again, and distributing kindling wood throughout the class with a single flick of his wand; each student received a single piece of wood that landed on their desk.

“You will be applying the same principles that we’ve been learning in the most recent lessons”, he said, “so most of this will not be too new today”.

Nobody transformed their kindling instantly as Dumbledore had done, but changes came quite quickly. Most, for example, got their kindling to become leafy quite quickly, and soon thereafter, take on a green hue and start to look like plant stems. Flowers themselves took a while to produce, but most of the class were getting there, as Dumbledore strolled around the classroom, humming irritating tunes to himself to distract them and offering more specific instructions here and there.

“Ah, cornflowers, one of my personal favourites”, said Dumbledore to Marca at a nearby desk, smelling them with his overly large nose. “And sage leaves”, he added, “what a delightful combination”.

Tom, meanwhile, had produced an unwieldy bunch of deep pink flowers that had sprouted in all directions. He had been hoping for something a least a little more elegant.

“Rhododendrons? Good work, Tom”, said Dumbledore, inspecting them, before moving on.

Tom wished he’d produced the more impressive-looking tiger lilies that had sprouted from Abraxas’s kindling, even if Abraxas’s kindling itself was otherwise mostly unchanged.

Tiernan, meanwhile, had produced a horrific combination of sickly sweet-smelling woodbine and edelweiss. He was not the only one to produce more than one kind of flower in their bunch; Belinda had produced some purple carnations mixed with some white flowers that were pink on the rim of the bloom, with a yellow area in the middle.

“Dog rose, Belinda, well done”, said Dumbledore, and a few people sniggered.

Dumbledore either didn’t hear them, or pretended not to. Tom was starting to wonder why Dumbledore seemed to be a walking encyclopaedia of flowers.

In front of Tom, Ezra Dunston was clearly suffering; he was sneezing intermittently, and snuffling away while working, or at least while trying to work. For the amount of progress he had made, he might as well have taken up the kindling stick and attempted to use it to Transfigure his wand, rather than the other way around.

Archie, next to him, had produced some red clovers from his own kindling. Not very impressive, but flowers, at least. He kept looking over to Ezra. Tom could tell that Archie wanted to help him transfigure his own kindling, but obviously couldn’t intervene, as it seemed likely he’d just produce more of the same, and make it clear they’d been Transfigured by the same person.

That evening, Tom took some time to further practice his Siphoning Charm, but it had really become quite easy, and he was now pretending to read, while actually not even trying to concentrate on anything other than his mental preparation for what he planned to do next. Once it got to an acceptable time to do so, he went to bed, despite how many students stayed up rather later on a Friday. He wanted to be well-rested. Tomorrow, he would sneak alone into the Forbidden Forest.

Chapter Fifteen

Beasts and Blood

In the morning, it took Tom far longer than he wanted to get down to the school broom shed without being seen, but eventually he was able to set out on a broomstick, although he took a more scenic route to the forest, along the edge of the lake, as this was the lowest point (and therefore most sheltered from view) and also simply less suspicious; if someone saw him, his destination wouldn't be nearly so obvious.

When he did arrive there, the forest was criss-crossed with various tracks and paths, and many of these had clear hoofprints in them. Unfortunately, this didn't necessarily mean much, as Tom was aware there were also centaurs in the forest. If anything, these hoofprints cutting deep into the mud were probably not made by the sleek animal that Tom had seen barely denting the snow when it ran, when he had been here some month and a half ago with Antonin.

As Tom went deeper into the forest, it became correspondingly darker, as the woody canopy blocked out more and more of the February morning sunlight. He was covering ground quite quickly, what with being on a broom and sticking to tracks, but he recognised that there was a lot of ground to cover.

Coming to a large clearing, Tom paused to consider which way to go from here. As he did so, a soft snorting sound caught his attention; it sounded like it could be a horse. He looked around, and caught no sight of his quarry. Still, he recalled how he had not noticed the unicorn last time until it fled, so he drew his wand, and remained quite still while scanning the scene for any sign of movement. It occurred to him that centaurs had human top halves, and therefore probably did not make such horse sounds, so his unseen company was more likely a unicorn.

Hearing hooved feet, Tom wheeled around, but still no sight of the animal, and the footsteps had now stopped again, wherever they were. He turned back around, and froze as he saw a figure in the clearing.

The man looked no less surprised to see Tom, and also froze in position himself. He was dressed in torn robes, and had unkempt hair.

"What do you want?", the figure demanded, half menacingly, half fearfully.

Tom wasn't about to reply with the truth that he wanted unicorn blood, but didn't know what to say instead. He pointed his wand, which was already in his hand, at the figure.

"No!" said the man, putting his hands up as though to shield himself, and cowering slightly while at the same time maintaining something of a snarl on his face. "What do you want from me? I haven't been near you, haven't been to the village", he complained gruffly, from behind his hands. Tom noticed that he was sporting quite long and dirty fingernails.

"What are you doing here?", asked Tom, returning the question without having answered it himself. After all, he was the one with a wand in his hand. "Are you a criminal?", he asked, taking in the man's appearance.

"You... You don't know?", he replied, lowering his hands a little. Tom's mind entered his at this point, to get the answers that didn't seem to be forthcoming by words. A flash of images showed Tom torn flesh, hair, a hollow in the wood, and a glimpse of a full moon - then Tom realised, this was a werewolf. He hadn't really thought about what werewolves did during the rest of the month.

"You're a werewolf", he challenged.

"I never asked for this!", the werewolf retorted, not troubling himself to deny it. "I never... I stay away from the village... Keep in the forest... Eat things here... Leave me alone"

"You would have attacked me", said Tom, thinking out loud. Surely that was the only reason he could have been approaching him.

"No, I was following that", he said, pointing directly at Tom, "and then I saw you"

"You're not making sense", said Tom, wondering if being a werewolf affected one's mind the rest of the month too.

"The little ones, they're more trusting, but it'd feed me for ages", said the werewolf. He was very much mistaken if he thought Tom was going to be trusting.

"Well I'm not going to trust you, am I?", said Tom, incredulously.

"What?" asked the werewolf, clearly slow on the uptake.

"You purpose to kill and eat me", said Tom, finding it quite surreal to be having this conversation, "but I'm hardly going to let you, as I'm the one with a wand"

A look of dawning comprehension appeared on the werewolf's face, almost a smile.

"Oh, you thought... No... No, you can't see... That thing next to you"

Tom looked around him and saw nothing out of the ordinary, and looked into the werewolf's mind again, and nearly fell off his broom as he moved aside to avoid the hideous thing next to him that he saw through the werewolf's mind - but the moment the connection broke, he could no longer see it. Perhaps the werewolf was imagining things? Certainly he seemed to be somewhat unhinged. Tom, still on his broom, moved closer to the werewolf, but still kept a safe enough distance.

"What is that thing?", he asked.

"Thestral", said the werewolf, clearly wary of Tom's closer position now, and also glancing at the spot where he had previously been. "Not everyone can see them"

Well, that much was clear already.

"What exactly is it?", pressed Tom, still unsure if it even existed outside the werewolf's mind. The thing he had glimpsed looked like a ruined wreck of a beast; horse-like, blackened as though charred by fire, skinny to the point of being skeletal, and with body-parts that a horse shouldn't have, but it was difficult to maintain enough focus to look at it properly, so Tom didn't have a fully clear picture in his mind. But if Death had a horse, this would be it.

"Is it anything to do with the unicorns?" he asked, wondering if this was perhaps some bastard offshoot; or nature's way of evening things out.

"Unicorns?" repeated the werewolf, his own mind flitting to another area of the forest, and momentarily glancing that way. "No, can't catch them, too wary. But that thing..." and Tom got another look at the thing that was now approaching him again, and this time he could hear it; had this been the sound he had heard?

"Stupefy! Stupefy!"

Tom cast stunning spells; the first at the invisible horror that approached him, the second at the werewolf, because now was not the time to have to juggle multiple threats at once.

The werewolf grunted and hit the floor, ostensibly unconscious. Unable to tell if he'd hit the other target, Tom flew a distance further from the ground, so as to put the creature beneath him. There was a sound of wings, and a rush of air against Tom's face. He raised his wand again, but had nothing at which to aim.

A twitch from the werewolf caught Tom's attention. Wheeling upon it, Tom hit it with another stunning spell. The body shuddered under the force of it, and became still once again. Tom approached warily, and was startled by yet another movement, a twitch from the werewolf's hand. Was he waking up already? It occurred to Tom that this would be a very inconvenient witness to his presence in the forest, and he knew that Tom had enquired after unicorns. And now he'd attacked him. All in all, the werewolf could cause problems if questioned. There was only one thing for it. Glancing around, Tom pointed his wand at the werewolf's throat. He took a deep breath, and spoke calmly and decisively.

"Diffindo"

A crimson line appeared in the flesh, and an instant later blood was rushing out, pouring onto the floor around the body.

Tom watched, transfixed, as the pool of blood grew deeper, wider, and darker. It seemed the werewolf was still alive, because its hand was still twitching, but surely could not be so for much longer. Tom kept his wand ready to cast another spell if necessary. Watching the twitching hand, for a fleeting second Tom thought he saw the horse-like monstrosity there too, nosing at the hand. He tried to work out what he'd just seen, to complete the mental image. It was black, skinny, had pointy ears, or were they demon-like horns? Its ribs were so clear, and its wings were featherless, and leathery, like a bat's. Wings, it had wings.

As Tom tried to work out from memory what it had looked like in the flashes that he had seen, he realised he was no longer looking at a mental image, and could actually see the thing before him now. It was lapping at the blood, and had now stopped causing the hand to move with its slightly beaklike snout.

The werewolf had said that not everyone could see them. Previously, the werewolf had been able to see them, and Tom hadn't. Now, the werewolf appeared to be dead, and thus could no longer see it, but Tom could. Perhaps he had taken the ability to see it from the werewolf?

However this shift had come about, the animal was now pulling at the open wound at the werewolf's neck, and tearing off strips of flesh to eat, ignoring Tom completely. Tom considered that now might be a good time to leave.

As he had an idea where unicorns might be, based on where the werewolf's mind had gone when Tom had mentioned them, he lifted up and flew to the treetops at the edge of the clearing. It'd be easier flying up here, without having to avoid every tree and branch on the way, and when he got to where he wanted to be, he'd be less likely to disturb a unicorn if he arrived from above, than from the same level.

Rising above the top level of the trees, the castle again came into view. Tom hoped that anyone looking out of its many-windowed towers would not notice him, but sank down a little lower just in case, and, glad to leave this particular clearing behind now, flew quite gently as close to the tops of the trees as possible without making a worse obstacle course of it than the trunks and branches had been down below.

Approaching the area where he expected unicorns might be or at least recently have been, he descended slowly until he could see the forest floor. He wanted to scout out the area from as high as reasonably possible.

After what felt like far too long gliding silently through this part of the forest, Tom saw the gleaming whiteness of a unicorn, and, scarcely daring to breath, moved in closer.

He drew his wand as quietly as possible. "*Stupefy!*" As Tom spoke, the unicorn already started to run. The Stunning Spell hit the unicorn's hindquarters, and one of its legs buckled under it. The beast veered into a tree, and stumbled a little more. It was clearly "stunned", but nothing like the unconsciousness that his spell had produced whenever he had used it against people.

With no further concern for the element of surprise that had served him well so far, but could hardly be used again, Tom descended down to ground level, and dismounted from his broom a short distance behind the dazed and limping unicorn. He cast another Stunning Spell at what had become an easier target, whose back legs now collapsed completely under it. The debilitated animal snorted and tried to scramble back to its feet, but to no avail. It pawed desperately at the earth with its front legs, while getting nowhere.

Approaching, walking around a little, and levelling his wand at the flank of the beast, Tom made sure it definitely wouldn't get away.

"*Incarcerus*"

Silvery chains whipped around the unicorn and bound it tightly. That was novel, thought Tom. It had been ropes when he had practiced it in the castle, not chains. In any case, the unicorn was definitely staying put now. It couldn't do anything with its legs, and

even the movement of its head was now restricted, as a couple of stretches of chain bound its head, using the horn as leverage, looped and lashed around the muzzle, and connected to a leaden bit in its mouth, forcing the neck to bend downwards, the creature's jaw nearly flush to its prominent and hitherto proud chest.

Though its legs were bound tightly with chains from the fetlocks upwards, this didn't stop the creature from trying to escape; it thrashed ineffectually and strained against its bonds with some vigour. Tom continued to give its legs a wide berth as he circled around further to approach the front.

Looking the beast in the eyes, Tom could tell that it didn't seem to understand what was happening. He looked around, to check that attention had not been drawn to them by its struggles. There was no sign that he was being watched by anyone or anything but the animal itself. It struggled a little less now, and gazed up at Tom. Was it pleading? Tom's lip curled slightly in contempt. He squatted down near its head, and had to settle backwards slightly to avoid being in reach of the horn, not that it appeared to have enough mobility to make it useful. Tom remembered how valuable unicorn horn was, and it occurred to him that he could take this one. And the tail-hairs. Of course the blood was the most important, but taking it would be the most potentially messy and dangerous thing he'd be doing, so he decided to do that last.

Making his way back around to the rear of the beast, he straightened out its tail, and then held his wand close to it, almost touching it, just below the dock.

"Diffindo"

As the severed hairs fell away from the dock, the unicorn let out a loud whinny, apparently aware of the loss, and resumed its futile attempt at thrashing. Tom hit it with another Stunning Spell, and, subdued, it quietened down again. Tom suddenly realized that maybe he should have pulled out the hairs one by one, to ensure having the full hairs, and not just most of each hair, until the point where he'd cut them.

On the one hand, it was not the end of the world if his acquisition of unicorn tail hair turned out to be useless - it wasn't even what he'd come out for; it was just a pleasant bonus. But on the other hand, if the unicorn was found afterwards with its trimmed tail, then suspicion might fall on young Wizards who didn't actually know what they were doing. Tom didn't want to be under suspicion. Come to think of it, the hair itself could be a problematic piece of evidence to be carrying around. And it's not like he could sell it on without incriminating himself. He reflected on how to put it back, but Repairing Charms and Sticking Charms didn't seem appropriate here. So, he'd just have to hide or destroy the evidence, or as much as possible to obfuscate what had gone on.

For the moment, however, he put the severed tail-hair down - it wouldn't even fit in his pockets anyway; he'd have to leave most of it behind even if taking some. He hadn't previously appreciated just how big these beasts were, and consequently just how large the tails were also. He reflected on how having cut the tail-hairs mustn't be too bad, since obviously wands with unicorn tail-hairs in must have had the tail-hairs cut, surely, as wands were a fraction of the length of the tail. With a wand's primary function being to channel and focus magic (as he had read about in *Fundamentals of Magical Theory*), it didn't feel to Tom as though a hair would be folded to make it fit, as that would surely ruin its directional flow. Then again, maybe they were shrunk down to size. Who knew? Not Tom, that was for sure.

He dropped this line of thought for now, and wandered back to the beast's head. It looked up at him with what might have been a fearful expression, its eyes fixed on Tom.

"I'm going to need you to stay very still now", said Tom quietly, and glanced up to its horn. Tom ran his hand up the beast's muzzle, past its eyes, and settling on the horn. The unicorn tried to jerk away.

"No, you're not going anywhere", said Tom, laughing now. "At least, not the way you want to", he smiled. He wondered at how much it understood. It seemed to recognise at

least that Tom coveted its horn. Perhaps it knew they were hunted for such. As it continued to watch him, Tom realized that it'd surely try to jerk away again as soon as it saw him go to cut the horn, and he wondered if cutting the horn was going to be difficult enough already.

"Well, you've watched me this far, but no more", he said.

With these last words, he pointed his wand at one of the eyes, so the tip was almost touching the eye. It didn't even flinch, as a person might if you held an object near their eyes. Tom wondered what spell to use to stop it from watching him.

"Incendio"

It flinched. It more than flinched. Three Silencing Charms later, it stopped braying at least. Tom extinguished the small flames that were now making their way from the jellied mess that remained of its eye. It looked quite ugly, for what had hitherto been quite a beautiful animal. Tom hadn't really noticed its former beauty until he saw the contrast now.

But then, he hadn't come out here for its beauty. Looking at the gelatinous substance oozing from the blistered remains of the eye (which now looked oddly deflated and droopy, where the outside was still in one piece), Tom vaguely recalled Professor Slughorn mentioning something about the fluid from inside eyes being used in certain potions. It'd be interesting to experiment with the fluid from unicorns as opposed to less interesting animals. Oh well, he could hardly take everything; he didn't want to be here all day. He could always try it another time. Decisively now, he pointed his wand at its other eye.

"Incendio"

Due to the Silencing Charms, there was no noise from the thing this time, aside from a slight hissing sound that came from the eye itself as it burned out, and the shuffling noise against the leaves and twigs on the ground as the animal tried in vain to react usefully. Tom extinguished the flames again. He was getting better at that, he noted, and smiled. It was nice to see such progress.

Tom held the beast's head in place as well as he could with one hand, holding by a chain. Of course, it had - as far as Tom could tell, in any case - nearly as much in the way of muscle in its neck alone as Tom had in his entire body, but after however many stunning spells it was up to now, and the tight bonds, it was more of an even contest of strength.

"Diffindo"

Tom's Severing Charm hit the horn, and ricocheted off in several directions simultaneously. There was a second of silence, and then a great crashing sound as two trees creaked and tumbled where they had been completely cut through, and a third split at the trunk enough for a good half of the tree to come crashing down noisily. Tom winced.

That racket must have been audible for a good distance.

Tom levelled his wand angrily at the unicorn, and then realized he had no way of punishing it for creating such a commotion that might have given him away. He was already going to do what he was already going to do, and he didn't have time to torture the thing slowly. Even less time now that all that noise had been made; he'd have to work quickly.

He glared at the horn, which, unlike the trees, was still perfectly intact. He didn't know any other way of cutting it, without an actual saw. Obviously there was a way, because unicorn horns were harvested, but whatever it was, the *Diffindo* Charm just wasn't cutting it.

Admitting defeat on that front, he took out the bottle from his pocket. He paused to reflect on the use of the Siphoning Charm. He now wished he'd spent more of his recent Charms class time practicing tidiness in the application of this spell, but here he was, and now was the time. He placed the bottle on the forest floor, twisting it slightly to make an impression in the ground, so that it'd have a more stable position. He planned to conjure the unicorn blood into the bottle as it was sitting on the floor, rather than holding it in his hand, since this way, if he missed slightly, at least he wouldn't get blood over him.

Using the horn as a lever, he twisted the head to a sideways position, and knelt on the side of the thing's face. He realized he didn't have enough hands now, so he swivelled around and stood on the side of the horn with one foot, forcing it right down towards the ground that the head rested against, and then knelt on the side of its face with his other knee instead. There, that was a much more comfortable working position. The beast was clearly finding the situation quite thrilling, because Tom could see its pulse very easily in a blood vessel in the creature's neck. This was almost too easy.

Leaning back as far as possible to avoid any wayward spurts of blood, Tom pointed his wand at the point of the throbbing artery.

"Diffindo"

Tom was surprised to see a rush of some silvery substance rush out and upwards, landing on the floor with a wet splash. And another, and another, and Tom realized that this was the blood; it was just a gleaming silvery colour.

"Asifon", he incanted, and directed the blood to the bottle. It filled almost instantly, and Tom wished he had brought more bottles. They would have been a pain to carry surreptitiously, but it seemed such a waste that it was all just flowing away on the forest floor.

He dismounted the unicorn's head, and visited his bottle. He wished he knew how to close it with magic, but settled for doing it manually very carefully, so as to not get any blood on him. Having stoppered it, he gingerly held it with his fingertips and flicked the bottle away from him, to get off the little bit of blood that was on the side. A small amount still remained. He considered wiping it on the ground, but rather than get it dirty, he wiped it on a bit of the unicorn that was accessible through the chains. The wound to its neck was still losing a lot of blood, but it had now settled down to a much gentler flow, albeit still with a visible rhythmic pulse despite the lower pressure.

He pocketed the bottle of blood, and decided to simply dispose of the tail-hair that would probably be useless to him. He threw it on the unicorn. Magically lifting a part of a tree that had been felled, he placed it onto the unicorn and set fire to it; it became a roaring blaze almost immediately.

"Relascio", incanted Tom, causing the chains to whip off and vanish, with a slight pinging sound. They were hardly needed any more now, and the less evidence he left behind, the better. If he had known how to vanish things outright as he'd seen Professors Vassy and Dumbledore do, he'd have done that. Presently, however, he surveyed the burning remains of his crime.

Fortunately the clearing was quite sheltered, so it didn't seem that any wind would cause the fire to spread out of the clearing to the rest of the forest. Tom didn't want to wait around to make sure, though, now that a plume of smoke was rising from the place and surely attracting attention. He took up his broom, and quickly sped from the place.

Upon reaching the edge of the forest, Tom flew low and kept close to the boundary, before cutting across and retracing his former route along the edge of the lake. He hoped there was no Quidditch practice going on, and was pleased to discover that there wasn't. This made returning the borrowed broom much easier.

Back in the Quad that stood outside the Entrance Hall, Tom could hear voices and it was clear that a lot of students were about. Perhaps it was lunchtime now? He entered via the smaller side-door.

"Hey, there's Tom", said Iolanthe Oannes. Tom would rather not have met people he knew right now, but here was half the Slytherin first-years.

"Hi", he said. "Getting lunch?"

"Obviously. Where've you been all morning?"

"Oh, I went down to the lake just now", said Tom. "Before that, I was at the library".

Nobody pressed him for more information about that, and as they made their way into the Great Hall, conversation had already turned to the current standings in the House Cup.

Chapter Sixteen

Eyes and Ears

Tom's activities in the forest had entirely escaped notice despite the billowing plume of smoke he had unavoidably left as a tenebrous mark on the pale sky indicating the scene of the crime.

Or so it had seemed for the remainder of Friday and the entire of Saturday, for life at Hogwarts went on without any interruption or challenge. It was not until Sunday breakfast time, when he found he had not only failed to escape notice, but had also made the front page headlines of the Prophet on Sunday, as he discovered from one of the numerous copies delivered to the Slytherin table, which bore the story:

Grisly Scene of Gruesome Crime At Hogwarts School Is it the work of Gellert Grindelwald?

Sources in Hogsmeade have reported that the still-smoking remains of a mangled body were found in the forest situated at the edge of the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Rumours that a child has been taken from the castle have not yet been confirmed by the school's Headmaster, Armando Dippet, despite an urgent enquiry from the Daily Prophet. One thing that has been confirmed is that a unicorn was attacked and sadistically set on fire, before bleeding to death from its injuries.

It is unknown if the Dark Wizard in question harvested blood from the unicorn before departing; as our erudite readers will know, unicorn blood is banned (in sale, trade, possession, use, and consumption) under both the Control of Dangerous Magical Substances Act 1849 and the Protection of Endangered Magical Creatures Act 1921. The killing of a unicorn is punishable by up to ten years in Azkaban Prison.

Unicorn blood is known for its uses in Dark Magic, not limited to its use to attain unnaturally long life. Hogwarts Headmaster, Armando Dippet, aged 301, was unavailable to comment.

Tom was about to "turn to page 5 for the full story", when Marca interrupted him.

"You look concerned", she said. "There is no need. This castle is very well protected"

"Not concerned at all", said Tom, smiling now. "Although they seem to think our Headmaster may be a suspect".

"In my country", said Marca, "this is called propaganda".

"Yes, here too", said Tom. "So you don't think there's anything in it?"

"Well", said Marca, "probably the core essence of the story is true. Probably a body was found. This might mean a human body or it might mean the unicorn. It was probably burned. Because it was burned, they probably do not know, what happened."

Nodding his agreement with Marca's assessment and turning to the rest of the story, Tom found that a reward was being offered for information, by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, who were making a full investigation due to the severity of the crime and the current political situation. He'd rather they didn't, but oh well, just a thing to circumnavigate. Tom wasn't sure why Grindelwald would be suspected, but at least if the newspaper was pointing fingers directly at foreign revolutionaries and indirectly at their distinguished Headmaster, they probably wouldn't be suspecting a 12 year-old schoolboy.

He wondered if he could claim a reward for giving information they didn't yet have,

but could not as yet come upon a way of doing so without identifying himself as the culprit, or at the very least coming into the spotlight.

“Why is our Headmaster 301 years old?”, asked Tom. “Anyone know?”

“It is because he was born in 1637 year, and has not yet celebrated his birthday this year”, said Marca, matter-of-factly.

“Thanks”, said Tom sardonically, “I gathered that part. I mean, he doesn’t look a day over... well, eighty or so, I suppose. But not hundreds of years old. I presume there are magical ways of preserving unnaturally long life; is unicorn blood the only way?”

“There is at least one other way”, said Marca, thoughtfully. “I read that Headmaster Dippet is not the oldest person even in this country. There is a certain Mr. and Mrs. Flamel, who are older, and they use Alchemy to produce the Elixir of Life. I do not know, what Dippet is doing. I imagine, that it is not unicorn blood, or it would be public knowledge by now, as he is a public figure, and he would be arrested already, unless he is more powerful, than your government. Whatever he is doing, for that matter, is probably public knowledge also, but I personally, do not know”.

“Hmm. Alchemy’s an optional subject we can take up next year, isn’t it?” thought Tom, out loud.

“Yes. Alchemy, and Divination, and Arithmancy, and Wandlore, and Beasts, and Glyphs and Tongues, and maybe some others... there was also some rumour that the school would offer Muggle Studies”

“Muggle Studies?”, asked Tom. “As in, studying Muggles? Studying like Muggles?”

Abraxas, nearby, interjected, his mouth full of sausage:

“Nod a tans”

“Come again?”

“Excuse me”, he said, upon swallowing. “Not a chance. I’ve heard that there were people asking for it as a subject - not from our House, I’m sure - but that Dippet said it’d never be a subject in this school, not so long as he’s Headmaster”.

“That would indeed be extremely embarrassing to have as a subject”, nodded Marca.

Tom spent much of that day in the library. His unicorn blood weighed somewhat on his mind; if there was going to be a proper investigation, he needed to find a good place to keep it, better than its current resting place in his trunk. He recalled how Dumbledore had made his trophies at Wool’s make their presence known. Of course, Dumbledore would surely not come to meddle in the affairs of Slytherin House, but if it could be done, it could be done, and Tom would rather it not occur. He already planned that if it were discovered there, he would deny all knowledge and claim it to have been planted. It was one thing confessing to winning trophies from the other orphans; it was quite another confessing to a crime that could get him ten years in prison. He wondered what a prison for Wizards would be like, but didn’t imagine that it would be fun, and in any case, it’d be very disruptive to his life to have to take ten years out.

Tom found himself occasionally distracted from his current research topic - Alchemy - with looking for hiding places around him. He reflected on the possibility of simply hiding it behind the *Collected Works of the Sorting Hat*. Surely nobody ever took that book out. Its neighbours could conceivably be more tricky, though, and he knew he’d want to periodically visit it to ensure its safety; perhaps too often, drawing attention to it.

For the moment though he put that from his mind, and focussed on trying to understand *Basic Elements of Alchemy*, of which the library had numerous copies, and appeared to be aimed at a newcomer to the subject. From what Tom could tell, though, Alchemy was all about basic elements, no matter how complex. For now, even the first page contained many things that were quite alien to Tom, though at least it did him the good grace of explaining its terms as it went along. It was certainly slow progress and a lot to take in, but it seemed to Tom an essential thing to be able to grasp.

After having missed lunch while absorbed in “the simpel kompleksitee of the dynamiske systeme” as the chapter heading described dizzyingly many-layered cycles of creation and destruction, by the time that the evening meal was about to be served in the Great Hall, everything Tom was reading was reminding him of his hunger. This Element consumes this one and feeds that one, unless affected by this other one in which case the food cycle, no, the flow cycle is alternate, and the fuel is pudding, no, not pudding, puddling, what? Pooling. Wait, why pooling, how do they pool? He scanned back up the page, feeling a little lost, before finally closing the book, with the intention to return to such matters when he had eaten.

In the Great Hall, Tom was alarmed to see there was not yet food on the tables as there usually was as soon as the main doors opened. He went and took a seat along with his classmates, who were also clearly concerned, except perhaps Marca, who generally seemed to subsist on the idea of food rather than the actual thing, for all she nibbled at the most ridiculously small portions.

“What’s going on?” asked Tiernan.

Tom held up a hand to shush him, as the Ravenclaw ghost, the Grey Lady, was nearby at the adjacent table, and talking. Ghosts were often quite well-informed about what was happening in the castle; being nigh unable to interact tangibly with the physical world around them, they spent much of their time watching and listening. Tom had sometimes reflected that the Hogwarts ghosts must be amongst the most well-educated beings around. Right now, however, the Grey Lady was not terribly forthcoming with information.

“...this great sadness, this terrible evil... and knowledge, the most sacred of things, can itself be a heavy burden to carry”

“Never mind”, said Tom to Tiernan. “I thought she might have had something meaningful to say about what’s going on. I’ll give her great sadness and terrible evil... I haven’t eaten since breakfast”.

Tiernan laughed.

“Library?” he asked.

“What? Oh yeah, library”, replied Tom, irritably.

Just then, Headmaster Dippet swept into the Great Hall, and strode down the central aisle, his long robes accentuating his movement. He had an air of surprisingly graceful power to him, for a man of three hundred and one. Making his way deftly up to his spot at the teachers’ table, he turned to face the assembled school.

“Good evening, Hogwarts”, he began. “As most of you will by now be aware, there is a rumour that a serious crime has been committed in our school’s grounds. I am now going to lay that rumour to rest: it is true.”

A murmuring broke out across the Hall. To Tom, this hadn’t seemed informational. He hadn’t considered the possibility that the story was not at least based in fact. Granted, he had committed the crime in question, so had special knowledge, but it hadn’t occurred to him that people might doubt even the bare essence of the story.

“Yesterday afternoon, Professor Diggory investigated smoke rising from the Forbidden Forest, and what he found was quite chilling. A unicorn has indeed been killed.

There is no reason to believe that the beast suffered before its untimely demise, despite the characteristically gloomy assessment of centaurs who also attended the scene”.

Well, the centaurs were right, thought Tom, but it was good if this was not being believed.

“The Department of Magical Law Enforcement are investigating the crime, and will be maintaining an increased presence in the area for the foreseeable future. They are calling for any witnesses to come forward with additional information, and I must echo that plea. The Forbidden Forest is of course out of bounds to all students, so I do not expect any of you to have information pertaining to the scene of the crime, but if any of you saw anything

unusual, such as perhaps noting any visitors approaching or leaving the forest, please come forward either to myself or your Head of House.”

Tom avoided looking at his classmates, and remained fixed on Dippet.

“I will further add this: if by chance any student was out of bounds and was consequently witness to any events in the Forbidden Forest yesterday, know that a one-time-only amnesty regards such trespassing will be extended in return for any information given, should you come forward with such, so please do not fear reprimand on this occasion. Anonymous tip-offs may of course also be made, should you doubt my word or fear later prejudice. I will now hand over to Professor Merrythought, who will share advice regards the situation”.

He gestured to Merrythought, who accordingly walked around to the front of the staff table, looking as grave as ever.

“A serious crime has been committed, and I expect it to be solved in short order”, she said, in her usual straight-to-the-point manner. “While investigations are conducted, I expect all students to broadly continue their usual activities in a sensible manner. However, be aware that the open fields adjacent to the Forbidden Forest are now also out of bounds until further notice, as is the Black Lake and its shore, and as is the village of Hogsmeade to those students who would otherwise have permission to visit at weekends. I repeat, to make it absolutely clear, no students are permitted to go to Hogsmeade until further notice. You will remain in the castle and its immediate grounds; that is to say, the quad, the Quidditch pitch for specifically authorized activities, the greenhouses for Herbology lessons, and the lawns immediately adjacent to the castle walls. You will not stray any further afield than that, on pain of receiving detention every evening and every weekend as long as the investigation continues. These temporary restrictions apply to all students, including Prefects”

Well, that was a cheery notion.

“In the meantime, I will take this opportunity to urge all of you to pay particular attention to Defence Against the Dark Arts. This does not just mean practicing Shield Charms and Impediment Jinxes and the like - though I would advise you to do that also - but also to be vigilant and be aware of anything out of the ordinary. Report anything suspicious to a teacher immediately. Ghosts, I ask you to kindly do the same, and have made the same request of the castle’s many portraits, and even the House Elves have been likewise alerted to be on their guard. Between us all, with our many eyes and ears, we can keep this castle and all its residents very safe indeed”

It was becoming increasingly clear that moving his unicorn blood, and thereafter keeping it hidden, may not be an easy task.

“In summary: Be vigilant, be prepared, be safe”, she concluded. She gave a momentary fleeting smile, a curt nod, and returned to her seat. As she did so, Dippet stood up again, and clapped his hands twice. As he did so, food finally appeared on the tables.

“Let us eat”, he said.

The following weeks passed relatively without incident. Tom resisted the urge to move his unicorn blood while he still didn’t have anywhere good to put it, and moving it was just a liability. He felt like moving it from place to place should keep it safer, but he knew that this was illogical and actually just risked being seen. Antonin’s Sneakoscope periodically went off now when Tom opened his trunk and thought about the blood. As this happened several times, Tom dismissed Antonin’s concerns with “either that thing is super-sensitive or my socks are plotting to assassinate me in my sleep”, and practiced closing his mind to the thought of the thing from which he now moved his attention, focussing instead intently on whatever task he was currently performing (such as accessing clothes, or books, or whatever other innocent item). This approach seemed to work.

Slytherin steamrolled Hufflepuff in their Quidditch Cup match, but that was to be expected, and even the celebrations back in Slytherin House were accordingly quite modest as the victory had been somewhat taken for granted.

The atmosphere of slight distrust and excitement that had been raised by the news and announcements in the Great Hall soon abated, only returning from time to time when rumours abounded about the comings and goings of Magical Law Enforcement personnel, but nothing that suggested to Tom that they were anywhere near catching him at all. He wondered why they put in so much effort for a dead unicorn, but the persistent suggestions that it may have to do with Gellert Grindelwald kept people's attention. Tom had tried researching Grindelwald in the library, but found that for all his fame, he had yet to have any biographies of him there. Upon asking Madam Redmond, the librarian, she informed him that she believed such a book to be in the pipeline, but not yet having been published in English or in this country. She expressed her hope to have copies before the end of the school year, "not that he'll be in your exams, I'm sure".

Tom wasn't sure where Grindelwald would feature if he were to be included, unlikely as that may be. History of Magic? He may be making history, but Professor Binns had yet to teach them anything about anything that had occurred in the last century. Defence Against the Dark Arts? Certainly Grindelwald was neck-deep in the Dark Arts, if the Daily Prophet was to be believed, but then, they had hinted at the same for Headmaster Dippet, which seemed unlikely - though of course entirely possible - so who knew?

One thing was becoming clearer to Tom as he read around the topic - a lot of the field of "Dark Arts" appeared to simply be so named because people didn't know about it, were unwilling to talk about it, and generally seemed to go out of their way to keep themselves in the dark regards the topic. Of course, while willfully avoiding any such potential growth and enlightenment, they naturally projected their own petty fears and called the knowledge itself "dark". Perhaps they called it that simply because those were the areas in which they feared to tread.

Tom, for his part, had never been afraid of the dark, so the metaphor didn't seem to apply to him. If anything, the closest he came to fear perhaps was his own darker deeds being placed under the spotlight. But even that wasn't so much a fear as an aversion. The thought of any of his occasional wrong-doing being exposed prompted more a sort of battle-readiness in him. He would, however, much prefer to avoid any such confrontations for now if at all possible, and as such, endeavoured to rather keep his head down and allow the current investigations to simply blow over in due course.

Chapter Seventeen

Easter

The Easter holidays arrived, and furnished Tom with a week mostly to his own devices at Hogwarts. Absolutely all of his Housemates went to their families for Easter, even Antonin and Marca; this latter had explained that Easter was a fancier holiday over in the East than it is here, and unlike Christmas, they celebrated it at the same time, except when they didn't, which was most years, but not this one. Calendrical confusions notwithstanding, the upshot was that everyone was away on this occasion. A small handful of students from other Houses remained, but nobody with whom he associated.

Tom took advantage of the castle's relative emptiness of people to explore more than he had previously. The doors to many classrooms and other places were locked, and unlike the broom shed, in most cases did not unlock with a standard Unlocking Charm.

Those that did unlock commonly turned out to be such things as, for example, broom cupboards and the like, albeit for the kinds of brooms used for sweeping. Tom presumed these were used by the House Elves that were said to be resident to Hogwarts, but which he had still never yet seen. He also found several new sets of toilets, and a couple of classrooms that didn't seem to be in use. He kept an eye out for somewhere to which he might relocate his unicorn blood, but so far did not encounter any place that didn't seem quite obvious, and / or be quite likely to be disturbed by House Elves going about their cleaning duties.

The library was also closed over the course of the holiday, of which Tom had been forewarned and took out several books prior to its closure, such that he might study them back in the Slytherin Common Room.

Another way in which he made the most of his solitude there was experimenting with magic. He even took Euphoria Elixir, in order to test his theory that he might be better able to cast a Patronus Charm while under the influence of such.

Feeling happy, he brandished his wand and shouted the incantation, resulting in little but a slightly hollow feeling to his euphoria when it still didn't work. He tried a few more times, before giving up again on that for now, retaining his good mood nevertheless. By the time the effects of the potion wore off, he'd not quite figured out how to get a rug to close up around someone automatically when they stood on it, but had managed to Enchant several pillows to flee from anyone who approached them.

By the end of the week, Tom had not only finished reading several books cover-to-cover, but had also discovered all by himself that it was possible to Stun portraits, and not only that it was possible to float in levitated bathwater, but also found from experience that if one does so, it's really important to keep one's concentration. And that Stargrass Salve will fix the bruises that result from not doing so.

As the students were to declare their intentions regards their second year elective subjects upon their return from Easter holidays, Tom had put some thought to the matter himself, and had decided by the time the others returned.

That he would take Alchemy seemed clear to him, based on the utility that Marca had mentioned. Furthermore, if there seemed to be a Hogwarts subject that was some manner of undercurrent to all magic, it appeared to be Alchemy; as such, it doubtlessly was a potential source of much power. As for his other two subjects to chose, he was as yet undecided.

Beasts was a subject that leapt out to him as potentially exciting, but then, perhaps they would simply be learning things he could do already? After all, he could generally control most beasts with little effort already, and he'd got on just fine with the ones he had met to date in the Forbidden Forest. Additionally, he'd head from Lucretia that the subject was "going soft", and that classes for her were far from what Dorea had done even back in her own second year. He didn't want to bother with it if it was becoming all about caring for

creatures and taking great pains to keep them alive even when they were annoying. He didn't want it to be like Herbology with fur.

Wandlore seemed interesting, but then, Tom had a wand, could not afford another, was happy with the one he had anyway, and did not foresee himself becoming a wandmaker. It was unlikely he'd ever in his life need to know the arcane details of what went on inside wands; his wand worked the way he wanted (with the exception so far of the pesky Patronus Charm), and true to Ollivander's words, it had proved itself a fine companion in the arena of duelling.

Arithmancy Tom discounted, as he just couldn't see the real-world applications for it. Doubtlessly they existed, but he had only three slots to fill from six subjects, and Arithmancy seemed to be the subject he'd put in sixth place.

Divination, the art of divining knowledge of the otherwise unknowable, on the other hand, was immediately appealing. Tom was definitely in favour of knowing what others did not. Knowing about the future ahead of time seemed an incredible advantage, and being able to divine knowledge of other goings-on past and present (as branch arts of psychometry and such went) could naturally be of quite some benefit. He was aware that Divination came also with out-of-hours sessions in and upon the Astronomy Tower, which Tom saw as a bonus, though he noted that many would see it as a reason to not take the subject, and instead enjoy those evenings engaged in recreational frivolities.

Having decided on Alchemy and Divination, the third subject that Tom chose in the end, after some debating between it and Wandlore, was one titled "Glyphs / Tongues". He had read about various non-human Beings that had languages of their own, and of course he was already familiar with the language of snakes, though granted snakes were not considered to have the status of "Beings". Tom was a little hazy on the topic of such classifications, but instead tended to mentally classify Beings, Beasts, and other things alike, into the more practical categories of "useful" and "useless". Ideas and skills, too. For instance, being able to talk to others definitely constituted "useful". Being able to read things also constituted "useful". Granted, he had his Perevodal Glass, and it too was "useful", but he did find the allure of being able to access the knowledge more directly and reliably to be quite alluring.

Meanwhile, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement continued search for the killer of the unicorn, much to Tom's dismay. A small operation was, according to the Daily Prophet (in the absence of Slytherins from whom to borrow the paper, Tom picked a left-over copy from the Ravenclaw table most days at breakfast), being carried out by Department personnel and being managed by a pair of Aurors, catchers of "Dark Wizards", stationed in Hogsmeade. Their identity was secret, but there were only so many places to stay in such a small village and only so many visitors, so locals were playing spot-the-Auror with relative ease, disguises notwithstanding.

Their latest effort, after scouring the area quite ineffectually while carrying Sneakoscopes and "Dark Detectors" in the form of what appeared to be copper-pronged instruments that made a buzzing noise, involved a team of Niffler-handlers. Nifflers were strange-looking long-snouted creatures that were normally used for finding more conventional treasures, but these had been Charmed to seek out evidence of criminal activity. So far, they'd found remnants of a body that the Daily Prophet got very excited about for a day, before magical analysis discovered the deceased to have been a werewolf, and suddenly nobody cared anymore. A small footnote questioned and then dismissed the notion that the werewolf might have been responsible for the death of the unicorn.

Upon the return of the others from their holiday, several people asked Tom about what had been going on in their absence, and he had to disappoint them that he really only knew as much as they did about the ongoing search.

That evening, Tiernan approached Tom with a look of consternation, wanting to speak about a different matter.

“Tom, what subjects are you taking next year? The optional ones, I mean”

Tom told him, and asked why.

“Just wondering”, replied Tiernan. “Isn’t Alchemy supposed to be very hard?”

“It might challenge some”, said Tom, thinking back to his library study of the matter.

“Hmm. What do you think I should take?”, asked Tiernan.

“What do you think most useful for you?”, asked Tom in return.

“I don’t know. I just want to do well. I don’t want to take easy subjects just for the sake of it, but nor do I want to do badly in hard subjects. Having fun would be good, so I wouldn’t mind sharing classes with you”.

Tom wasn’t sure to what extent he really constituted “fun”, but smiled at the notion.

“Well, we don’t really know what’s easy or fun. Beasts might be. Divination comes with astronomy evenings, if that takes your fancy. I haven’t heard anyone describe Arithmancy as fun.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll go with Divination. Maybe Beasts, and one other”

“Did you give this any thought over Easter, Tiernan?”, enquired Tom.

“Far too much, actually”, sighed Tiernan.

Eventually, Tiernan settled on Glyphs and Tongues as his third option. Similar conversations abounded over the next couple of days until the deadline for submitting options. They had been warned that late submissions of preferences would result in potentially random allocations according to class sizes. The fear of being allocated specifically to the least popular subjects resulted in most people handing in their preferences in good time.

Marca, predictably, had decided her subjects quite early on, and had announced that she had already selected Alchemy, Glyphs and Tongues, and Wandlore. Antonin, after some rumination, settled on opting for the same. Beasts seemed to be a very popular subject; perhaps because people were excited by fierce creatures, or perhaps simply because it seemed easy and was literally a breath of fresh air (as such classes had, by necessity, a large outdoors aspect to them). Belinda and Emlyn had both chosen Beasts amongst their options, and neither of them struck Tom as particularly nurturing types.

Abraxas, with his usual casual air, declared that he’d chosen probably the most respectable subjects, which in his opinion were Alchemy, Arithmancy, and Wandlore. It didn’t seem that he’d given any thought to ease or fun. Tom got the impression he was just living up to family expectations, but was doing so with his habitual laid-back confidence.

Before long it was the end of April, and time for the final match of the Quidditch Cup, Slytherin vs Ravenclaw. There had been a few entirely coincidental happenings in the corridors of Hogwarts in the lead-up to this match, to include Ravenclaw’s Keeper Reginald Stewart accidentally drinking a Forgetfulness Potion the evening before (that Slytherin Chaser Rebecca Flint had been seen talking with Peeves shortly beforehand had nothing to do with it), and the number of attempts made to curse Ravenclaw’s Seeker in the week approaching the match was naturally only a result of her being an annoying stuck-up Witch, and nothing at all Quidditch-related. Soon, she was not going anywhere without an escort of Ravenclaws looking out for her, though this had not stopped there being a few further skirmishes. As for the unfortunate incident of Howard Ingram getting locked in a dungeon shortly before Ravenclaw’s final Quidditch practice of the season, that could happen to anyone, and it surely wasn’t at all a matter of him being a Beater for Ravenclaw.

Come the morning of the match, Reginald Stewart had remembered to show up, Ozzy Fame was still in one piece (“for now”, grinned Belinda), and both Ravenclaw Beaters made it to the pitch.

The first injury of the match came in the first few seconds. The Snitch was released, and made itself swiftly scarce; the Quaffle was released, signaling the start of the match, and the central Chaser from each team made a dart for it (Slytherin Chaser Douglas Darkwater got there first); the Bludgers being released an instant after the Quaffle prompted both Slytherin Beaters and one of the Ravenclaw Beaters to speed into action; Howard Ingram hung back, to protect his teammates. However, Colin Merle, the Beater who had moved in on the attack, was no match for Walburga, Lucretia, and two Bludgers all at once. His saving grace was that the Bludgers had not worked up so much momentum yet as they had just that second been released, but this did not save him from being clubbed in the face by Walburga, and dazed by a Bludger hitting his head as he knocked the other one aside and broke out of the *melée*, dripping blood from his lip but clearly not hurt too badly to continue.

Due in part to the ferocity of play, it was a while before the first goal was scored, with the Slytherin Beaters escorting Douglas Darkwater almost all the way to the hoop. In contrast with the common theme of focussing on the Seeker, Walburga and Lucretia today seemed to be keener to harass the Keeper. Of course they couldn't make a direct attack on him when the Quaffle wasn't in the vicinity of the goal-hoops, as per Quidditch rules, but whenever it was, they did not waste the opportunity, and they also batted Bludgers towards his end of the pitch whenever possible, unless there was another Ravenclaw target very nearby.

Down at the other end of the pitch, whenever the Quaffle neared the Slytherin goal-hoops, Selwyn would often opt for a pre-emptive strike, flying out almost as far as the goal area boundary to meet and disrupt the Ravenclaw Chaser, rather than wait to try to save the goal nearer the hoop. She invariably did this with an intimidating vigor, hurtling towards the Chaser, often to a chorus of "Violent Violet, fa la la la la" from the stands.

It was not until Fame made a streaking dash that indicated she had spotted the Snitch that the Slytherin Beaters seemed to lose their nerve regards their plan of not focussing too much on her. For some while after that unsuccessful dart, during which they had both swooped in on her, Lucretia now marked Fame as closely as possible, while Walburga took care of the rest of the goings on single-handed. Walburga had a slightly easier time of this than she might otherwise have done, since Lucretia's marking of Fame meant that Merle flew over and marked them both, so that there would be a Ravenclaw Beater there too, to even things out.

Fame managed to shake Lucretia eventually by first gathering up the other Ravenclaw Beater, Howard Ingram, opting to look for the Snitch over by the Slytherin goal-hoops. What with Fame, Merle, Ingram, Lucretia, and Violet all in one place, a Bludger was attracted in quite short order, and in the ensuing flurry of brooms and minor injuries, Fame made good her escape. The cluster of players had now attracted both Bludgers and Walburga, and they were thus entertained for a good few minutes. The Chasers were currently engaged in a surprisingly peaceful but vigorous battle nearer the other end of the pitch, leaving Fame and Murdock to look for the Snitch quite unmolested.

It was Fame who succeeded in this endeavour first, leading to quite a resounding victory for Ravenclaw, as she held up the Snitch to the sound of chants of "Ozzy Ozzy Ozzy! Fame Fame Fame!" from the Ravenclaw stands, and even some from the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff stands.

This meant, Tom had learned, that Ravenclaw had won the Quidditch Cup, since their two Houses were now tied for victories, but the paucity of goal-scoring in this match meant they had won their head-to-head game by quite a margin, thus taking the Cup on tie-break points - and with it, quite a boost in House Cup points, for that matter.

That night, Slytherin House was not sorrowful, but raging with its plans of making Ravenclaw pay for this, in the House Cup, and wherever else the opportunity may present itself.

Duelling became more fierce as the end of the year approached. In Tom's case, and doubtlessly in many others, this was partly a matter of becoming more competent as time went by and more experience was accrued. The overall increase in ferocity was also promoted heavily by the burgeoning competitive spirit between the Houses. The Ravenclaw victory in the Quidditch cup had brought their tally very close to that of Slytherin's, and Slytherin fought tenaciously to widen the gap while Ravenclaw were keen to close it.

At present, the gap was widening again, since more Slytherins were duelling than Ravenclaws (as many of the latter House kept out of duelling especially in this time period as exams approached), and when it came to points given out in classrooms, most teachers gave out such points for correct answers, and it doesn't matter if in a given class there are a throng of Ravenclaws who know the answer, if one Slytherin catches the teacher's eye first and collects the points.

Additionally, when faced with a Ravenclaw and another House's student both raising their hands, it was predictable that many teachers would assume the Ravenclaw more likely to have the correct answer, and so ask the other student, to find out if they really do know. An entertaining case where a positive prejudice regards Ravenclaw's scholarly nature actually worked against them, and was probably responsible for a lot of points going to conceited Slytherins and bold Gryffindors.

In the category of conceited Slytherins and bold Gryffindors, a handful of additional first-years from these Houses, and only one from Ravenclaw, had now graduated to the open duelling evenings, and were duelling with the older students (and each other) alongside Tom. No Hufflepuffs had as yet moved up, though it was rumoured that several might be joining them before the end of the year.

Tom was duelling almost undefeated against second-years now, and would surely be asked to duel third-years soon. Even the second-years knew more spells than Tom did, but often had trouble casting them at him when he interfered with them with his mind. He had wondered if he would get to see a "battle of the Witches" between Belinda and Jana, and was not disappointed, as some duels into the first evening with them present, they got to face each other. Upon first seeing them paired, he bowed out of a round in order to observe the spectacle. Obviously they'd have duelled enough times before, but in the first-year evenings, which Tom had not attended (he had initially attempted to attend both sets of duelling nights, but Merrythought had not allowed him to do so), so he'd not seen such yet.

Predictably, they engaged each other with quite some vigour. It was Jana who scored the first meaningful hit, though, using a Knockback Jinx to successfully flip Belinda, causing her to land in a crumpled heap at the side of the Great Hall.

Grinning at the win, Jana was caught completely unawares by Belinda's Stinging Jinx that she cast immediately upon orienting herself correctly; naturally, the duel had been clearly won by Jana's Knockback Jinx, and Belinda ought not to have continued. She did, however, and did not stop with the Stinging Jinx either, as she followed it up with another spell that Tom didn't recognize and whose incantation was difficult to catch with Jana's cry of surprise and pain at the same time. Whatever the spell Belinda used was, Jana was now bleeding from her eyes, nose, and ears. Possibly the mouth too, but it was a bit difficult to tell with the general mess. Clearly unable to see with blood in her eyes, she lashed out in defence, desperately casting Stunning Spells one after the other in the general direction of Belinda. Being fully sighted and now back on her feet, Belinda blocked them with ease, but the others nearby did not, and Jana had accidentally felled several innocent bystanders before Merrythought stunned her, and Belinda for good measure.

Merrythought's face twitched slightly as she clearly wanted to express her discontent to them, but could not do so yet, what with them both being unconscious. She approached Jana just as Tegner did also, and stood back while he worked. His healing spell caused

the blood to leak back into her, leaving only some streaks on her face and clothes. He applied a potion to a cloth, and put it on her sting. Tom had seen this one a few times now, and had learned that it was in fact Essence of Murtlap. Tegner checked Belinda, and declared her to be medically fine, other than that she was Stunned.

With a single flick of her wand, Merrythought lifted both bodies into the air, put them back-to-back, and strode out of the room with them. As she went, she addressed the Hall without looking around or breaking her pace, informing the remaining duellists that if anyone else engaged in such stupidity in her absence, they would be joining these two for detention in the dungeons.

When they saw Belinda again in the morning, she was of course in a foul mood. She looked like she had not slept, and her skin was marked with what appeared to be insect bites. She revealed this to be the result of her not having a wand while being harassed by Doxys throughout the night. Her fatigue and skin condition notwithstanding, she seemed most angry at...

"Dumbledore! That foul insufferable interfering self-important arrogant Mudblood-loving imbecile!"

"What about him?", asked Tom, grinning at Belinda's evaluation of him.

"He showed up in the dungeon and said she couldn't do the detention with me!"

"What? Why?" asked Emyln, confused.

"I don't know; he didn't say", said Belinda in an exasperated tone like this was beside the point.

"I bet Dumbledore was just looking out for his House", said Tiernan.

"Yeah, maybe Slughorn could have got you out of it; pity he didn't know"

"Well none of you tried to help, did you?" accused Belinda. She was met by muttering and shrugs; clearly it hadn't occurred to anyone that there was anything they might have done. Tom wondered who liked her enough to be bothered trying to help. Maybe Emyln, and some champion he would be.

"Did she get some other punishment?", asked Julia, curious.

"I don't know, do I?" replied Belinda irritably. "I was in a... Anyway, I didn't think I could hate her more, but I do, and him; I hate them both. And I will see their downfall... I want them both destroyed!"

There was a silence for a moment, before Tom broke it.

"Meanwhile, let's go to breakfast, shall we?"

On the way to the Great Hall, the others advised Belinda not to try anything in the Great Hall. Angry as she was, she at least saw this much reason, and contented herself to fume quietly. Her self-restraint turned out to be unnecessary, however, because during breakfast Jana was conspicuous by her absence.

Eighteen

A Need and a Lead

With the investigation regards the death of the unicorn still being ongoing - didn't they have anything better to do? - Tom thought more often about moving his unicorn blood to somewhere that wasn't quite so directly connected with him. He knew from reading *Ab Schola Condita* that there were attic-spaces at Hogwarts that, at least as of the book's publication, had never been used for anything more glamorous than storage of things that had no cause to be frequently accessed, which seemed like the ideal place to secret away a bottle of highly contraband stuff in a climate that really didn't make carrying it around more than necessary an inviting option.

To this end, the next weekend, he took to the highest floors of Hogwarts, in search of any obvious apertures that might lead to such handy hiding-places.

After a while, he encountered the first signs of an attic area; a vestibule area off from the side of a corridor, with a hole in the ceiling, and a rope-ladder descending from it. Seeing that there was nobody around, Tom started to climb up it - slowly, because this was harder than he had expected. The bottom of the ladder moved away from him, pushed away by his feet, meaning nearly all his weight was on his arms to heave himself up.

Partway up, he stopped for a brief rest, hooking his arms through the ladder. Suddenly he found this was much easier, with his hands facing towards him rather than away from him, as for some mystical reason the ladder now straightened out considerably. He climbed up the rest of the ladder with little difficulty, keeping his hands this way around.

At the top, he found a room that didn't look much like he had hoped an attic space to be; it didn't look, in short, like a seldom-visited storage area covered in dust and cobwebs. Instead, it looked like a very comfortable lounge area, to the point that at first glance he thought he'd wandered into another House's Common Room, before dismissing the notion as surely they'd have a password. After all, the rope ladder had only held him up a little bit before he got the hang of it.

Perhaps this was a staff lounge, he thought, but then he struggled to imagine the ancient Professor Dippet or the notably overweight Professor Slughorn going up that rope ladder if it weren't absolutely necessary.

Looking around, there sofas, armchairs, rugs and fireplaces, but also tables that, unlike the wooden tables in Slytherin House, were covered in what seemed to be felt of various colours. It's surely be a nightmare to try to write on parchment with a quill on one of these tables. On one of the tables was a cup and some dice with various markings on; another table had a deck of cards. The farthest wall sported a large bullseye target, with several arrows sticking out of it. Perhaps this was a games room of some kind, but for whom? A set of black cauldrons arranged in a circle sat inexplicably on the floor near one of the fireplaces, which did no more to make the room's purpose clear.

Regardless, this place did not look unfrequented at all, and on the contrary, seemed quite likely to often receive visitors, and thus not at all a good place to hide such a thing as he was currently carrying on his person. He descended the rope ladder again, with a little difficulty. He settled for jumping down after the first few rungs. A Ravenclaw student passed by in the adjacent corridor, and gave him a curious look, but did not challenge him.

Tom carried on the way he had been walking, feeling that it was becoming increasingly necessary that he find somewhere to hide this thing; he could not wander around here all day, meeting people constantly. He needed to find a good hiding place and soon. He realized he was walking the same way as the suspicious Ravenclaw had been walking, and considered that maybe it would be better if he doubled back and tried the other way, so he turned and went the way he'd come from. If he was going to find somewhere, it was going to have to be back this way. But what place down here could serve his needs? He'd already been down this way, not yet found anywhere useful, and

didn't want to go quite so far as Gryffindor Tower itself, which would surely be crawling with students, and definitely not yield the quiet hiding place he needed. No, it was perhaps time to throw caution to the wind and just carry on the way he had originally been going, in the hope of finding the hiding place he needed. He set off down in the direction the Ravenclaw student had gone, his eyes peeled for any sign of something that might lead to a hiding place - he knew that Hogwarts contained a lot of secret walls, doors, passageways, areas, etc; *Ab Schola Condita* had hinted at such, and the door to the Slytherin Common Room was clearly only one such example.

In a tapestry on the wall he was now walking past, some trolls wearing ridiculous outfits had stopped brutally clubbing a Wizard, and were now watching Tom with some confusion. Perhaps they were wondering why he was passing their tapestry for the third time in the space of less than a minute. Tom hoped they were too stupid to report this behaviour as suspicious as per Merrythought's instructions, because he really needed to get this done and not be connected to the hiding place when he found one.

Just then, a miniature doorway appeared on the opposite side of the corridor, a short way along from the tapestry, pushing aside the stones of the wall as it grew to a usable size. This door had definitely not appeared previously; he would have noticed it. He approached it tentatively at first. He tried to cast his mind through the door to learn what was on the other side, but his mind met no others, and he tended to rely on the minds of others to be able to do such reconnaissance. Not finding anything from this essay, he pushed open the heavy door and stepped inside, letting it close behind him with a dull *thunk*.

Behind the door lay exactly the kind of place Tom had been hoping to find, though he'd expected to find it through a ceiling. It was a huge room, laden with all manner of things.

From vast arrays of furniture to towering collections of books, from overburdened clothing racks to assorted spare brooms, from piles of blackened cauldrons to an impressive flock of parchments that fluttered around in a corner, this room was full of so much disorganized bric-a-brac that any small addition would surely go quite unnoticed, and furthermore, the room itself had a door that clearly spent most of its time invisible.

Looking around the place, it appeared to be some sort of cross between a warehouse and a giant lost-and-found, but then, perhaps it was merely a collection of nearly a thousand years worth of lost things. Maybe this was the place that missing socks went to enjoy a long and quiet retirement.

A rattling sound caught Tom's attention, and he went to investigate it. Finding the source of the noise, he stood back from it, warily. In a small cage there was a strange creature; it was dark green in colour, and very loosely humanoid in appearance, though only a couple of feet tall. At first Tom thought it might be a House Elf, which he had seen in illustrations but never yet in person, but this thing had three legs, or five, if the top limbs were legs also; there wasn't a lot of difference between the appendages, they were all long, muscular for their size, and all of them grasped at the bars of the cage with clawed finger-like appendages. From its head, three long horns poked through the bars of the cage, and it hissed through a beak-like mouth. As far as he could see, it didn't have ears, and upon reflection Tom was relatively sure this wasn't a House Elf, not even a mad one. It was now making a squawking sound in addition to its hissing, and it had increased its efforts to break free from its cage. Tom raised his wand to perform a Silencing Charm, but changed his mind.

"Stupefy"

The spell hit the creature solidly in its chest, the thing hit the back of its small cage with some force, and a slight squeak, before slumping down to the cage floor, and neither moving nor making any further sound. Tom smiled.

Ignoring the stunned five-limbed thing now, he saw a glass-fronted cabinet with various bottles. The bottles were of various shapes and sizes and weren't labelled, and Tom suspected that much like his own unlabelled bottle, they perhaps contained things that the bottler did not wish to be known by others. He wondered how to go about identifying unlabeled potions from scratch. He'd have to ask Marca, or Jana, or maybe even Slughorn, since this latter was actually his Potions teacher. Meanwhile, however, he opened the glass front of the cabinet and placed his own bottle amongst them. There was no chance of him mistaking any of the others for his, as his was the only one to be a shimmering silver colour, but otherwise, it just looked like another bottle in the collection now. He closed cabinet door, and regarded the setup, hoping his addition was as inconspicuous as it seemed to him.

Having achieved his aim in the room, he wanted to explore a little more while he was here. A chain dangled near him, and looking up it, it met a large spiky cage near the ceiling. Tom grinned, and wondering if it would come down so he could look at its mechanism more closely, he tugged on the chain. It didn't come down, but his tugging disturbed some small flying creature. Then he realized from its golden glimmer and the way it darted about, that it wasn't a creature at all, it was a Golden Snitch. The Snitch flew over a pile of books and out of sight.

Following it around the corner, Tom's eyes widened as he saw an area full of gems and other treasures of gold and silver. In the middle of the treasure, set on a small velvet cushion, was a bright blue gemstone, larger and more resplendent than any of the others.

Tom approached the gem, and noted that this seemed to be a lost room, he could surely make off with a gem without notice, and perhaps sell it to one of the shadier looking shops he'd seen in the vicinity of Diagon Alley. He remembered Dumbledore's words that "thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts", but then, what wasn't known about wouldn't hurt him, and besides, this appeared to be a "Lost and Found" room of some description, so perhaps it was in fact rather defensible to claim some of the items and put them to good use. He picked up the gem - or tried to. There was a bright flash and a searing pain, and before he knew it, he was on the floor next to a dead bird that looked a lot like a Golden Snitch; it was very small, round to the point of being spherical, and its feathers were a shiny gold in appearance. But most importantly, it was clearly dead.

Instinctively, he went to draw his wand, but found his arm wasn't following his instructions. It was quite numb - not completely without sensation, for a kind of tingling remained, like pins and needles, but he could not move it, and when he touched it with his other hand, it felt alien and rubbery, as though it were perhaps part of a mannequin or such, but not his own arm.

He tried to massage life back into his hand, but without being able to feel it properly, he feared he might break his own fingers accidentally, as they remained stock still, and he couldn't tell if they were about to break at any point when he was manipulating them. With difficulty, since it was in the wand-pocket of his robes on the same side, he drew his wand with his other hand. He pointed it at his dead arm, and, hoping for the best, spoke:

"Rennervate"

Nothing happened, and Tom racked his brain for what else he could use. He couldn't think of another spell, maybe a potion? As he was mentally going through his own personal inventory, feeling was beginning to seep back into his arm. Either his spell had taken a moment to come into effect, or his arm was recovering by itself. Whichever might be the case, thought Tom, this is good. He massaged it again with his other hand, in an effort to speed up the process. Pretty soon, his arm felt like it had been plunged into a hot bath on an icy day, but visually, it was fine, and his dexterity was returning more rapidly now, as he flexed it, testing it, and hoping to hasten its recovery.

He breathed a sigh of relief, and picked himself up off the hard wooden floor. Seeing the gemstone again, he backed off from it slightly, not wanting to be zapped by it a second

time. As he did so, and was reflecting on how this newly discovered property of the gemstone would in fact increase its value if he could just take the thing without being disabled by it, he backed into a large sarcophagus, which emitted a chill breeze and a moaning sound. He whipped around, his wand still in hand, now levelled in the direction of these things. The heavy stone lid was not fully in place, being slightly at an angle to the sarcophagus. Concerned regards what deathly thing might be about to emerge, Tom moved the lid with his mind, pushing it so that it slid in to fit properly, falling heavily down into place with a loud bang. The moaning stopped. Tom wasn't sure if whatever was inside could get out now, so he decided to make sure.

"*Incarcerus*" he incanted, and found that this worked - he hadn't been sure that it would - the sarcophagus was now tightly bound shut, lid and all.

Tom was torn between thinking he'd seen quite enough of this room now, and thinking he hadn't seen nearly enough of it yet. The latter impulse won out, and, wand at the ready, he continued his exploration, deciding to figure out later how he might get the dangerous gem.

A short way down the aisle he was in, he came across a large dusty mirror, in an ornate frame. On the floor at the foot of it was a large sheet, that appeared to have once upon a time been a dust covering. Looking at the mirror itself, Tom was startled to see his reflection was considerably taller than he was, dressed differently, and not copying his movements. He took a step back, and raised his wand at his reflection. His reflection did not follow suit.

"Who are you?", demanded Tom. His counterpart remained silent.

"I warn you, I can smash this mirror", he said, wondering for a moment if his claim was actually true. The figure in the mirror did not appear to pay any attention to this threat. Tom approached, slowly, and without taking his eyes off the figure in the mirror, picked up the sheet from the floor. Holding the sheet in one hand, and his wand ready in the other, Tom tentatively used the sheet to rid the mirror of its layer of dust.

There, looking back at him, was not merely a taller version of himself, but older, too, clearly grown up.

"Can you talk?" asked Tom, without any trace of threat this time.

No reply.

"I guess not", said Tom. "I think you are me, but I wonder what you're doing here. Well, it's a mirror, obviously, but you look like an older me. I wonder if I can learn from you. If you can't talk to me, can you show me things?"

Showing the first sign of any reaction to Tom's presence at all, his mirror-self glanced around him with a smile. Tom noticed that his older self was in the Great Hall, standing in front of Dippet's chair, only it wasn't Dippet's chair, it was his. He was the Headmaster of Hogwarts. As he stood there in robes of black and Slytherin green, the other staff and the pupils gave applause; he was the greatest Headmaster Hogwarts had ever seen. Then there were people attacking him, but he repelled them effortlessly; nobody could match his duelling prowess, as he dispatched waves of attackers at once. And he wasn't just dispatching his attackers now, he was wiping out Muggles, all of them, and their filthy weakness. He cast fire that raged through the world, purifying it. He cast huge waves that slaked the fires and washed away the ashes of the Muggle world that had been, leaving everything pure, clean, beautiful, and lifeless. Only his magical world remained, and people were rejoicing and praising him, as their magical world could now expand to all places, and there was new life, happiness, world without end, and he was ruling over it, wise and powerful, eternal, undying, invincible.

"Wow", said Tom, breathlessly. "So, this is what I do?", he asked of his reflection, who did not answer as such but rather smiled knowingly. His reflection was in their potions classroom now, with books around, no, he was in the library now, no, it was this room, with reflections of books and other things around.

"I get it", said Tom. "I must study, become powerful, strong. I will become invincible, and make the world pure and beautiful".

Tom continued watching his reflection for a good while, and was pleased to see that his future held such brilliant things, though the mirror showed them in a seemingly random order. Aside from ruling the world, he won duelling competitions, and invented potions that cured all ills. He walked on water; he enacted new laws, and had Dumbledore fed to a giant snake. He owned a Quidditch team, and they won all the time. He had a personal army, who maintained order and reflected his greatness in their own little way. He got top marks in all his exams.

This last item brought Tom's mind back to the present. Exams. School. Wonderous as his future was, if he wanted to actually meet it, he'd need to tear himself away from this mirror at some point and go get it.

"I will return", he said to his reflection. "Let's put this back on to keep you safe", he added, picking up the sheet. He realized the mirror was far too tall for him, so he lifted the sheet up with magic and put it in place. As he did so, he noticed for the first time some writing at the top of the mirror. It read:

Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi

Tom was about to get out his Peverell's Glass, but something already seemed familiar about the text. He squinted at the words: *be cafru...* Be careful? And *oyt ube*, something tube? Or *stra ehru*, strained, strange, stray? The last word, *wohsi*, looked odd. He pronounced it "woshi" in his head, but if that was it, then the h and the s were backwards.

Backwards, the whole word would be "ishow". Hmm. "ishow notyo". Continuing with this direction, he found "ishownotyoursefacebutyourheartdesire". Just English, then, spelled backwards. Easy enough to read, after all. And he certainly agreed, he did indeed deeply desire the future it showed him. And the mirror encouraged him that it was possible, attainable, not that Tom was generally one for self-doubt in any case. But seeing it there made it much more real. He remembered that he was supposed to be covering the thing up and leaving, so he finished putting the sheet in place, and looked back around him, alarmed that he had had his back to such a dangerous room for so long without paying attention to it, while he had been quite absorbed by the mirror.

Deciding to leave for now, and return another time, he stopped on the way out only when his eye was caught by a small stone pyramid with an ornate gold and silver snake wrapped around it. He picked it up.

"Good luck opening that", said a portrait in a broken frame, which was stood nearby. Tom looked at the portrait; it was familiar. Perhaps one of Hogwarts' previous headmasters whose picture he'd seen before.

"It opens?" said Tom. "Why, what's inside it?"

"Never you mind", sneered the portrait. "It's for someone better than you to open".

"What do you know about me, painting?", asked Tom, annoyed.

"Oh, nothing much", said the portrait, wearily. "But I hardly think you'll be able to open that. Do you speak Parseltongue? No, I didn't think so".

Tom frowned at the painting, and pointed his wand at it. "Who are you?", he demanded. "Who am I? Only Hogwarts' most recent Headmaster. Dear me, what do they teach in school these days, that history is so quickly forgotten"

"Black", said Tom. "Phineas Nigellus Black".

"Oh, I've not been completely forgotten then?", said the painting, scathingly.

"What's in this?", repeated Tom, holding the small stone pyramid. "You're an oil painting, I believe. Oil burns, and I'm holding a wand. I suggest you answer my question"

The former Headmaster opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, before replying:

"A key, it's said to be, anyway", he said, abruptly. "Not that this information is of any use to you. It'll take a Parselmouth to open it".

"How would a Parselmouth open it?", asked Tom.

"By speaking Parseltongue, idiot boy", replied the painting.

"And saying what?", demanded Tom, controlling his anger.

"No idea"

"Tell the truth", ordered Tom.

"Really, no idea"

"Very well. *Incendio*" Tom had to shield his eyes from the blaze which was a little larger and hotter than he had intended, before extinguishing it. Upon doing so, there was no sign of the annoying old man. That was good. Not only had he been rude, but also, Tom would rather not leave a talking witness of his visit to this room.

Regarding the snake on the pyramid in his hand, Tom spoke directly to it:

"Open. Open up. Open for me. I command you, open"

Nothing. Tom, covetous of its contents now, especially after the conversation with Black, put the thing into his bag, to figure it out later. A large black velvet bag was also on the same broken writing desk, and it looked suspiciously like a large money sack. Tom opened it, and grinned to see a lot of shining golden Galleons therein. He picked it up, and tried to put it in his bag, but there was not enough room, with his schoolbooks also. He took them out, and put it in. He could carry his books separately. Alright, definitely time to leave now, and straight back to his dormitory to put these somewhere safe.

Upon exiting the lost-and-found room, the doorway shrunk behind him, and vanished back into the wall. Tom realized he didn't actually know how to make it come back. At least he knew where it was, and would probably do well to work out how to access it again on another occasion. He hadn't used a password, such as that to access the Slytherin Common Room, and nor had he tapped anything with his wand, as with the entrance to Diagon Alley. He pondered what he *had* done, when someone rounded the corner.

"Hello Tom; what are you doing here?", asked Jana.

"Visiting you, obviously", replied Tom, a joke being the first thing to come to mind, to buy him time.

"Really?"

"No", he replied, bluntly. After all, it was hardly a credible excuse, and best presented as that which it was, a joke.

"Oh"

Tom remembered the excuse he had planned to use in case anyone asked him what he was doing there.

"Actually I was looking for Professor Vassy; I know her office is around here somewhere", he said.

"No, this is the Gryffindor end; the staircase into Gryffindor Tower is just over there and around the corner. Well, and then the other corner and down the corridor... and, well, nearby by Hogwarts standards anyway. Ravenclaws live all the way down the other end in their own tower, and Vassy's office is down that way too."

"Right, I'll try down there then", said Tom.

Jana smiled, and looked far happier than she had done in the days since her recent duel with Belinda, during which she had seemed quite glum, with confusing emotions muddying the waters of her mind and making it difficult for Tom to glean much from inside. Right now, however, she was clearly feeling much better about things.

"What are you smiling at now?", he asked, wondering the source of her mirth that surely could not be explained by their conversation that had consisted of giving and receiving directions. "Did you take Euphoria Elixir or something?"

"No, I'm just pleased to see you finally tried the Hair-Raising Potion."

“What?” said Tom, confused. He glanced into her mind and caught a vision of himself, but with his hair sticking up in all directions. As he touched it with his hands, there was a slight crackling noise, and a tingling sensation in his hands, and he realized it must be a remnant from his encounter with the shocking gemstone.

“I did not... this was just... stupid Charm or something, duelling maybe”. He was annoyed at his clumsy explanation, but Jana seemed comfortable with it.

“Oh, right... That explains it; I thought your hair was sticking up a bit differently than mine does under the influence of Hair-Raising Potion, I mean, before I tame it with other stuff”

“You call that tamed?”, he said, while still trying to flatten his own hair.

“I have it how I like it”, said Jana. “Here, let me”, she added, and reached up to Tom’s hair. He leant back from her for an instant, but then assented. After all, she might possibly know what she’s doing with sticking-up hair. Her own hand jerked back upon first touching his hair; evidently surprised by the static. She then went on to gently touch it repeatedly, here and there.

“Thank you, that will do”, said Tom irritably, seeing that his hair was now more or less how it should be.

“Sorry, I, um, you’re welcome”, said Jana.

“Right”, said Tom. “So, Ravenclaw, Vassy, this way”, he said, part turning and indicating down the corridor. “Thanks. See you around”.

“Yeah, bye”, called Jana after him.

Upon putting sufficient distance between himself and Jana, Tom took a staircase and headed back down in the direction of House Slytherin. When he eventually got back to his dormitory, he resisted the urge to investigate the pyramid immediately, as he didn’t want to draw attention to it.

For now, he put his mind instead to what he could do with the money he’d just acquired, coupled with daydreams of the future he’d seen in the mirror in the lost-and-found room. Lying on his bed, he smiled and thought through the vaguest of plans, that gradually began to take clearer shapes in his mind.

Chapter Nineteen

End of Year

Exam time approached, and Tom found he actually needed to study more than usual. It was all very well that he performed splendidly in most lessons most of the time, but in an exam he'd be unlikely to pluck answers from teachers' minds, and even from fellow students would be more difficult as people went at their own pace, and also did not mentally shout out their thoughts in the same way when writing as they did when wanting to communicate vocally with someone, such as by answering a question.

Naturally, it was important to Tom that he should perform well. People had come to expect him to do well, and he did not wish to disappoint them. To this end, a lot of otherwise free evenings and weekends became a matter of occupying himself with memorization of things; from the dates of battles and deaths, to the properties of flabberghasted leeches and lolabug venom.

Aspects that weren't a matter of memorization, Tom felt he had under control better than most around him in most cases. Wandwork in various subjects, and the hands-on aspects of potion-making, for example. Even his flying was getting to be above the standard of most who did not fancy themselves Quidditch players. One of the things Tom did not excel at was caring for plants in Herbology, but there didn't seem to be much that was obvious that he could do to remedy this, so he contented himself with knowing as much as possible about what *ought* to maintain them in good health, in the hopes that this would suffice for examination purposes.

To this end, Tom engaged in extra studying during time in the evenings that was surplus from homework activities, which he was lately often skimping on somewhat to make room for his more personalized studies. This evening, Julia Nettleskip regarded Tom and Marca's books and sheets of parchment spread over the table, complete with pumpkins, which they were using to practice Charms, currently fulfilling the role of unnecessary paperweights.

"You two should really be in Ravenclaw, the amount you study", she said.

"No", said Tom. "Slytherin ambition, and knowledge is power. Not going to conquer the world with my good looks, am I?"

Marca looked him up and down appraisingly, as though trying to decide whether his good looks were up to the task.

"I don't know", said Julia, "I might. Good looks can go a long way if you know how to use them"

"Well then", replied Marca, "Please by all means do let your, err, good looks (here Marca looked skeptical) take you a long way away from here, as they are not at all contributing to our study of Voice-Giving Charms".

"Voice-Giving Charms?", echoed Julia. "Like those damned cards that none of us could do?"

"We managed to do them", said Tom, "and as I recall, we did yours for you too, for the House Points"

"Yeah", said Julia, unabashed, "but they're not on the syllabus, are they?"

Marca gave Julia a withering look.

"You want to learn only how to do, what is on the syllabus, and with only this bare minimum of ability, you expect to impress?"

"I'll impress", said Julia, offended. "But what's the use of knowing things they're not going to ask for it in the exam?"

"They don't have to ask for it if I want to give it to them", said Tom.

"Let us say", said Marca, "that Professor Vassy wants us to make a pumpkin dance for her. Making inanimate objects dance *is* on the syllabus, as it is one simple Charm, of course with a lot of potential for showing off beyond the basic do-any-dance *terpsicor*

Charm that we learned in class. Which do you think is better, to point your wand and shout *terpsicor* like a mad idiot, or to give the pumpkin a whole song and dance routine?"

Now it was Julia's turn to be scathing.

"You are spending your evenings working out song and dance routines for pumpkins?"

"No", replied Marca, "Just this evening, and not even all of this evening, because unlike some, we learn things quickly".

"You're hopeless", said Julia, "and you should be in Ravenclaw", she added, and walked off. Tom stood up and drew his wand. He was levelling it at Julia when Marca gave him a reproachful look.

"What?" asked Tom. "You can't criticise, remember what you did to Emlyn in the Great Hall"

"That was different", said Marca. "That was a mealtime. Here we have work to do. Come on, let us be practical and efficient and all that".

Tom wondered how much of House trait manifestation was down to the Sorting Hat being right, and how much was a matter of self-fulfilling prophecy and people living up to the expectations placed upon them, but he couldn't argue against the logic of practical efficiency, and sat back down.

"Alright, but I'll get her later", said Tom.

"You do that", laughed Marca.

"Sometimes I wonder if they're right", said Tom, referring to Julia's and Emlyn's separate assessments that they should be in Ravenclaw.

"At least in Ravenclaw we wouldn't be surrounded by such idiots with such strong aversions to learning".

"Indeed", said Marca. "Then we would instead be surrounded by unworldly academics who have no natural aptitude for what works in the real world, and simply do not get things done. Is that the phrase? To get things done?"

"Yes, that's the phrase. Fair point. Anyway. I've got my tango down, and you've got your Barry-thing..."

"*Barynya*", corrected Marca.

"Yes, that, and I can multiply my pumpkin or whatever we must use so my object has a partner... You know, you should really do the same; I know yours doesn't need a partner, but it'd be great to have a whole set of them going"

"Yes, good idea", said Marca.

"Just thinking out loud. Now you have your song, I'll find mine in the library or ask Madam Redmond to find something - she's very helpful - but right now while I'm happy with my ability to make it sing, I'd love for it to sing with a voice of some actual singer, because singing is honestly not amongst my talents at this time".

They brainstormed for some while the acquisition of a suitable gramophone record and, trickier, the conveyance of its song to the pumpkin or other object without actually having the gramophone record or player present, and as Tom needed to stop by the library before he could complete the first part of that physically, they moved on to Transfiguration, perfecting the practice of queuing up ideas in their minds to produce smoother changes, rather than simply changing one attribute of an object at a time.

When it was time for exams, exam timetables were given out, and it seemed most exams would take place in the Great Hall, even many of the practical exams. Tom was particularly surprised to see that the Potions practical would be in the Great Hall, not in Slughorn's classroom. Perhaps it was because they wanted the entire year to do the exam at once, or perhaps they wanted to more carefully control these "controlled conditions" of which they spoke.

The Potions practical turned out to have them brewing a Forgetfulness Potion under said controlled conditions, though it was clear from some horrified expressions that Tom observed from time to time that many people didn't need it; they had forgotten perfectly adequately already without it. Tom took a moment to recall carefully the ingredients and method. They had of course done this in class already, so it should not be too difficult, he thought. Looking through the ingredients with which they had been provided, he remembered, or at least hoped he remembered, what he needed to do with most of them and when, although he had no recollection of what to do with the Horned Slugs. It occurred to him that they may be there merely as a distraction.

He knew the first part was quite easy, and they had only an hour to brew the potion, which had taken them their entire Potions lesson to brew, when they had done it. So he set up his cauldron, added the Lethe river water, increased the heat while twenty seconds went by on the big clock at the front of the Hall - very convenient - added two sprigs of Valerian, which he was sure was next, and spent the next little while writing out his instructions for the next part, as he knew he had to do everything else right near the end of the hour. He added things to his list, scratched them out, added them again.

He peered into Jana's mind, and she was unhelpful, as she was merely watching her friend Valerie, who, perhaps true to her name, had added too much Valerian to her potion, as was quite clear even from across the room, from Jana's viewpoint. Jana was clearly dismayed and hoped to attract subtly Valerie's attention, but she must also realize, thought Tom, that even if she understands she's added too much, she'll have no idea how to compensate, as merely fishing it out won't suffice, it'll be too late for that now. Not only that, but even just catching Valerie's attention was surely a futile ambition on Jana's part, as Valerie was near the front of the Hall, and Jana and Tom were near the back, as per their surnames.

Tom, of course, did not care about Valerie's potion and whether it turned out to be a Forgetfulness Potion or, as Jana's mind suggested it might now turn out to be, more like a Tonic of Dreamless Sleep, but did care about his own. He glanced over his shoulder at Marca, who, catching sight of him, merely smiled and nodded. Annoyingly inscrutable girl.

Looking over to Ravenclaw top student Elvira Highcastle's desk, as she was another candidate for probably knowing what she was doing - not that he knew what she was like at Potions, but she was good at the subjects they shared - he looked into her mind, and found it singing:

*Stir end five times widdershins,
Four mistletoes second half,
Three stirs first half,
Two measures standard,
One double-pinch mixture,
And a pear in a partridge tree*

Tom was sure the last part wasn't a potion ingredient, but checked the other items and actions against his list, and found Highcastle's quirky memory method helpful, at least insofar as it conveyed information that was probably correct from her mind to his.

After doing the first part, he knew that he now needed only to let it brew for most of the rest of the hour, and contented himself with doing nothing more than occasionally adjusting the flame under his cauldron, and otherwise spectating the goings-on around him. Some were doing as he was doing, a few periodically added something or did something else, and one Gryffindor whose name Tom did not know carried on making increasingly frantic adjustments to his potion until it erupted in a hot and foamy mess.

At the end of the hour, the remaining potions were cooled, bottled, labelled, and collected for testing.

His exams took place over the course of one fairly intensive week, and after much parchment, a pair of dancing candlesticks, a cat that became a teapot and was reverted only by Dumbledore for safety reasons, a flying obstacle course, some tending of ticklish tomatoes, and a short spell-blocking session against Merrythought, it was time to await the results.

When the results were announced, the best part of a week later, Tom was pleased to find that he had done respectably well in all his subjects, with even a fair pass in Herbology, and particularly well in Defence Against the Dark Arts - which did not surprise him - scoring almost as well, and still over the 100% mark, in Charms and Potions. Marks above the 100% boundary were accrued by including things that had not been on the syllabus but that were relevant and contributory, be it in the theory paper, as he had with each of those subjects, or in the practical, as he had in Charms. He received extra merit in Defence Against the Dark Arts for not only not missing any of Merrythought's spells, but also for having the presence of mind to subtly place a static Shield Charm between them before they began, which took her a moment to dismiss, giving Tom a chance to smile smugly before having to actually defend himself more actively.

Results from those around Tom were varied, from Marca's high scores in all subjects, to Tiernan's good Potions results offset by his Herbology that was weaker than Tom's, and his rather lacklustre Transfiguration effort; his cat merely adopted the overall shape of a teapot, and continued to miaow, its tail spouting a slight wisp of steam.

But overall, the exam period had not been too bad for them, and now it was a matter of finishing up in the House Cup, scrabbling for what House Points remained to be given out in the more relaxed lessons that followed the exams.

Upon heading into the Great Hall on the evening of the last day of term, the Slytherins were pleased to see there had been no sufficiently strong last-minute comeback from Ravenclaw, as the Hall was decked in banners of Slytherin green and silver; Slytherin serpents shone brightly on some of the larger banners, and silver and green confetti fell from just below the Great Hall's layer of floating candles, disappearing just before they reached head-height. It seemed safe to assume that this would not be the decor if Ravenclaw were being announced as the House Cup winners.

With varying degrees of smiles, smirks, and grins - and a "Woohoo!" from Belinda - they made their way to seats at their House table, admiring the decorations, exchanging glances with other Slytherins, and surveying the reactions of students from other Houses.

Ravenclaw House were, predictably, most subdued and largely either glumly silent or else muttering amongst themselves, probably trying to vindicate their collective failure.

They had lost the House Cup, despite having had a sizable leg-up from their Quidditch Cup victory, however marginal that victory may have been. In the category of amassing other points, they had had exam time, which really ought to have been Ravenclaw's opportunity to shine their brightest, and in all likelihood they did.

But Slytherin had clearly had the edge in duelling, had done almost as well as Ravenclaw had in Quidditch (since they had actually scored an equal number of wins and it had only been lost on the head-to-head tie-break), and the garnering of points in the remaining lessons of term in the run-up to exam time had continued to be quite close to equal.

As for Hufflepuff, it was no surprise to Tom that they had come in clear fourth place, and he had an idle curiosity as to how often they had in fact won the House Cup over the school's nearly thousand-year history. Hufflepuff House traits such as loyalty and a hard-working nature were things Tom could definitely appreciate, and he readily acknowledged that they definitely had a place and value in the world, but he couldn't see how they'd

compete with the other Houses' traits when it specifically came to actually winning points via the various House-Point-winning mechanisms currently in place at the school.

At the Gryffindor table, only a few first-years had been amongst those already seated when Tom and his fellow Slytherins had arrived, and Jana had not been amongst them, nor her usual companions Valerie and Xavier. When they did arrive, they arrived together.

Valerie steadfastly kept her eyes forward and avoided looking in the direction of the Slytherin table; Xavier shot them a sulky glance or two. Jana, for her part, caught sight of Tom and rolled her eyes in response to his smirk, but Tom did notice that she had a slight smile as she shook her head and took her place with her friends.

Professor Slughorn, meanwhile, was lingering far longer than usual amongst the students. He habitually exchanged brief greetings with students here and there along the table as he made his way up to the staff table, but today, he was clearly in an especially social mood, and that was saying something for him, as he was rather a social chap even at the worst of times.

Tom looked over to the staff table; Professor Vassy, head of Ravenclaw House, was conspicuous by her absence. Professor Dumbledore, head of Gryffindor House, was present, but looked bored, and appeared to be daydreaming. Tom wished Slughorn would hurry up and go gloat at the staff table. Not because he wanted rid of Slughorn, who wasn't even at their part of the table and whose presence Tom would not have minded in any case, but rather because he liked the thought of Slughorn enjoying their House's triumph more directly at Dumbledore's expense, by celebrating in his immediate vicinity.

When Vassy eventually arrived, she did not extend her students the same courtesy that Slughorn had, and walked quite quickly up to her place at the staff table. Noticing this, Slughorn excused himself from his most recent spot at the students' table, and went up to greet her. The Hall was too crowded with minds and voices for Tom to get anything close to the specifics of what was said between them from some way across the Hall, but Tom got the impression that Slughorn was trying to graciously accept the congratulations that Vassy had now offered; he was smiling and nodding, and gave a good-natured shrug that caused Vassy's already weak smile to falter a little further.

Tom smiled as he saw Slughorn then get back up from his seat and head over to visit Dumbledore, clapping him on the shoulder and shaking his hand in turn. If Dumbledore was at all bothered his House had not won the House Cup, he did not show it. He smiled politely, said something, and turned to face Professor Diggory, head of Hufflepuff House, as Slughorn moved on to shake his hand in turn. Diggory looked perfectly good-natured about the matter, in true keeping with his House qualities, and gave a shrug of his own, a broad smile on his ruddy face. Slughorn remained and chatted with those two, rather than return to his place and chat with the obviously put-out Vassy, or talk to the other teachers present who were not Heads-of-House, until Dippet finally arrived, surely the very last person into the Hall, staff and students included.

Professor Dippet shook Slughorn's hand, before addressing the assembled school at large:

"Good evening, Hogwarts", he began. "Here we are, at the end of another year. As you can see, our congratulations must go to Slytherin House (here he was interrupted by some cheers from the Slytherin table) as their ambitions have been so resplendently realized this year, so please join me in congratulating them".

He made a slight bow towards the Slytherin table, and his own applause was drowned out by the self-congratulatory applause and cheers from the Slytherins themselves, and the much more measured applause from the other Houses. When all had quietened down, he continued:

"As some of you may have heard, next year you will have not only the House Cup and Quidditch cup to which to look forward, but also the Potions Championship, an inter-school competition to which we will be playing host. Each school will be able to select one

student as champion, and that student will be selected not only for their competency with potioneering, but also for their aptitude in the category of creative problem-solving. One year, I remember the competition was won by a student who used a simple bezoar-based concoction to cure poisoning and get on with the next challenge, while the other students were trying to refine the most impressive NEWT-level specialist antidotes. Another year, the winner was a student who slipped a Love Potion into the judges' refreshments, though this and some similar ploys have now been banned. The point here, as you can see, is that there is no reason why absolutely any student wishing to try out for Hogwarts Champion should not study hard over summer, and be set to impress us upon return to school"

Tom made a mental note to acquire potion ingredients, and perhaps another book or two.

Dippet continued a short while with his end of year speech, but as it was now mostly platitudes about the importance of focus on school matters regardless of whether the country goes to war (a sentiment that seemed to get more approval from the Ravenclaw table than from the Gryffindors), Tom was now busy fantasizing glory in the Potions Championship. It was not until the end of year feast appeared on the tables that his attention returned to the room.

Back in the Slytherin Common Room for the last evening of the year, the entire of Slytherin had been called together for a short address from Slughorn. It was consequently more than a bit crowded, as it wasn't usual for everyone to be in the Common Room at once, let alone all trying to be in the largest central part, and not in the various adjoining annexes.

"Well done everyone", Slughorn began, cheerfully, "We've reclaimed the House Cup that should, of course, always be ours. Jolly good work over the course of the year, especially in that final leg when it was a bit touch-and-go for a while"

Some cheers and hoots interrupted him here, but this seemed to please him in any case.

"Even the Quidditch Cup was very close, and if I know our players, every effort will be redoubled next year to reclaim that too"

"And then some", interjected Violet Selwyn, which was met with some approving murmurs.

"As for the Potions Championship next year, a very serious business, I thoroughly expect that to be in the domain of my own House, of course. Now, I will be one of those in the Conclave that will decide the Hogwarts Champion, but you'll need to work with me on this one. I need to have good options to put forward, convincing cases, you know, portfolios of deeds accomplished with potions and that sort of thing. To this end, I urge you all to get brewing over summer, and see what you can do. Since the challenges won't be known in advance, I recommend to make sure you're perfect at about half a dozen general purpose potions that can solve a lot of problems. Include at least a good common poisons antidote, a Levitation Potion is always good, and Invisibility Potion could be a useful one.

A fair command of some kind of Sleeping Potion wouldn't go amiss, these sorts of things. The real trick to winning though is in the application, and that's where I expect Slytherin House to come into its own"

Many students were now nodding, in many cases looking thoughtful, others just looking eager.

"If anybody needs any potions help over the course of summer, I don't usually offer correspondence tuition, but I'll make an exception in this case, and will be happy to address any questions you might have. Anyway, all that said, I won't keep you from your festivities any longer; good luck, well done again, and have a splendid summer, Slytherins!"

There was an undue amount of applause, and Slughorn was mobbed by the nearest of the throng, wanting to speak with him about the Potions Championship. Tom hung back, but before long, it was Slughorn who sought him out.

“Riddle, I wonder if I could borrow you for a quick word”, he said, and beckoned Tom to follow him into one of the annexes, where it was quieter.

Chapter Twenty

Return

“Firstly, well done on your own performance this year in the exams, especially the 113% in Potions, and I hear you’ve been winning lots of points in duelling too?”

“Yes, I have. Thank you, Sir”, smiled Tom.

“Now, a quick word about your living arrangements over summer (Tom’s smile vanished) - I’ve been given to understand you’re living with Muggles, is that right?”

“Not by choice, Sir”, said Tom, through gritted teeth.

“Yes, I can imagine”, said Slughorn, frowning. “Well, that must be, er... character-building, shall we say, but it does come with some responsibilities”

Tom raised an eyebrow. Was he going to have to look after the idiot Muggles in some fashion?

“So”, began Slughorn, “I heard you did get a warning about Cursing a Muggle last summer, all in good fun I’m sure, Jelly-Legs Curse, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Sir”

“Well, harmless at it was, it does mean that you must be extra careful to not do it again. You mustn’t do magic on or around Muggles, you know. I’d hate to lose a promising young student such as yourself to such a silly bit of bureaucracy, but you could be expelled against my wishes if someone wanted to make a big thing of it”

Tom could imagine who might make a big thing of it.

“Sir, I don’t think I could stand spending the whole summer living like a Muggle. In my room, at... that place... the Muggles seem to have forgotten about it; they never come in any more. So I can do magic there, can’t I? Since it’s not on or in front of Muggles?”

Slughorn appeared to be in thought for a moment, before replying:

“Well, strictly speaking, you ought not to. The Statute for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery does dictate that you ought not do magic outside of school at all” Tom opened his mouth to reply, but Slughorn continued:

“However, when it comes to inside Wizarding households, this is usually left to the parents to enforce, which means most magical children get to practice their magic at home during the holidays, and I certainly wouldn’t want one of my best young students to be disadvantaged”

Tom looked hopeful, and waited for him to continue this train of thought.

“Do you know, I’m on good terms with Martellus Custer, in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, who oversees these little matters. I’ll have a word with him; if indeed there’s a Muggle-repellant Charm in place, I see no reason why you can’t keep up with your studies over summer; I’ll see if he can register your room as a separate dwelling”

“Thank you, Sir”

“But no more Cursing the Muggles”, added Slughorn, wagging a finger.

“I’ll be sure to resist the urge, Sir”, smiled Tom.

“Jolly good; that’s the spirit” enthused Slughorn. “Now, in other matters, as you’ve no family and, well, no money, the school provides a bursary for you to buy your things for school. Here... (he produced a money pouch) should be enough for your things in general, and here (he presented a book, *Potioneering Principles for the Pragmatist and Perfectionist*) is a copy of your second Potions textbook for next year - we’re still using the *Modern Student’s Guide to Potion-Making*, you see, but with this one too, so that’s one thing you don’t have to buy; should make the rest of the money go a little further, eh? Just don’t tell anyone I gave you a school copy.”

“Thank you, Sir. It’ll be our little secret”, said Tom, with a polite smile.

“Splendid. Now, about buying your things, you can get to Diagon Alley alright yourself, can you?”

“Yes Sir”

“Right, well, that’s everything then, I think...” said Slughorn, trailing off.

Tom had an idea.

“Sir... is there any chance that I could stay here over the holidays?”, asked Tom hopefully, almost desperately. “I’d be no trouble”, he added. “I just really don’t want to go back to live with the Muggles”

Slughorn shook his head.

“No. I’m sorry, Riddle.”

The next day, the clarion call of Professor Merrythought rang out over the platform at Hogsmeade Station, currently crowded with students jostling to get onto the train before each other.

“Come on, get in, hurry up! In an orderly fashion now!”

Tom, Tiernan, Antonin, and Marca took a compartment for themselves. They were swiftly followed into it by William Wilmot, who stammered an apology and equally swiftly exited it again, much to the amusement of the Slytherins.

As the train eventually pulled slowly out of the station, Tiernan spoke:

“Well, there goes that then, our first year’s really over”, he said, with a sigh. “Are you two going back to your own countries over summer?” he added, directed to the Eastern Europeans, who responded simultaneously:

“No”

“Yes”

“My parents have purchased a flat in London”, said Antonin, by way of an explanation.

“I will be returning to Sverdlovsk”, said Marca. “It is far away from any conflict”.

“The war already spreads, Marca”, warned Antonin.

“Let them bring it”, said Marca, with a grin. “No army penetrates my country so deeply. It is always the same, Muggle or magical. They try directly to attack Moskva, and if they even succeed to reach it, then they die and go home. Nobody will ever come near Sverdlovsk”

“How are you travelling?”, asked Tom, curious.

“My mother will meet me in London, and from there, we will take the... What is it called... *Dumakhodsetz*?” - here she looked to Antonin hopefully, but he raised his eyebrows and shrugged. “*Letuchiy porokh, dumakhodsetz*... Fly powder, think thought chimney flow... net... thing?”

“Floo”, said Tiernan, understanding this latter jumble of English words. “Floo powder, the Floo Network”.

“Yes, that”, said Marca, nodding.

Tom had a vague recollection of reading about such in *Ab Schola Condita*, but not enough to know much about the machinations thereof, beyond that it involved using fireplaces as gateways, travelling between them so rapidly as to be as good as instantaneously.

“So, what are your plans over summer?”, asked Tiernan, to the group in general. Marca replied immediately.

“Probably I will spend a lot of time studying, but also, there is a dance course, that I wish to complete”

“Bary...” - Tom racked his brain for what sounded right - “Barybrentiya?”

“No”, laughed Marca. “You are confusing Barynya, the dance, with Barynotus, the greater weevil, and maybe the Brendid Beetle, the lesser of the two weevils”

“Huh?” interjected Tiernan. “Wait, what’s the greater evil?”

“Weevil”, said Tom.

"They are potion ingredients", said Marca. "They were in our Potions exams, remember? They are used in simple hair removal potions, and also some poison cures, and weight loss potions".

"Why would a person want to lose weight?" asked Antonin.

"Maybe for artistic purposes perhaps", shrugged Marca. "Which reminds me, Tom, no it is not Barynya that I will be doing, but ballet"

"If you took a weight loss potion, Marca, you'd actually become a wraith", opined Tiernan.

"Why ballet, Marca?", asked Tom, ignoring this.

"It is good", she replied, "to be balanced".

"You don't usually seem to be in danger of falling over", observed Tom.

"I do not mean physically, I mean as a person. For example it is good, to balance studies and mental exercise with physical pursuits, so for me, that means duelling and dance, although I will not have much opportunity, to duel during summer".

"More than I will, I think", muttered Tom.

"What are you doing during summer? Spending time with Muggles?", asked Marca, clearly trying to be polite but also looking like she had smelled something bad.

"Not by choice", said Tom, reminded of his conversation with Slughorn. "I'll certainly be trying to avoid them as much as possible. Either holed up in my room, which happily they can no longer access, or visiting Diagon Alley"

"It'd be good to see you over summer, Tom", said Tiernan, "and you'd be welcome to visit our house, only..." - he trailed off.

"Only?"

"Well, it's just that we'll be away ourselves quite a bit of summer, holidays, you know, so I don't know when we'll be around yet".

"Hmmm", mused Tom. "Well, do write. I'll be eager to get away from that place. Where do you live, anyway? London?"

"Devon", replied Tiernan. "It's nice; you'll see".

Tom already saw, in Tiernan's mind, a glimpse of a large stone house in a bleak and windswept moorland. Tom smiled, as he considered it'd surely be quite peaceful and undisturbed by Muggles.

"We can meet in summer if you want", said Antonin, "as I will be in London".

Tom looked into Antonin's mind, but saw only flashes of a man and a woman, presumably his parents. Of course, Antonin would not yet have seen his new residence.

"That'd be good", said Tom. His mind wandered to the fact that he had much more freedom to buy things this summer, owing to the extra gold he had acquired from the lost-and-found room. Certainly an owl was in order, maybe a broom? He hoped to not spend the lot, after all, it'd be good to have some to spend on small things, and he didn't know when he'd be able to get more money.

When the train arrived to King's Cross, they poured out onto Platform Nine and Three Quarters, exchanging farewells, and in many cases meeting up with parents this side of the barrier. Tom deliberately tarried a while on the platform, to allow his classmates a chance to go on ahead of him. He did not have any pressing desire for them to see him meeting whatever Muggle had come for him.

As he loitered, he saw Jana hugging her friends, making her farewells. She caught sight of Tom over Xavier's shoulder, and after parting, came over to talk to him.

"Hey Tom", she smiled, "waiting for someone?"

"Just thought I'd let the crowd die down a little", he said, more or less truthfully.

"I'm glad I saw you; we didn't swap addresses"

"Addresses?"

“Yeah, for keeping in touch during summer”, she said, opening her shoulder-bag now, and finding something to write upon.

Tom hated how many people were getting to see his address; he was annoyed at his ignominious connection to Muggles, poverty, and lack of family all in one go - but he also did not wish to turn down connections to the magical world during what was probably set to be a fairly long summer of not being at Hogwarts. He wrote his address for her, and advised “but only write to me here; don’t try to visit”. He took her address in return, but reminded her he didn’t actually have an owl yet, though he planned to get one soon.

“Well, you have my address for when you do”, said Jana brightly.

“Speaking of your address, do you want to duel there? It’d be good to be able to duel during the holidays”

“Can’t, Tom”, she said. “Squibs’ houses aren’t registered as Wizarding households, so it’d look like we’re doing magic at a Muggle’s house”

Tom frowned his dissatisfaction, but did not have any better alternative. So long as Slughorn was true to his word, they would in principle be able to get away with doing magic in his room at Wool’s, but he wasn’t about to invite her there.

“But you fly on a broom, and she makes potions?”, asked Tom.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t count. A broom doesn’t need a Witch or Wizard to use any magic to make it work; it’s already Enchanted to respond to touch. And with potions, there’s again no wand-waving or incantations; many scarcely believe it’s magic. Bouncing bulbs will bounce whether there’s a Witch or Wizard around or not”

“Right”, said Tom. “I suppose the magic’s in it already, not like how a wand channels our own magic”

“I guess so. I think that’s why Squibs can use potions but couldn’t use a wand, except perhaps for pointing to things. Hey, what subjects are you taking next year, by the way?”, she asked, changing the topic.

“Alchemy, Divination, Glyphs and Tongues”, replied Tom, who had answered this question so many times now that his subject choices rolled off the tongue in alphabetical order. “Why?”

“Just wondered. I chose Beasts, Alchemy, and Divination, so I guess we’ll be seeing more of each other”

“You’re clearly getting the hang of fortune-telling already”, said Tom.

“Heh, well, I am looking forward to Divination. Looking forward to all of them, really”

“So am I, Jana”, sighed Tom, slightly rueful that he was going to have to wait until the end of summer for them.

“Well...”, began Jana, “I have another train to catch now, so I’d better go. So... um... bye”

She surprised Tom with a hug that he should have seen coming. He put a hand on her back uncertainly. He wasn’t used to this hugging thing. This was also the closest he’d ever seen her hair, and he was contemplating how many hair potions she used, when she released him and smiled.

“Bye Tom”

“Bye Jana”

He watched her disappear through the barrier, and considered whether he should do the same or wait longer. He dearly hoped there would not be some idiot Muggle standing in the station with a card saying “Tom Riddle” on it. His mind being now too clouded with the possibility of such to be able to be able to tell if this was the case, he hurried on through to the main part of the station to confirm the situation.

Back on the other side of the barrier, Tom found Mrs. Cole waiting for him in the large hall to the front of the station, where mechanical signs indicated the arrivals and departures of trains to non-magical places. For her part, she was clearly dismayed to see him, but as the

meeting was of course quite expected, her expression was steely and resolute. She gave a polite nod, which Tom ignored.

“Welcome back, Tom”, she said, clearly trying to be nice.

“Yeah”, he replied, with a lacklustre tone, for want of anything better to say to her.

“Well, erm, we have a motorcar now, so... this way”, she said, with a weak and fleeting smile, and led on, glancing backwards only to confirm that he was actually following.

Arriving to the vehicle, Mrs. Cole fiddled with some keys, and after a small struggle, opened the back of it.

“That case of yours must be heavy”, she said, thinking out loud, “together then, shall we?”

Oh, this was going to be painful. Not only could he not use magic, but he had to cooperate with an annoying Muggle who thought she was doing him a favour. Tom was immensely grateful that he had had the foresight to allow his fellow students to go on ahead of him, rather than have them potentially see this. Some wrestling later, the coffer was in, and the boot hatch closed.

The ride home was a little bumpy and jumpy, as it became clear Mrs. Cole was not yet accustomed to driving. She caused the engine to cut out completely several times, and swore loudly when she misjudged a roundabout. By the time she arrived back at Wool’s, Tom wasn’t sure whether he most wanted to kill her, or just throw up.

“You look a bit pale, Tom”, said Mrs. Cole. Tom looked at her witheringly.

“And tired”, she added. “But of course, you’ve been travelling all day. Let’s go and get some help to take this in”.

As they walked up to the front door, Mrs. Cole suggested that Tom go on up to his room, and she’d get a couple of the older boys to help bring his stuff up. Tom nodded slightly, and went on up to his room. On his way up, it occurred to him that the Muggles probably still didn’t know where his room was, as they appeared to have collectively forgotten about it last year. Oh well, they knew more or less the right place - so they’d probably give up and dump his trunk nearby. That worked for Tom; he could collect it from there. And push it into his room manually, he thought, contemptfully, but at least he was allowed to do magic inside his Muggle-proofed room with - as there would by necessity be - no Muggles there.

He did a small tour of his room upon arrival. Not that there was much to tour, but he looked in his wardrobe, and gazed out of the small window for a moment.

As he kicked off his shoes and stretched out on his bed, he snorted on account of the dust that had accumulated on his bed in his absence. He got up again, and looked disdainfully down at the sheets, missing the comfort to which he had grown accustomed at Hogwarts. He was contemplating how best to deal with the dust-laden bedlinen (*Scourgify? Tergeo? Put it to the laundry and collect new sheets?*) when he heard voices outside his room:

“It must be around here somewhere, look, there’s number twenty-six, and there’s twenty-eight just there, so twenty-seven must be nearby”, said a voice that Tom did not recognise.

“Let’s just leave it here and go”, replied a more fearful voice that sounded familiar, though Tom wasn’t sure who exactly.

“What’s up?”, asked the first boy.

“Well, it’s... you-know-who, isn’t it?”, whimpered the second.

“No, I don’t know who”

“Oh, yeah, right... It’s... Well, we hoped he wasn’t coming back; he’s a right freak”

“That bad, eh?”, asked the more confident boy with a chuckle.

“You never knew him, and trust me, you don’t want to. Come on, let’s leave it here and go”

Tom stepped outside his room and cleared his throat, the latter action partly on account of the dust he had all so recently inhaled. He saw the two boys, one of whom looked startled out of his wits, and the other of whom gave him a quizzical but otherwise unperturbed look.

It was the startled one who spoke first, however:

“Hi Tom”, said Morris Hambleton, the boy whose voice Tom had found familiar.

“Tom is it?”, said the other. “I’m Jim - nice to meet you”

“You can leave that there; I can move it into my room myself”, said Tom, indicating to his trunk.

“You sure?”, asked Jim, whose sleeve was now being tugged at by Morris.

“Goodbye” said Tom, by way of dismissal, and they both departed; Morris with some haste, and Jim following, confused.

Tom looked down at his trunk, and with a sigh, sullenly began pulling it towards his room, by one of the end handles. It didn’t have wheels, but it shifted easily enough along the flat corridor, even without magic.

Back in his room, he unpacked his clothes into his wardrobe, not that he had enough clothes-hangers now, nor the ability to Conjure or Transfigure such for himself. Maybe the orphanage had some spare that he could have.

Meanwhile, for the first time, Tom missed the company that he had to at least some degree enjoyed at Hogwarts, and hoped people would write as promised, since such would really help to keep him sane.