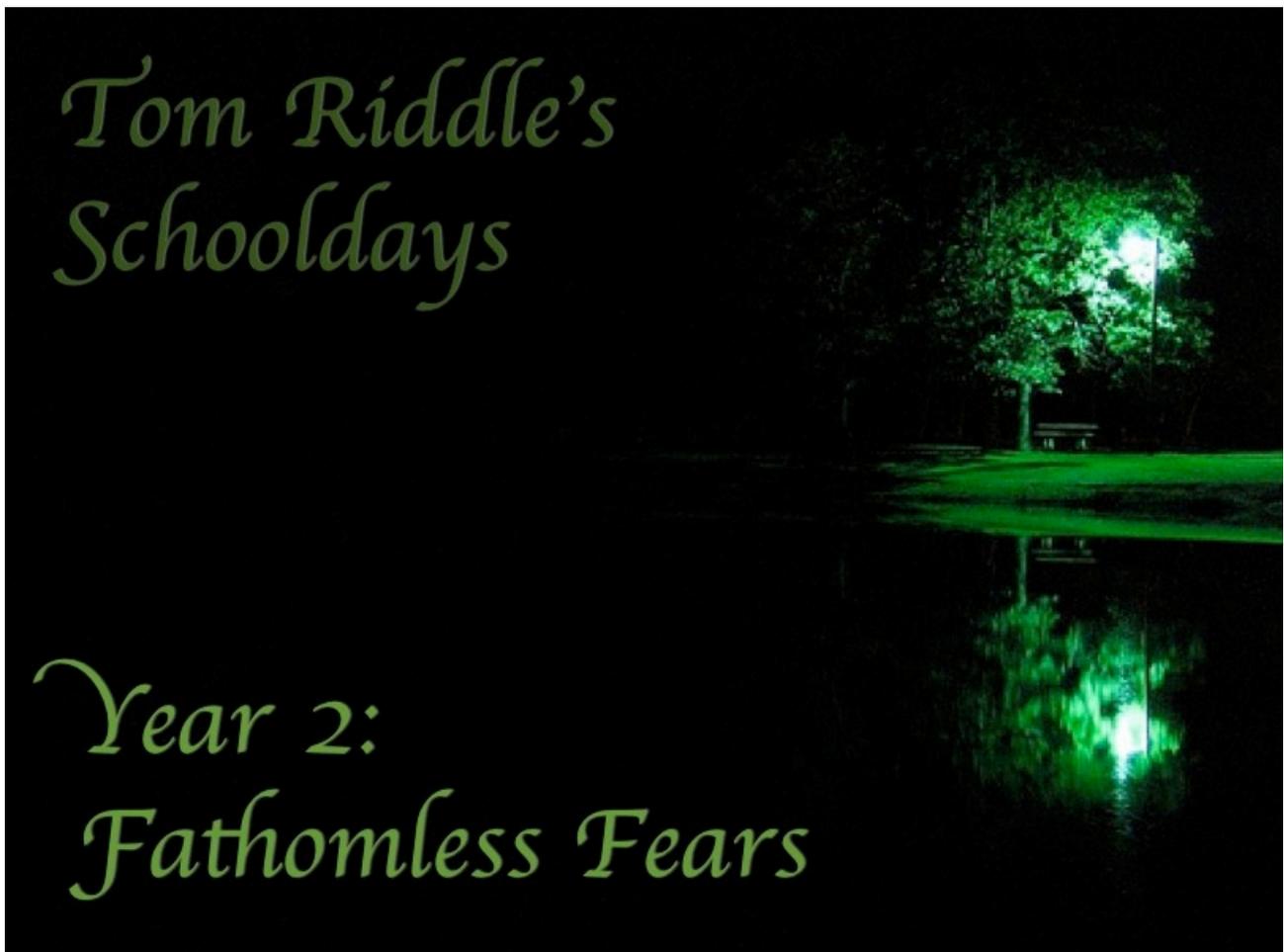


Tom Riddle's Schooldays

Year Two: Fathomless Fears

by David Styles



Chapter One

Brega

The bell ringing in the hallway outside room number twenty-seven in Wool's Orphanage, London, meant that it was time for breakfast. Tom swung his feet out of bed, and then immediately lifted them back off the floor in response to its cold touch. This was hardly the thick carpet of Slytherin House. He threw his blanket on the floor, where it formed a bridge between his bed and his wardrobe.

Once dressed, he quickly splashed some water on his face - something he usually did first, but had not dared to brave the cold floor unshod - and combed his hair. He looked at himself in the small cracked mirror above the porcelain basin. Unlike the mirrors at Hogwarts, it did not voice any opinion of its own as to his appearance. Still, he was something special to have even this much at Wool's; most of the other children his age slept in bunk-beds in dormitories, with the individual rooms being for the oldest of orphans. Tom had been moved here a couple of years ago on account of the bad things that had happened to the other children around him when he had been with them. This suited him, of course.

By the time he reached the Dining Hall, it was already crowded. Mealtimes at Wool's involved queuing up to be served at a canteen, and there was now a long queue. Tom walked to the front of it.

"Do you mind if I push in? I'm in a hurry today", he said.

"What? Erm, yeah, of course, go ahead" came the reply, as expected. Tom wasn't sure how much magic he could get away with doing, and hoped to do none at all around the Muggles, but that didn't lessen the other children's fear of him, and he was comfortable with that.

Upon receiving some porridge and a beaker of orange squash, Tom looked for a place to sit. Of the tables in the room, none were empty, so he took to the least populous one and sat as far from the other children as necessary. Lottie Smith, the girl nearest to him, edged a little further away from him. He ate his porridge quickly, and did not drink much of his squash; he felt he needed a water afterwards to wash away the horrid taste. He'd had potions made with crushed insects that tasted better than this. He'd forgotten how bad some of these Muggle things were, and vowed that in future he'd just take water with his meal.

Back in his room, he put on his jacket and took up the sack of Galleons that he had acquired in the Lost and Found room at Hogwarts, before heading out with it safely placed inside his rather less conspicuous satchel.

The barman at the Leaky Cauldron was nowhere to be seen when Tom entered, though this perhaps was reasonable, at this hour of the morning. He hadn't been sure if it would even be open yet at all, but it was.

"Morning", said the barman, now arriving down some stairs. "End of term, is it?"

"Yesterday, yes", replied Tom.

"What can I do for you?"

“Just passing through”, said Tom.

“Right you are then”, replied the man, cheerfully. Tom wondered why he didn’t mind his bar being used as public thoroughfare for non-customers. Perhaps he was paid for it by the Ministry of Magic. Or then again, perhaps he simply profited from having so many people passing through that some would stop for refreshment. Tom, however, was content to simply make his way into Diagon Alley.

A little under a year ago, he had been eager to buy a wand here. Now, he had a few shopping plans in mind, but first, he wanted to see if he could open an account at the bank. There were many things available via Owl Order, but they required an account at Gringott’s in order to purchase them. The bank was easy enough to find; it was the most imposing building in Diagon Alley by far, and it towered above one end of crooked cobbled street, leaning outwards as it rose. Feeling quite small in the huge doorway, Tom passed by a sign warning against theft - not the warmest of welcomes - and stepped inside with bated breath.

If Tom had felt small in the doorway, he felt even smaller once actually in the bank.

A vast lobby with a high vaulted roof, and everywhere was marble and gold, glinting in the sunlight. He gazed up at the sun streaming in through a domed skylight far above him, and walked straight into a creature that he had only seen pictures of before, but had to be a Goblin.

The Goblin did not speak to him, but glared darkly for a moment, before going about its business. Looking ahead of him, Tom saw that along the counters at the sides of the long room were more Goblins. He had known that Goblins ran the bank, but he hadn’t really thought through that this would mean dealing with them. All he had learned about them at school had taught him to be wary of them. He walked up to one of the counters, and the Goblin staffing it ignored his approach.

“Good morning”, said Tom, whose voice did not sound as confident as he had hoped it to. He felt a twinge of annoyance about that, but the Goblin responded now, at least insofar as it looked up from its ledger and looked down at Tom from over its pointy nose.

“I’d like to open an account”, said Tom.

“Name?”, said the Goblin.

“Tom Riddle”

“Have your parents an account at the bank?”

“They’re dead”, replied Tom, simply. The Goblin did not offer its condolences.

“Legal guardian?”, it asked.

“I live at a Muggle orphanage”, said Tom, bitterly. “I’m a student at Hogwarts”, he added, to underline that he was not actually a Muggle who had somehow found his way into Diagon Alley and was now trying to open an account at a Goblin bank. The Goblin pursed its lips.

“House?”

“Slytherin”

“Horace Slughorn is still the head of Slytherin House?”

“He is”, said Tom.

“We will open an account for you, Master Riddle, and Horace Slughorn will be sent a form that he must sign and return”

“Will he know how much gold I have?”, asked Tom. The Goblin surveyed him with narrowed eyes, as though skeptical that Tom could have reason to utter the words “much” and “gold” in the same sentence, with respect to himself.

“Only if he asks”, came the reply.

Tom had planned to deposit the money he had taken from the Lost and Found room, and keep the money he had been given by Slughorn, but now changed this plan in light of the new information. He didn't want Slughorn to know that he had any more money than Slughorn himself had dispensed to him. He took out his rather smaller bursary pouch, and placed that on the counter. The Goblin slid it aside with its long spindly fingers, without looking inside it.

“Fill in this form”, said the Goblin, producing a parchment from under its desk. Tom had to stand on his tiptoes to be able to see it, and the Goblin, who couldn't have been taller than Tom but clearly had a higher platform behind the desk, adopted a very slight smile. Tom did not think it was a friendly smile, more of a smirk at Tom's efforts to reach over the counter, but ignored that in favour of filling in the details. When this was done, the Goblin turned the parchment around and read it, before speaking again.

“Please present your wand”

Tom was surprised by the use of the word “please”, when the Goblin had been nothing but abrupt hitherto. Perhaps the mention of the wand, something Goblins did not have and could not have under the terms of the treaties made between their races, had put the Goblin in its place, at least a little bit. Tom produced his wand and showed it to the Goblin.

“Place it on this scale”

Back to direct instructions then. Oh well. Tom placed his wand on the scale, and the Goblin took a small piece of paper that emerged from a slot at the side of the contraption, and squinted at it, before placing it with the parchment that Tom had written on.

“You may take your wand”

Tom took it.

“This is your initial deposit, I trust?”, asked the Goblin, indicating to the small bursary pouch.

“Yes”, replied Tom.

The Goblin opened the pouch, and tipped its contents out onto the counter.

“Seventeen Galleons?”, it said, after running its finger past the coins.

“That's right”.

“Very well. Your purse”, it said, pushing the now-empty pouch back at Tom, “and your receipt”, it added, offering a small slip, which Tom took.

“Any further business to which you wish to attend, Master Riddle?”

“No. That's it”, said Tom.

“Good morning to you”, said the Goblin, curtly, and blinked at him, before returning to whatever it had been doing when Tom had arrived.

“Goodbye”, said Tom, and left.

Back in Diagon Alley, Tom looked around for a shop from which to buy an owl. He remembered having seen one, and sure enough, he soon found such a place. The door was wedged open, and inside were - of course - lots of cages of owls. All of the cage doors were open; apparently these birds were quite content to stick around. Of course, thought Tom, owls were hardly creatures held captive; it was in their nature to be sent out into the world to do their master's bidding and still come faithfully back. Some of the birds that were awake hooted at Tom's arrival, and a tall bearded Wizard with unkempt hair soon emerged to greet him.

"Ello there, what can I do ya for?", he said, his voice thick with some Northern accent.

"I'm looking to buy an owl", said Tom, wondering what else people came to this shop to do.

"Long distance? Short distance? Parcels? Jus' letters? What kinda price ya lookin' at?"

Tom ignored the latter question, and instead addressed the first.

"Well, I suppose it needs to be able to do the journey between London and Hogwarts", said Tom.

"Right you are, then. Course, a lotta Hogwarts students get short distance owls, then they 'ave to use owls from the Owl Office 'ere or in 'Ogsmeade to do longer trips. What kinda size? The biggest we got are ones like this fella here, great grey owl, an' we got eagle owls an' all"

Tom regarded the great grey owl, which true to its name, was quite huge, easily more than half of Tom's own height.

"Or if yer lookin' for some summat a tad more manageable in size", continued the scruffy Wizard, "we got a snowy owl, only one in stock right now, and spectacled owls like this chap 'ere"

"How much for the snowy owl?", asked Tom, looking at the smaller, but no less majestic, white owl.

"This one, forty-nine Galleons"

Tom had hoped to not spend nearly three times the sum of his bursary money on an owl, in addition to the things he actually had to buy. Not only would it make a notable dent in his larger funds, but he didn't pressingly want to answer questions about its providence - there was only a degree to which he could downplay its cost.

"I had hoped to spend rather less than that", said Tom.

"Well, they don't come cheap, I'm afraid. The cheapest we got are mostly the littl'uns, short range birds really, we got these 'ere, for fifteen Galleons", he said, gesturing to a couple of small owls that looked a bit like Jana's small and irritating bird. Tom looked at them appraisingly, unimpressed.

"Brega-hahaha-hoo", chirruped a medium-sized owl in the cage above, and fluttered down to join them in their cage, barging them aside to take centre-stage.

"Or frankly, ya could 'ave 'im, for the same"

"Why?", asked Tom.

"More trouble 'n 'e's worth"

“Why?”, repeated Tom, unsatisfied with the vague response.

“Trouble-maker, this one”, explained the shopkeeper. “Came in for free, an’ all. Turned up in the Ministry, come in one o’ the Floo grates, an’ nobody’s sure where from. They usually use littl’ owls, pygmy owls, scopsies, an’ t’ like, for running memos from one Department t’other. But this fella shows up and starts stealin’ mail. So eventually they catch ‘im - took half o’ Beast Div to catch ‘im - and then they dunno what t’ do with ‘im, so they brought ‘im ‘ere, an’ a right pain ‘es been since”

“Fifteen Galleons?”, asked Tom, with a raised eyebrow.

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!” interrupted the owl.

“Ten, if you’ll take ‘im now”, said the Wizard, hopefully.

Tom regarded the owl, who was looking back at him, its dark eyes contrasting sharply with its white face. The rest of its feathers were less resplendent, in more subtle tones of pale to dark brown and black, which probably served well as camouflage.

“Come”, said Tom, extending a hand. The owl flapped its wings and alighted onto Tom’s outstretched hand. Its claws were slightly scratchy and the weight was a little more than Tom had expected. The shopkeeper looked surprised at the obedience.

“Well tha’s a thing I didn’ expect”, he confessed.

“Animals tend to obey me”, said Tom, without taking his eyes off the bird.

“So you’ll take ‘im?”

“Yes”, said Tom, looking up at him now. “Get off”, he added, to the owl, who now hopped obediently off his hand and onto the shop’s counter. “Does it have a name?”, he added, reflecting on the fact that instructions usually seemed to go better with names. The shopkeeper shrugged, as though this had not occurred to him.

“Brega-hahaha-hoo”, interjected the owl.

“I’m not calling you that”, said Tom.

“...ha-hoo”, repeated the owl, dolefully now.

“Brega, on the other hand, is workable. We can cut out the silly laughing noise”

“Hahaha-hoo”

“Ya got far t’ go?”, asked the shopkeeper, as Tom paid.

“No”, said Tom, “Whitechapel”

“Still bit far t’ walk with a cage, I’ll jus’ Charm one for ya, t’ make it light enough for this fella t’ deliver ‘is own cage”

“What’s the point of the cage?”, asked Tom. “It doesn’t seem like they need locking up”

“Gives ‘em somewhere to sleep, and ya don’t want owl droppins on ya carpet, do ya?”

“No, I suppose not”, agreed Tom, not that he had a carpet.

“All our cages ‘re self-cleanin’”, advised the Wizard, “so no need t’ worry ‘bout tha’. As for food, ‘e’ll gerris own, bu’ we also stock owl treats ‘ere if ya wanna girrim extra”. Tom did not reply, so the shopkeeper went on:

“So, if ya jus’ address this t’ ya’self now...”

Tom looked at the small tag that the shopkeeper had attached to the cage.

“How specific does the address have to be?”, he wondered out loud. The shopkeeper shrugged again.

“T’ be honest, most things are fine wi’ just a name, unless ya gorra really common name, in which case, jus’ purra coupla lines o’ address on t’ make sure it gets where it’s goin’”

Scowling, Tom took the quill he was offered, and wrote:

*Tom Riddle
Wool’s Orphanage
Whitechapel*

It occurred to him, as he finished writing this, that he could just have included his middle name to preclude the possibility of it being misdirected to another Tom Riddle if there happened to be someone out there with the same first and last name, but it was done now.

Glancing at the address, the shopkeeper made a twitch of an expression that Tom was hard-pressed to recognise. Looking into his mind, he seemed focussed on the word “orphanage”, but the whatever the reaction to that word was, it wasn’t something Tom understood. This irked him further, but the shopkeeper had now moved on in his thoughts.

“Right, so, err...”, began the Wizard.

It was clear to Tom that the shopkeeper was reluctant to try to send the owl on its way himself, lest he should fail. Tom was about to dismiss the owl, when a thought occurred to him.

“As you’ll have noticed, I live with others. Muggles, at that”, he said, resentfully. “They are not accustomed to owls arriving bearing cages”

Granted, they could hardly think him any weirder than they already thought him, and he really didn’t care if they did, but still, he’d rather not create that situation and risk further chiding regards skirting around the Statute of Secrecy.

“Jus’ tell ‘im not t’ be seen; you’ll be surprised the talent ‘e ‘as for tha”.

“Alright”, said Tom, inwardly a little skeptical, but then, what was the worst that could happen? “Off you go, then, take this to my room, and do not be seen”

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!” hooted the owl, as though in acknowledgement, and gripped the cage by the top, and flew out with it. It looked a strange sight, as the cage looked too heavy to be carried by an owl, but off it went, all the same.

Tom spent a while longer in Diagon Alley, to include briefly window-shopping for potions ingredients, but did not buy anything yet as he wanted to make a list. He did, however, purchase some brass weighing-scales, with leaden weights. They looked just like the Muggle equivalent, but the weights neatly stacked and rearranged themselves as necessary, according to what one placed on the other side of the scales. They were a small and neat set, that, like Tiernan’s, was far lighter in total, than the sum of the individual weights. It fitted snugly into Tom’s satchel, and wasn’t sufficiently burdensome to encourage Tom to turn back to Wool’s just yet.

Taking a detour down the adjacent Knockturn Alley, where he had previously only window-shopped, due to not having had sufficient gold to actually buy things, Tom now

planned to go shopping for books at Buah Khuldi Bookhandlers, which appeared to specialise in books of a darker nature than most of those at Flourish and Blott's, or even Obscurus Books, for that matter. Tom was only curious, but he hoped to at least broaden his education, by acquiring further powers that his contemporaries knew not. However, mere moments after he had picked up his first book inside the shop, an intoxicatingly attractive tome entitled "*Stygean Transitions of the Perpetual*", he was interrupted by a small, old, bearded shop-keeper.

"Good day to you; young master", said the Wizard. His voice was quiet, but in the resounding silence of the avenue of books in which Tom stood, it might as well have been a tombstone dropped in a library.

"Hello", replied Tom, simply.

"Whom do we have the pleasure of serving today?"

"My name is Tom Riddle"

The Wizard's brow furrowed a little.

"I must beg your pardon; I'm not acquainted with your family", he said, perhaps a touch accusingly.

"Neither am I", said Tom, and returned his gaze to the book in his hands.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to leave, and return with a parent or guardian", said the shopkeeper. Tom looked up at him, surprised. "We cannot allow unattended minors to peruse these books at will", continued the small Wizard; "I'm sure you understand".

Tom most certainly did not understand, and had to calm his angry mind a moment to be able to see into the shopkeeper's thoughts. It seemed he feared the Ministry of Magic for some reason; perhaps that they might deem him to be at fault if Tom went and did whatever these books might give him the ability to do. There did not seem to be much room for argument though, so Tom scowled, put down the book, and left without another word, fantasizing about revenging himself on the shopkeeper.

Back at Wool's, Tom walked down the corridor to room twenty-seven, and frowned when he did not see an owl cage sitting outside his door. He pushed open the door - there was no lock, but Muggles couldn't come here anymore and magical folk wouldn't, so his solitude was all but guaranteed.

In his room, the cage was lying on its side in the middle of the floor, slightly dented and surrounded by broken glass. Tom surveyed the scene, and noted the glass to have come from the window, itself barely large enough to have fitted the cage through it, and now open to the elements aside from a few shards of glass still attached to the frame like slender teeth.

"Brega-hahaha-hoo!"

The owl drew Tom's attention to where it was sitting, on his bed-frame.

"Next time, try opening the window", said Tom. "I'll leave the latch undone even if the window's mostly closed, think you can manage that, Brega?"

"Brega-hahaha-hoo"

Tom repaired the window with his wand, and then, setting the cage upright, repaired that too. He looked down at it, in the way, on his small patch of floor. He cast a Hover Charm upon it, and put it up near the ceiling. That was better.

Chapter Two

At the House of the Dolohovi

The first letter to arrive for Tom came quite soon indeed, and was from Antonin. Tom observed that Antonin had got his name slightly wrong, having written “Tom Marvolov Riddle” but Tom had understood from conversations with the him and Marca that this was a thing over in the East; one’s middle name always being named for one’s father, and always ending in a certain way.

In his own case, in contrast, Tom knew that “Tom Riddle” was the name he had been given after his father, and that Marvolo was his maternal grandfather’s name; all he had been told about him was that he was a contemptible Muggle circus-worker. Well, Mrs. Cole had not used the words “contemptible” or “Muggle”, but those attributes were obvious. Tom could barely think of any worse lineage than that of a Muggle vagabond prancing in a tent for the entertainment of other Muggles.

Shelving his resentment for the moment, Tom opened the letter, which read:

Esteemed Tom,

I write to inform of address in London. I also invite you politely to visit. I suggest the day of Anastasia the Troglodyte as good day to meet.

Our house can be found with regrets in dirty Muggle area, but it is very pleasant inside. House is at Kilburn Way, Camden, London. There is not house number, because we have protective enchantments to reject Muggles. You will see a black door wearing Vantamantium. You will identify it, when you see it.

Please, reply with advice about convenience, and tell what time you want to arrive. You will be welcome at any time, but my mother requests to know what time, so that she can ensure food is prepared.

With respect,

Antonin Aleksandrov Dolohov

Tom replied, accepting the invitation, but enquiring as to when exactly the day of Anastasia the Troglodyte was. A brief exchange of letters ensued, and the details of Tom’s visit quickly arranged.

Tiernan also wrote soon enough, but as the Lestrangle family were holidaying in France at the moment, there was no hope of an invitation at this time, that was for sure. Nor did Marca’s letter contain any invitation when it arrived; after all, she was even further away than Tiernan, in Russia. It did however keep him entertained for longer, as she wrote in Russian, and he had to use the Perevodol Glass that she had given him, in order to be able to read it. This was still not an immediately straightforward task, though, as the text

when viewed through the glass, while rendered into English, was constantly in a state of flux, and changed with particular rapidity if he held the glass more closely or further away, such that encompassed more text or less, to offer more context to the translation. Eventually he got something like a readable version of the letter, which was nevertheless nowhere near Marca's own quite respectable standard of English, and with some clearly questionable translations:

Mark Aleksandrovna Green
Greenhouse
Twistfishing
SSSR

Dear Tom,

By now you know to use around change translate glass to read my Russian. Maybe Antonin will write you on Bulgarian language, I do not know.

Here nice with family and hometown. Muggle government state troublesome annoyance, but no real problem. I joined to ballet course as she described on train. I also will to seek duelling course while I here.

I do not know which potions to study while I here. Have you plan? I write Slughorn ask, but I value your opinion also. I expect without doubt you plan to pursue Potions Championship. Naturally only one can join but with so much concurrence people we should work together to promote Slizerin victory, think not whether? Meanwhile I study perfect antidote popular poisons, sleep potion, against fire potion, quick potion, and strength potion.

It known also Witchcraft Creator school also in Potions Championship. With my family important we supreme them as I Boar Warts school. I see from newspaper Dark Strand (these words shifted a lot, and also appeared as "Harsh Strict", amongst others) Institute not in Potions Championship, so Antonin no problem this regard.

I expect also your dirt blood Griffin Gold will try to join. She achieved highest grades in potions examination. I not wish harm her but it very embarrassing if she above us goes in Potions Championship so important study. You think maybe also give her forget potion for become certain?

Of course many people older students join cannot prevent. Not idea other hour lesson people our year. Maybe Tall Castle girl Raven Claw?

Meanwhile also enjoy holiday but industry importance achieve success.

With respect,

Mark Aleksandrovna Green

Tom replied to this letter, and copied out the address very carefully as it was, despite not being able to read it, rather than use what appeared to be a bad translation that didn't even get her name right, and as such, could hardly be trusted with the rest of her address.

He hoped Brega could read his fastidiously copied Russian, or at least that the magic inherent to owls was sufficient to "just know" where it was supposed to go, once he had addressed it, regardless of the fact he himself had no idea.

The questions about his own Potioneering aspirations reminded him that he needed to go buy more ingredients in Diagon Alley, but first, he needed to make a short-list of potions, and from that, a list of ingredients. Then he'd need to practice with them, a thought that promoted a very slight sense of alarm, as he most often had more knowledgeable minds than his own around when preparing potions. Still, he might not yet be as good as some, but was quite sure that he could become so with a little application.

He sat down upon his bed to read, perusing at length his new Potions textbook, *Potioneering Principles for the Pragmatist and Perfectionist*. As the name suggested, it was less a book of potion recipes, and more a book on why things are the way they are, and how to optimize one's potions for various needs and preferences. Tom could tell this was going to be a worthy book, one that would lead him into what he'd wanted to do for some time, to at least work towards creating his own innovations.

Some days later, Tom read the headlines at newspaper stands as he walked along Marylebone Road on his way to Camden. He didn't bother to read full articles, but it appeared that the Muggles were well on the path to war. Germany had designs on the independent "Free City of Danzig", which didn't look likely to remain free for much longer, as the Poles sought to defend their own interests there. If it didn't fall to Germany, it'd fall to Poland. It was all very well being independent - Tom himself took pride in his own independence - but one had to be strong enough to defend that. The weak, on the other hand, needed to either seek strong protection, or perish.

Cutting through the park and passing Lord's, his thoughts turned to the other set of politics running parallel. Grindelwald's Revolution, as it had been dubbed in the *Prophet on Sunday*, seemed set to introduce a new order to much of Europe, unless some very powerful force arose to stop it. Grindelwald had taken control of the territories around his old school, Durmstrang, and was using that as a base while constructing a fortress rumoured to be perhaps be in the vast forests of Germany. Tom wondered what views Antonin and family would have on the matter, as they had come here to avoid the conflict.

Arriving to Kilburn Way, Tom was surprised to find the place looked even more dismal than Whitechapel; gloomy buildings were under siege from weeds, but he nevertheless found the recognizable black door as described in Antonin's letter. This door was as black as unicorns were white, and could definitely not be the door to a Muggle residence. Tom lifted the silver door-knocker that was cast in the form of some lion-like animal that Tom did not quite recognise, and knocked. It made a muted booming noise,

and Tom waited. Because of the shade of the door, the door-knocker appeared to be hanging in mid-air. The door opened.

“Good morning, Tom”, said Antonin. “Come inside”.

Inside the house, despite it appearing to be a small flat on the outside, was indeed clearly no Muggle abode. Immediately upon entering, an ornate mirror greeted him with something in Bulgarian, of which the last word was “...*Dolohovi*”, but he did not catch the rest of it. A long and richly carpeted hallway lead into the house, and there was clearly a staircase to one side. On the walls were paintings of the magical kind, similar to those that adorned the walls at Hogwarts. Three young Witches in one of the nearest paintings curtsayed at Tom’s arrival.

“*Robŭt!*”, said Antonin, and with a sound like a distant whip-crack, a small green-skinned creature appeared, which Tom recognized immediately as a House Elf, although he had not seen one before, only illustrations. “Robert” seemed like a strangely mundane name for a magical creature, but then, it was just a slave. Antonin addressed Robert the House Elf in Bulgarian; the creature bowed, and turned to tug at Tom’s coat.

“*Robŭt* will take your coat so that you will be comfortable”, said Antonin, so Tom slipped off his coat, taking his wand out of his pocket first, and let Robert take it. Another crack later, and the boys were again alone in the corridor.

“Come this way”, said Antonin with a smile, and led Tom to a spacious sitting room, adorned with clearly valuable things. On a coffee table lay a chess set of far finer quality than even the one in the Slytherin Common Room, and a drinks cabinet against one wall to the side looked as well-stocked as any potions cupboard. Unless, of course, it was actually a potions cupboard. Tom’s gaze rose to a crystal chandelier, and noted that each individual piece of it appeared to be suspended in midair, like a very expensive version of the candles that lit the Great Hall at Hogwarts.

“*Robŭt!*”, said Antonin again, and Robert the House-Elf once more appeared. Antonin spoke to him in Bulgarian, and he disappeared again. “He will bring drinks”, said Antonin. “Please sit”, he said, gesturing to a sofa. Tom wandered over to the window.

“This isn’t London”, he said, of the view outside.

“No”, said Antonin, “it is a part of the *Stara Planina* in Bulgaria”

“We travelled?” asked Tom

“No, it is just a view”, replied Antonin.

With a crack, Robert reappeared, this time with a tray sporting two tall glasses of a thick pale brown liquid. Antonin spoke, indicating to the coffee table, whereupon Robert set the tray down there, and after an expectant glance at Antonin was unreturned, vanished again.

“This is *boza*”, said Antonin, of the drinks. “It is good. Drink”. Tom took a glass, and tasted it. It was odd; wheaty, sweet, and acidic, all at once. But, as Antonin said, good.

They played some chess casually while they drank (the *boza* was very soon gone, and soon replaced by tea, brought promptly by Robert), and spoke of their plans regards the Potions Championship - or rather, mostly, Tom’s chances. Antonin seemed aware that he was not amongst the top Potioneers of their class, let alone the wider school, and as such had little to no chance of being selected. He was, however, interested in the chances

that Tom or Marca would have, and quite happy to share his thoughts on strategies for such.

On the topic of strategies, Antonin was producing a very difficult chess game for Tom, and was certainly the strongest of the people Tom had played. As ever, Tom had a degree of advantage against Antonin in being able to follow his thoughts across the board, but somehow this did not seem to help as much as Tom would have liked. Simply put, Antonin had very quickly learned early on to not make risky moves in the hope that Tom would not notice the weakness, and instead, always played the best move he could find.

Antonin's chess pieces were rather more disciplined than Archie's had been, the first time that Tom had played chess with a Wizard's chess set, and rather less opinionated than the Hogwarts chess sets. They simply did what they were told. However, as they spoke and understood Bulgarian, not English, Tom moved the pieces with his mind, rather than ordering them about. His pieces soon got used to this, even though after all this while, it still impressed Antonin enough to make him smile when Tom moved a piece. The smile whenever Tom moved might have been unnerving, had Tom not known the reason.

"Good morning", said an accented voice from the doorway. They looked up, and saw a tall, slim Witch, with braided hair twisted into a bun. Antonin stood up, and spoke to her, a Bulgarian sentence ending in "Tom Marvolov Riddle". He then completed the introduction:

"Tom, I present my mother"

"A pleasure to meet you", said Tom with a smile but without meaning, rising from his seat and extending a hand. She shook it, and inclined her head in a small nod and a smile.

"You can call me Anaïs. Antonin has spoken of you"

Her accent was slightly different to Antonin's - softer, more fluent. There was a moment's silence, which she broke:

"I have prepared some traditional Bulgarian breakfast food for you. But perhaps you will wish to finish your game first?", she said, indicating to the chessboard. Antonin looked to Tom.

"I offer you a draw", said Tom, content to avoid a loss and enjoy food sooner.

"Draw", repeated Antonin, extending a hand, which Tom shook.

"Very well then", smiled Antonin's mother. She clicked her fingers, and Robert appeared with three trays; one in each hand, and one ostensibly balanced on his head.

None of the trays slipped even when he bowed; it seemed that House Elves had a special kind of magic that made this possible - or perhaps it was the trays that were thus Charmed. Either way, Robert quickly sped the trays over to a larger table near the side of the room, and set them down.

Robert being dismissed, Antonin's mother wished them a pleasant breakfast, and herself left them to their food.

"Is this milk?", said Tom, of the white and slightly frothy liquid in a jug in the middle.

"Yes, well, no, not really... It is... *Ayran*"

"*Ayran*?"

"It is a Charmed milk product thing, I do not know how they make it"

Tom poured some and tasted it; it was surprisingly a touch salty and sour, but cold, wet, and refreshing all the same.

“Here, have some of this”, said Antonin, naming something whose name Tom did not quite catch, dividing for him a portion of some pastry thing.

“Shouldn’t we have the soup first before it goes cold?”, said Tom, noting that there was a soup present that already did not appear to be at its hottest.

“It is *tarator*, a cold soup”, said Antonin, “it is correct so”.

Tom was a little skeptical of the notion of a cold soup, but could come to trying that later; it was unlikely to get any worse in the time it took him to eat this pie-like thing. It was flaky and warm, and had an orange layer that looked - and upon tasting, turned out to be - pumpkin.

“It is made with *sirene* cheese and some other things”, said Antonin. “My mother Charms the cheese herself; do you like?”

Tom half-suppressed a laugh at the notion of Antonin’s mother Charming cheese, and described the food as strange but nice enough.

When Tom did get around to tentatively trying the soup, he was surprised to find it was actually very pleasant, and also the only thing aside from the tea that he’d had here so far that wasn’t to at least some degree salty. It was a whitish soup, with cucumber and some herbs, and a slight nutty taste.

“Does your mother make all this food?”, asked Tom. “Isn’t that what House Elves are for?”

“She likes to prepare some things”, replied Antonin. “The rest, *Robūt* prepares”

“Your mother likes to work alongside a House Elf?”, said Tom, incredulously.

“It is more like *Robūt* is a kitchen assistant”, said Antonin, defensively.

“Ah, Tom Marvolov”, came a deeper voice, shortly after they had finished. Turning around, Tom saw what must be Antonin’s father, framed in the doorway. He had shoulder-length hair, and his shoulders themselves were not inconsiderable in size. If Antonin’s mother had a sort of subdued or at least repressed vitality to her countenance, this man made up for it, radiating vigor. He extended a large hand as he entered the room, and Tom rose to shake it.

“Tom Riddle”, corrected Tom, with a smile. “Pleasure”.

“I am Sasho; that is, Aleksandar Vladimirov”

Tom was now confused, and sure there should be a Dolohov in there somewhere, so simply nodded and gave another fleeting smile. Tom felt his own posture shift a little to reflect his own confident power, despite him being a fraction of the size. Not like combatants jostle for dominance, but more like a mirror to the vibrant energy of this mountain of a Wizard.

“Antonin says you are very talented”, said Sasho, or whatever his name was.

“I have my moments”, smiled Tom, with false modesty muted by the smoothness of his tone.

“And your parents, they was talented also?”

Tom wasn't sure whether this was an oblique enquiry regards his blood-status, which, being in fact unknown, Antonin would have been unable to report. He replied to tacitly answer both the asked question, and the perhaps unasked one.

"My mother died the day I was born, so cannot have had much power at her disposal. My father I don't know about; I presume dead, and it seems clear I must have got my own abilities from his side".

Sasho cocked his head sideways a little at this information, as though to consider Tom from a different angle.

"My own parents are dead also", he said, presumably with the intent of sharing something they had in common. "Antonin's grandfather, my father, was a military Wizard of notable power, but it takes only one Killing Curse to change that. Antonin's grandmother, my mother, moved back down to Bulgaria with me at that time - he had been Russian, of course"

Tom wasn't sure what response was expected to such, but had learned that interest in families was normal, and that he should show that, albeit always being careful to tread carefully around questions of lineage.

"So you grew up in Bulgaria?", he asked, though the answer seemed clear, to buy time to find a more meaningful avenue of conversation.

"Yes, then I met Antonin's mother when she came to Bulgaria as the ambassador to the royal liaison office, and the rest is history", he said, as though there had surely been books written on Antonin's parents. From the throwing around of words like "ambassador", and "royal", perhaps there had.

"It must pain you to be away from your homeland now", said Tom. "How does it go, with Grindelwald's Revolution?"

"Ah", said Sasho, waving a large hand. "I can understand Grindelwald's cause, but I have no plan to fight for it. We could not remain in that region without taking sides, and we all would rather come to the other side of the war alive".

"Fair enough", said Tom. "What do you think will happen? With the war?"

"It is difficult to say. He has become very strong, and with many supporters. His influence grows, and his numbers also. It seems he will remain the leader of a new world power, for a time."

"For a time?", echoed Tom.

"Power asks for jealousy, Tom Marvolov", said Sasho. "Jealousy grows like a monster; others will seek to claim his power, and it needs only one time success for it to be the end for him"

Antonin's father stayed with them a while talking, but soon they went to another room with less in the way of valuable breakables, where Tom and Antonin could duel, much to Sasho's entertainment. Sasho declined to duel with Tom upon being challenged, which irked Tom a little, but nevertheless a good time was had with Antonin, and then more food was eaten, this time a range of salted cheese things with rich oily salads, and more *ayran*, before Tom finally departed back to Wool's, not wishing to overstay his welcome such that he'd not be invited back. When he did return, the window in his room was hanging open, and he had new post, this time from Jana. It read:

Dear Tom,

Hope this finds you well, and that Tetu doesn't get you into any trouble with the Muggles.

It's nice being back up here, but I miss Hogwarts and everyone too.

Having fun flying - we have fields here - but it's not as good as having a real Snitch to catch, and, dare I say it, Bludgers to dodge. But I can't have real balls here, because a Snitch would just fly away and never come back (real Quidditch pitches have Containment Charms, but the fields here don't), and Bludgers wouldn't have any other players to knock off brooms, so they'd both just follow me relentlessly.

As I can't do magic directly while I'm up here, I'll be using the time I'm not spending flying to be working on my Potion-making skills. Are you hoping to go into the Potions Championship? I don't know how they go about choosing the champion for our school, but I hope to get a chance to give it my best shot, unlikely as it may be, what with there being a whole school full of more practiced Potioneers. The most difficult thing, it seems, is knowing which potions to perfect. Have you made a shortlist yourself?

Hope you get an owl and are able to reply soon,

Love,

Jana

He wasn't sure who or what Tetu was - perhaps her owl, of which there was no sign. Prompted by yet another enquiring after a potions shortlist, he finalized his own, though he didn't include it in his reply.

It would not be until rather later in summer, a fair lot of potions practice later, and after numerous visits to Antonin's family's house, that Jana would seek to arrange to meet in Diagon Alley. As he'd rather not have to juggle her and his fellow Slytherins at the same time, he arranged to meet up with her as soon as they got their new book lists from Hogwarts - this would mean that they'd surely be shopping in Diagon Alley before most of the more upper class families, who, from talk at school, seemed to hang back more in order to dodge the crowds - in some cases, even going so far as to get the shopkeepers to come to them, though he was only aware of the Black family doing that. Then again, the Black family seemed to be quite large enough to make such a trip quite worthwhile for any such vendor of scholarly things. Tom, on the other hand, would not be making any of the shops very much richer, and would definitely rather meet them on their own turf, in any case.

Chapter Three

Bar Snacks and Broomsticks

When the day came to meet up with Jana, Tom surprised his namesake at the Leaky Cauldron by actually wanting to order a drink, for the first time. He ordered a pumpkin juice, partly because it was a pleasant reminder of Hogwarts, and partly because he wasn't sure what else they offered here in the category of drinks they'd serve to a twelve-year-old. Nor did he wish to get into a discussion about it with the bartender.

He took his drink and some honeyed nuts upstairs, to a table in a small area that was nevertheless overlooking the entrance, such that he would be able to see Jana when she arrived. Assuming she had not changed it, her distinctive hair would not be difficult to spot through the window, in the sea of Muggles. Sure enough, she soon came into view, her swept-back hair styled into narrow spines drawing attention from Tom and Muggles alike. It was interesting to see a Muggle watching Jana with some curiosity jerk his head away the moment she reached the door to the Leaky Cauldron, as the pub's Muggle-repelling Charm did its work.

Tom abandoned his drink at his table, but left his jacket slung over his chair, to mark the table as taken, while he went down to alert Jana to his presence.

"Hey Tom", said Jana, upon seeing him.

"Hello Jana", replied Tom.

"Oh, you're friends with my fellow Tom here, are you?", said barman Tom.

"Yes", said Jana, brightly.

"Don't think we've met, have we? I'm sure I'd remember you if you'd passed through here before"

"No, I've passed through", said Jana, "but I, er, looked a bit different then", she said.

"Hmm", said barman Tom, clearly skeptical that he could forget a face, but then he turned his attention, as most did, to her hair. "A new fashion, is it?", he asked.

"No, I don't think so", said Jana, "just me".

"Oh well, certainly very striking", said barman Tom, returning to his usual affable demeanour. "So, here's your tutti-frutti peanut-butter ice-cream milkshake, and, er..." - here he looked to Tom, expectantly.

"I still have my drink", said Tom, his eyes on the colourful monstrosity that Jana had ordered.

"Right, so, that'll be four Sickles, please", said barman Tom, and Jana produced some coinage. Tom watched, amused, while Jana walked remarkably carefully with clearly easily spillable drink.

"Couldn't you have got a closer table?", she asked, making her way up the staircase, getting something wet and sugary on her fingers as she did so.

"Well, we're here now", said Tom, indicating to his table. Jana put down her drink, and Tom noted the drips with displeasure. He took out his wand.

"*Tergeo*", he said, and the liquid removed itself from the table and vanished.

"We're not supposed to do magic outside of school, you know", said Jana.

“Well if an owl arrives in a minute telling me off for it, then we’ll know it gets noticed if we do magic here”, replied Tom.

“You could get expelled”

“Who’d expel me?”, said Tom. “Slughorn likes me, and as for Dippet, well, I’m sure Slughorn could talk him around. It was only a Cleaning Charm”.

“I just don’t want you to get into trouble”

“Well, be careful not to spill more of it then”, said Tom, with a smirk.

Jana shook her head, and carefully drank a little of her drink.

“Why am I friends with you, Tom?”, she asked.

“I have no idea”, he replied.

“You’re different from most people”, mused Jana.

Tom privately agreed, but wondered what she saw that was so different to other Wizards, and asked her.

“I don’t know”, she said. “I guess you say what you think about people, and not a lot of people do that. I appreciate honesty”

“Most people appreciate honesty, until they receive it”, said Tom. “They’re too easily upset”

“Well, you could always try being nice to people”, joked Jana.

“I’m nice to people”, said Tom, though he struggled to come up with an actual example. Eventually he hit upon one: “You might recall I let you know when Belinda tried to poison you, for instance”

“I’ll be sure to return the favour if I notice someone trying to kill you”, she replied, now taking a long spoon to some of the ice-cream that was trying to escape from the glass.

“I’ll hold you to it”, said Tom, with a smile.

Once they had finished in the Leaky Cauldron, and after acquiring their new year’s school-books in Flourish and Blott’s (and Jana being impressed that Tom already had a copy of *Potioneering Principles for the Pragmatist and Perfectionist*), Tom made to cross the street towards the apothecary, the natural next call, where they could pick up new potion ingredients. Jana, however, collided with him, as she automatically turned upon exiting the shop.

“Apothecary”, said Tom, pointing.

“Don’t go there”, said Jana, “they’re so over-priced”.

“Where then?” said Tom, frowning.

“Aunt Marte - that’s my great-aunt, the one I live with - orders stuff in bulk for a discount”

“But I don’t want to order in bulk”, said Tom, thinking of his small room being decked out like a potions storeroom - and besides, though he had rather more money this year than last, he didn’t fancy using it up making industrial-size potions ingredient orders.

“Oh, don’t be silly”, said Jana. “I’ll bring in a full set for you and you can pay me at school. It’ll be much less than at the apothecary. I’m already doing the same for Valerie”

“Alright”, said Tom, somewhat uneasy at the thought of being dependent on Jana’s reliability, but pleased to conserve his resources, and quite content to not have to carry

another set of ingredients around with him and back to Wool's. "But there will be Hell to pay if you fail to bring them in and I'm left without ingredients", he added.

"I'll bring them", said Jana, in what she clearly hoped was a reassuring tone. "Now, brooms!", she said, her face lighting up at the prospect. She took Tom by the hand and started to lead him to the broom shop. He wrested his hand from hers.

"I don't want to buy a broom, Jana; I couldn't afford a broom that's much better than the school ones anyway", he said.

"And I can't afford one better than the one I already have", sighed Jana, "but you don't have to buy one, we can just try out the new ones; they've got a courtyard in the back for test-flies".

Tom narrowed his eyes..

"Oh come on", said Jana, "it'll be fun".

Tom couldn't quite see the point of this, but consented to pay at least a flying visit.

Inside, the walls were decked with racks sporting broomsticks of various sizes and designs. The were whole walls given over to the Comet series and the Cleansweep series, and a smaller wall for the Bestbuzz brooms that Jana had spoken about in her latest letter.

Near the counter were broomstick repair kits, and on the back wall were Quidditch-specific supplies; bats, balls, gloves, and the like.

"Hi", said Jana brightly, to the young Wizard who appeared to be the shop assistant. Her own gaze quickly roved over the brooms. "Bestbuzz", she said, happily, "Can I try one?"

"Of course", said the young Wizard, "there are slight differences; you looking for a particular Quidditch position?"

"Seeker", said Jana, now dumping her bag of books on the floor.

"Aha", said the Wizard. "Then you'll be after the Bestbuzz One; it's the best all-rounder. The Bestbuzz Two is slightly more maneuverable, but not as fast - it's intended for Keepers - Bestbuzz Three is faster, not quite as maneuverable. That's best for Chasers. Bestbuzz Four of course is for Beaters, the most solid and stable, and pretty decent on the speed front. But yes, Bestbuzz One for you", he concluded, indicating to the top-most broom. He went to get his step-ladder, and Tom summoned the broom down to his own hand, pre-empting this, and handed it to Jana.

"Tom!", she exclaimed.

"What?" asked Tom.

"Magic! Outside of school!"

"Really, Jana", said Tom, reproachfully, "I didn't even use my wand. That was just my mind. They can't tell me off for using my mind outside of school, surely".

"I didn't see it", chuckled the Wizard congenially, "nicely done though, you should play Seeker yourself with that skill - or do you already?"

"No, I'm not a Quidditch player", said Tom, with a smile. Jana, meanwhile, stepped onto the footbar of the Bestbuzz One.

"No mounting brooms in the shop please", said the Wizard, "take it out the back if you want to try it out"

“Right you are”, said Jana, and zoomed out of the back door, her foot still on the footbar, but without technically mounting the broom. Since she only had one foot on it, the broom spun around the axis of its shaft as she did so, but she seemed quite comfortable with this.

“Crazy”, said the shop assistant, shaking his head. “Your sister?”

“No”, said Tom, summoning the Bestbuzz Four from the display, and following Jana on foot. As he walked out into the courtyard at the back, Jana zoomed past him going the other way.

“Just a sec, Tom”, she said. “Do you have a Snitch I can borrow?”, she asked the shop assistant, bringing her broom to a near vertical halt by the counter, and stepping off it with one foot.

“Yes”, said the Wizard, with a slightly wearied voice. He produced one from under the counter, and handed it to her.

“Thanks” she said with a smile, and shot back out the back.

“No mou...” began the shopkeeper, but she was already gone. Apparently Jana was all for obeying rules when it was a matter of Tom abiding by them, but could not quite control herself when it came to brooms.

A moment later, Tom had risen up into the air on the Bestbuzz Four, and Jana was darting around on the Bestbuzz One, catching the Snitch and releasing it. Tom looked up at the sky; it looked very slightly distorted. He flew up to it, and found his progress impeded near the top. There was some manner of enchantment here, to stop people (and, presumably, balls) from flying out. Tom wondered how it could be breached - not that he planned to fly off; he just wondered how to overcome the enchantment.

His attention was distracted by the Snitch flying past him, followed swiftly by Jana, catching it an instant later, and releasing it again.

“Shall I go and ask for some Bludgers for you?”, offered Tom with a smirk. “Or maybe I should just attack you with a Beater’s bat; it’d be good practice for when Walburga gets back on the pitch with you”

Jana regarded him for a moment, as though actually contemplating the offer. The Snitch flew past her, and she caught it as it did so.

“No, I don’t think so”, she said, “but it is rather fish-in-a-barrel, isn’t it?”, she added, letting it go once more.

“Hmm”, said Tom. “How about now?”, he asked, accelerating the Snitch with his mind. She tried to catch it as it went past her, and narrowly missed. The flight of the Snitch was unpredictable even to Tom, as he was pushing it to accelerate it, but it was also flying how it wanted; sometimes with Tom’s push, sometimes against it, and often skirting off to the sides, and sometimes being momentarily lost and regained (by him and his mind), since Tom needed eye-contact to control it properly, and it was difficult to keep track of, even for him, even in this courtyard that was much, much smaller than a Quidditch pitch.

In short, for Tom it was was about the most unpredictable object he had yet manipulated with his mind. For Jana, it was a Snitch that spent most of its time being faster than usual. It now took her a couple of minutes to catch it instead of a couple of seconds.

“Were you making it do that?”, she asked.

“Yes”, said Tom. “Don’t shout at me though; it’s clearly alright, or we’d have got an owl about it by now”

“You can interfere with a Golden Snitch?”, she asked, in a tone of astonishment.

“Clearly”

“So... Quidditch games...” she began, her brow furrowed. Tom could practically see the cogs whirring in her mind. “You could interfere with them, fix them?”

“Obviously”, said Tom. “But why would I? What’s in it for me?”, he reasoned out loud. Jana looked surprised at the question.

“Well, I thought... maybe, you know, for a friend”

“You want me to interfere with games for you?”, asked Tom, somewhat surprised at this rather Slytherin request from the Gryffindor golden girl.

“No!” replied Jana, clearly shocked. There had been too many miscommunications in such a short conversation already now, so Tom looked into her mind, and saw a blur of green-robed Quidditch players. “I meant for your own team, for Slytherin”, she said, unnecessarily now as Tom had got the clarification from her mind already.

“How would that benefit me?”, asked Tom, returning to his former point. The question clearly took the wind out of Jana’s sails somewhat, and she also clearly didn’t have an answer for it. It would seem that she hadn’t reckoned on a Slytherin being quite so selfish as to not bother to cheat for a team he’s not on, without some other incentive, even if it was his own House.

“Well... Your House...” began Jana, and trailed off. “But if you haven’t, that’s very noble of you”

“In case you didn’t notice, Jana, Ravenclaw won the Quidditch Cup”

“I did notice” said Jana, as though this had not occurred to her hitherto. “So I guess you really didn’t interfere... Not that I doubted you”, she hastened to add. They had descended to the ground now, largely of Tom’s impetus, and Jana, distracted by the conversation, hadn’t paid attention to this drift and had just sort of followed him. Tom dismounted from his broom.

“Shall we?” he said, gesturing to the doorway back into the shop.

“Yes, I guess”, sighed Jana, “better let the shop man know we’re not buying”

They made their way through the shop, and returned the brooms and Snitch, and Jana enthused about the broom with the shopkeeper, but ultimately sighed “I can always hope for Christmas”.

Outside the shop again, Tom and Jana looked at each other and spoke simultaneously.

“School robes?”, said Tom, thinking of where to go next.

“Bludger”, said Jana.

“Excuse me?”

“Last year”, she said slowly, with a look of dawning realization, “I was hit by a Bludger”

“Well-remembered”, said Tom. “But yes, I know, I was watching”

"You didn't stop it, or divert it", she said, thinking out loud. "You could have done, right?"

"I was as surprised by that Bludger as you were, Jana"

"Probably not *quite* as surprised", said Jana thoughtfully, as in fairness Tom didn't get to have his face smashed by it, "But alright. And... If you had seen it coming? Would you have done something?"

"Well, if I'd seen the Bludger coming, I'd still not have known it was going to hospitalize you for weeks", said Tom. "Bludgers fly at you all the time, and you dodge them. I would have thought you'd be glad if I had confidence in your abilities", said Tom.

"True", said Jana.

"And besides, I can't exactly be a third Beater for Gryffindor, can I?", added Tom.

"No, I suppose not", she agreed. "It's part of the game. I'm glad you don't interfere".

Tom neglected to mention that he had planned to swat the Snitch out of her way if necessary to ensure a Hufflepuff victory in order to win his bet.

They went next to Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, which unlike the shop Tom had bought his school robes from last year, had entirely new clothes, and robes made to measure. As they entered, a young Witch - possibly but not necessarily the eponymous Madam Malkin - was taking measurements of a girl on a stool, or rather, the tape-measure was doing that, while the Witch waved her wand and directed sheets of cloth to take their places; running the tip of the wand along seams that sewed themselves as she went along.

"Afternoon", said the Witch pleasantly. "Hogwarts robes?"

"Yes"

"I'll be with you very soon indeed", she said. Indeed, she was making rapid progress, and the robes already looked done, albeit inside out. A flick of her wand (and a momentary expression of surprise on the part of the girl on the stool) later, and the robes inverted themselves to be no longer inside out, and, indeed, looking like any other Hogwarts robes. From the Hogwarts insignia bearing all four House elements, it was clear that these robes were for an as yet un-Sorted first-year.

"First-years?", asked the Witch, when she got to Tom and Jana.

"No", they replied, simultaneously.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I usually remember people; did you get your robes from here last year?"

"No", they replied, again simultaneously. Tom was now doubly irked from not only having been mistaken for a first-year, but also having become a chorus.

"I got mine by Owl Order, last year", confessed Jana.

"And I got mine from another shop", said Tom, without giving the specifics.

"Oh well, I'll be happy to furnish you with this year's", said the Witch, "I'll just need to take your measurements, and know your Houses, of course"

"Gryffindor"

"Slytherin"

"Brother and sister, are you?", enquired the Witch.

"No", they replied, Jana with a laugh now and Tom with a scowl.

"We are not even very alike", said Tom, and Jana's mirth lessened a little.

"No, it's true you don't have much of a resemblance", said the Witch, "I just thought... Well, never mind"

After some busying around taking measurements, and an avoidance on both their parts of buying the appropriate uniform hat (they both already had one; Jana's had never fitted properly with her hair and wasn't likely to, and Tom insisted that his head was scarcely bigger than it had been last year, and they almost never wore hats anyway), they left the shop with their new robes, and, in Tom's case, a new bag; this one outwardly appearing not much larger than his old one, but inwardly actually containing much more room, owing to its magical construction. He put his old bag inside his new one. He wasn't sure what he'd do with the old one, but he'd never really had enough things in life for it to occur to him to throw it away. He took his jacket off, and put that inside too.

"Warm today, isn't it?", said Jana, helping herself to a drink from her own bag. "Ugh, and this juice is warm too", she added upon tasting it, wrinkling her nose with displeasure.

"Shall we have another drink at the Leaky Cauldron before I have to catch my train home? Or is there anything else you want to do here first?"

"How long do you have?", asked Tom.

"Another two hours, but that's including walking up to Euston Station. Or we could go there now, and have something in a tea-shop or something up that way, if you like?"

"A Muggle place?", said Tom. "No, let's get something at the Leaky Cauldron; they do food there too and I'm hungry. We can keep an eye on the time. You have a watch, don't you?"

She confirmed that she did - unnecessarily, as Tom had observed her checking it numerous times, clearly keen to not be late for the train - and soon they were spending their remaining time in the Leaky Cauldron, eating a platter of self-replenishing sandwiches and discussing potions. Tom expressed his hope about starting to create their own potions, and asked Jana if she knew much about that.

"Well, I think I'll know a lot more when I've read this new Potions book", she said. "I'm aware of the basics of what things change what in potions generally, but most things I've brewed at home have been following recipes, or just with minor modifications"

"Minor modifications?"

"Yeah, you know, switching this for that, changing quantities a bit if the ingredients are a bit different, but getting the same jobs done inside the potion"

"And that doesn't cause problems?"

"Well..." she trailed off, with a slightly abashed smile. "Sometimes it goes well, sometimes not so much. But that's how we learn, isn't it? Making mistakes?"

When the time came, Tom walked with Jana as far as Euston, as she seemed unsure of the quickest route back, and Tom didn't want her stuck in London any more than she would want such. Having seen her off, Tom headed back to Whitechapel, and Wool's, contemplating his new books and the order in which he planned to read them. That should keep him entertained a while, and ready for the new school year.

Chapter Four

Near and Far

Tom was not convinced that Mrs Cole's driving would have improved much over the course of the summer, nor the jumping nature of the engine in the Muggle motorcar she'd be driving in order to convey him to King's Cross to catch the train to school. Alas, he had not, however, found any convenient way to get to the station by himself with all his things without doing magic in public or being noticed doing so. So, making the best of a bad situation, Tom had brewed himself an Anti-Nausea Potion. By the time they were heading off from Wool's, though, Tom was beginning to wish he had also brewed a Calming Draught to take prior to having to put up with Muggles, or that he had at least had the foresight to poison Mrs Cole in order to avoid travelling with her today.

"Tom, why have you got a bird?"

"Brega-hahaha-hoo!" chirruped Brega the owl.

"Shut up, Brega", commanded Tom, and then added, to Mrs Cole, "It's an owl. Ignore it".

"I can see it's an owl, why have you got one?"

It was not like Mrs Cole to need telling twice, these days. Tom glared at her.

"I'm looking after it", said Tom, to the apparent surprise of both Mrs Cole and also Brega, who looked equally astonished at the proclamation. "It's to do with school. School for which I'll be late if we don't get going. You wouldn't want me to be kicked out, would you?"

"No, of course not, Tom, sorry, I was just surprised, that's all"

As they made their way to King's Cross, Tom noted that he had surely been right to brew and consume the Anti-Nausea Potion, as the trip was as bouncy as ever, and Mrs Cole seemed dangerously distracted by Brega. Tom wondered if he ought to have had Brega meet him at King's Cross, or perhaps even at Hogwarts.

Once in the station, Tom wasted no time in proceeding to Platform 9³/₄, even though he was quite a bit early. A handful of students were already there, some with parents, some without. Jana was present, without parents or her Squib great-aunt. Come to think of it, Squibs could surely not get onto this platform. Tom wondered if they could access Diagon Alley, or Hogwarts. Jana noticed Tom within seconds of his arrival, and came over to greet him.

"Hello Tom, and hello to you too, cheeky"

"Brega-hahaha-hoo!"

"Shut up, Brega", said Tom.

"Aww, but he's so cute", said Jana. "Or she, did you say Brega, is it a girl?"

"It's not a girl, it's an owl", said Tom, "But I'm pretty sure he's male; the shopkeeper seemed to think so, and I presume he knows owls. Could be wrong, of course, but I don't really see why it's important. I mean, what difference does it make? It makes none."

"Might make a difference to Brega", said Jana.

"He delivers my letters", said Tom. "If he's offended because he's actually female, he's hiding his misery very well, and that works for me".

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!”

“No, I think you’re probably right”, said Jana, “About him being male. He seems cheerful enough about it”

“I’m not sick at all”, said Tom, changing the subject completely, tired of talking about an owl’s feelings.

“Excuse me?”

“I took an Anti-Nausea Potion to survive the Muggle car journey here. Funny, how drinking something with Doxy kidneys in it can make one less nauseated rather than more. I must admit I wasn’t entirely sure how well it was going to work”

“You took an Anti-Nausea Potion to cope with being around Muggles?”, asked Jana. “You’ll be poster boy for Slytherin in no time”

Tom gave a cold laugh, and clarified that he had meant that the primary issue was with the Muggle car, not the Muggle in the car, though he agreed it might be an idea. Jana looked like she wasn’t sure what to say.

“Don’t you use potions for things like that?”, asked Tom.

“Me?”, asked Jana, unnecessarily. Obviously he meant her. “I use half a dozen potions every morning, but mostly just for, well, you know, some girly morning routine things”, she said, gesturing in the general direction of her body.

“You just gestured to all of you”

“Yes... I, er, wash all of me, for instance”, she said, blushing. The glimpse into her mind’s eye was automatic but quite unnecessary. He shook his head to clear the image, not that he’d seen much worth noting; Jana clearly liked a lot of bath potions and had been high submerged in foam in her mental picture. Tom’s intrusions into people’s minds weren’t only visual, though, and the sensations of the momentarily presented scene had also been quite distracting from the present reality of Platform 9¾. Having just had the sensation of being in a bathtub, he now felt like he ought to be toweling off, as a logical next thing to do, despite being completely dry already.

“You alright?”, asked Jana.

“Yes, just distracted for a moment”

“Sorry”, she replied, scanning his face for a reaction.

“Never mind”, said Tom, frowning slightly at the lingering conflict of tactile sensations from the real and the unreal.

“Yeah, I erm...” Jana looked around for an escape and found one; Valerie Clemence had just arrived. “Oh, there’s Valerie, Tom, do you mind if I go and... I haven’t seen her seen her in ages”

“Go” said, Tom, simply, though he had honestly meant to say something friendlier than that.

“Thanks, I err... Sorry... I mean, see you at school... Yep...” said Jana, trailing off and hurrying over to meet Valerie, where they met in a hug from which Jana seemed reluctant to emerge. Shortly thereafter the girls were talking, and Jana was miming shooting herself in the head. Then she mimed it a few more times, presumably explaining to a confused Pureblood Witch what exactly was meant by the “shooting oneself in the head” gesture that would naturally exist only in the Muggle world. Valerie was nodding with what

appeared to be a look of grim empathy, and shot Tom a reproachful look for a split second before breaking eye contact as soon as it was made, and returning her attention to Jana. Tom wasn't sure how he was to blame. It was not he who spilled his mind over everyone he encountered. Or at least, he hoped he didn't.

"Hello Tom; it has been a long time", said Marca, surprising him, as she had arrived through the barrier behind him without his notice.

"Oh, hello Marca, welcome back", said Tom. She gave him what could only be described as a ceremonial hug; it was over a second later, and she gave a slight nod, as though to say "Well, that's that part done now".

"Did you give her a Forgetfulness Potion?", asked Marca. "I see, that she remembered to come to school at least. I was thinking, something more to help her forget her skill at Potions"

Ignoring the swift progress of the conversation from polite greeting after a summer apart to immediately hatching evil plots, Tom gave it a moment's thought and replied with a question of his own:

"Forgetfulness Potions can be aimed at specific memories? Not just general forgetfulness? How?"

"I do not know", said Marca. "Teires might know, though. You should ask her. She would not remember, that she told you, you know".

Tom neither committed nor refused to take any such action, for the time being. Privately, he did not expect that any of them would be chosen to represent the school for the Potions Championship. No matter how competent, they just hadn't had the opportunity to showcase their skills properly yet. Getting high marks in their end of year exam was just great, but what of those who had achieved equally high marks in their sixth-year practice NEWT exams? If he was really going to go down the poisoner route, he would need to start with them, and by the time he'd got through most of the school, nobody would remember they even had a Potions Championship. No, that was ridiculous. The alternative of course was to more directly control the decision of whoever made the selection, but he did not yet know who that would be, nor how exactly he'd go about controlling them.

"Hey Tom, and, er, thingy", said Archie Aardwolf, arriving and looking cheery. "Good summer?"

"Delightful", said Tom dryly. Actually, it had been quite a pleasant summer, definitely his best yet, but he didn't feel inclined to get drawn into a conversation about it.

"My name is Zelyonaya", said Marca, without any sign of annoyance at being addressed as "thingy". Archie opened his mouth, and then closed it again, with the slightest hint of a sorrowful look. He had clearly forgotten the name already.

"Zel-yoh-naya", said Marca, more slowly.

"Zel-yoh-naya", repeated Archie, nodding solemnly, before returning to his usual relaxed cheer. "Good to see you", he said with a smile, as though they were friends, and went off to join a small group of Hufflepuffs who were presumably his actual friends.

"You have odd friends, Tom", said Marca.

“He’s not a friend”, said Tom. “We talked on the train on the way to Hogwarts last year, and we’ve barely spoken since, unless you count the sort of exchange that just occurred”.

“Hmm”, said Marca. “Hufflepuff”.

Tiernan arrived through the barrier, and quickly saw them. He spoke for a moment with what must have been his parents, and came over to them.

“Tom, Marca, it’s been ages, how’re you?”, he said, clapping Tom on the shoulder and narrowly abstaining from doing the same with Marca.

“Not as tanned as you”, said Tom.

“Yeah, like I said in the postcard, Hover-Skiing in the Alps. Great fun. You should try it”

Tom expected Marca to share his lack of enthusiasm for the notion of Hover-Skiing, but it turned out that she had spent a lot of time Hover-Skiing back home, not this summer, but rather in winters prior to her time at Hogwarts.

“Where are the others?”, said Tiernan, before answering himself: “Oh, there’s some”. By “others”, he clearly meant other Slytherins from their year. Not far away were Abraxas Malfoy, Emlyn Avery, and some of the Slytherin girls of their year, a couple of whom noticed Tiernan’s gaze and smiled by way of greeting.

“Hey Riddle, ready for duelling?” - It was fellow Slytherin Nott, now a third-year.

“Always”, smiled Tom.

“Good show”, said Nott. “Hey, there’s Morgan; I’ll catch you later”, he added, and went to meet Morgan Rosier, another third-year, who had now arrived.

With some hooting and whistling, the Hogwarts Express arrived to the now-crowded Platform 9¾, and much of the assembled student mass pushed and shoved to get compartments together. There was barely need; the Hogwarts Express was Charmed such that there was room for everyone.

Tom, Marca, and Tiernan took a compartment, and noticed that Antonin was conspicuous by his absence; nor had they seen him on the platform. They could see the entrance barrier from where they were seated, and Antonin came through in time to board the train with seconds to spare. A short while later, he arrived to their compartment, looking a little flustered.

“Living life for the thrills, Antonin?” enquired Tom. “Maybe you should join Gryffindor”

“Excuse”, said Antonin. “Stupid Muggles... Afraid of strangers... Thought father was a *shpionin*... *Spion*...”

“Spy”, interjected Marca.

“Yes, that, a spy”, said Antonin. “Anyway, he Cursed them, but then paperwork and trouble with the Ministry. Only just got here.”

“We can see”, said Tom. “Have a seat”.

“Thanks”, said Antonin, sitting down.

Upon arrival at Hogsmeade Station, new first-years were gathered up by Professor Merrythought, just as they had been the previous year, and the rest of the school made their way by an alternate route. The others seemed to know where they were going, so Tom and the other new second-years followed along too. Coming to the nearby road, they

found a line of carriages, each with a near-skeletal monstrosity of a winged-horse thing in front of it, the same as Tom had met last year when he was hunting for a unicorn.

“What are those things?”, asked Tom, of Marca, whom he judged most likely to know. She looked at them.

“They are coach carriages, isn’t it?”, she said, raising an eyebrow as though suspecting a trick question.

“No, the horse-things”, said Tom. Marca looked at him, and at the row of carriages again, then back at him with a look of momentary surprise and perhaps understanding.

“Oh, they are *testrali*, erm, testrals, no, thestrals”. Tom looked at her quizzically, and she continued. “If you are seeing invisible horses, that is to say, horses that I cannot see anyway, then they are almost certainly thestrals, horse-like creatures that can only be seen by those who have known death”

“Who hasn’t known death?”, mused Tom aloud.

“I think, that it maybe requires to have some personal aspect. Perhaps to have seen directly a friend or loved one die; I do not know the exact mechanism”

Tom reflected on this. He was rather light on friends and definitely didn’t have any loved ones, nor had he ever. He had watched the werewolf and the unicorn die, not to mention various smaller animals previously. He didn’t care about any of them, so it wasn’t a matter of caring. Perhaps slitting the stunned werewolf’s throat was “personal” enough for Marca’s unknown mechanism, and the werewolf had been in human form at the time, which may have counted for something. Marca was looking at him with a slightly cocked head.

“Have you known a friend or loved one die?”, she asked, simply.

“I don’t think so”, said Tom. “Anyone who might count as a friend is still alive. I don’t have any family as far as I’m aware. Maybe I saw my mother die when I was born, though that would be as a baby”

“Yes, maybe that”, affirmed Marca, turning to access the carriage that had just now drawn up by them - they had been making their way forwards in the queue while talking.

“So you can’t see them?”, asked Tom.

“No, not yet”, replied Marca, thoughtfully.

Up in the castle, the Sorting Hat had a new song, but in the same doggerel style as the previous year’s production. Tom considered the existence of its *Collected Works* in the library, and wondered if it made a new song every year. That would be quite some feat - there were surely only so many things one could find to rhyme with “courage”.

Of the first-years Sorted, most of the names were fairly meaningless to Tom, though he noted that Slytherin House gained another Black, in this case, “Black, Alphard”, who got slightly louder cheers than most of his other new colleagues. Obviously, the family was welcome here. Tom wondered if the Blacks would be embarrassed for a family member to go to a different House, what with their strong House loyalty often manifesting as a contempt for the other Houses. For Tom’s part, he could readily see the value of the other Houses, but, a very few occasions of thinking he might be better in Ravenclaw aside, Tom liked his House very much, and considered it clearly the best. A House full of pragmatic people who were ready to actually get things done. In itself, not a trait that for example

Hufflepuff lacked, but what Hufflepuffs lacked was the actual drive and ambition.

Hufflepuffs were worker bees, labouring for the benefit of others. Slytherins were often happy if their works benefited others - depending on who the others were - but the underlying motivations tending to be more selfish meant that a lot more got done for themselves.

Within the last year alone, Tom had learned a lot of magic, more than most students, acquired enough gold to at least be able to function a little bit like those raised in Wizarding families, and even procured a cure for death itself. Not bad going, and he doubted any Hufflepuff had done the same.

When the Sorting was done, and the last applause died down, Headmaster Dippet rose from his seat, and addressed the assembled student throng:

“To our new students”, he began, “Welcome. To our returning students, welcome back. Before discussing some of the more exciting aspects of this year to come, a small announcement is necessary regarding a less happy matter. For those of you more aware of the goings-on in the Muggle world, you’ll know the Muggle world has been teetering on the brink of war these past months. It is with regret that I must inform you that the Muggle government has today declared war to be now all but inevitable, to the point of having ordered a general evacuation of children from cities into the countryside, amongst other precautions relating to last-minute preparations for the war that is expected to commence in earnest within the next couple of days”

Murmurings arose throughout the Hall. Of course, none of these students had known war, but they were all born of survivors of the Great War, even though many of their parents would only have been children at the time, and thus only the oldest of those actually involved in the conflict. Tom knew from Rev. Peabody’s sermons that many older boys had gone to war, to fight in the trenches. It sounded believable, though Tom was a little skeptical of many of Rev. Peabody’s stories. While his stories of magic and monsters were, on reflection, plausible, if there was any powerful being watching everything they did, then that being had a much more hands-off approach to managing the world than Tom would have in its place. Headmaster Dippet gave the Hall a moment for the murmurs to die down, and continued:

“This will not, of course, affect the magical community nearly so much as it will affect the Muggle population, but as we have many here with Muggle relations, this may prove to be a difficult time, but I have every confidence that your schooling, which is my responsibility, will not be affected.”

Tom wondered how much it would affect Mudblood students for their Muggle fathers to be sent abroad to die. While he himself, if he had a Muggle father, would be glad for it to be sent away to die, he felt sure that many would find it difficult to concentrate on their lessons, homework, and exams, while their Muggle fathers were out contending with - appropriately enough - mud and blood in equal measure, with hails of bullets, bombs, poisonous gas, people burning alive, and all the other horrors that Rev. Peabody had described in sufficient detail to give some of the orphans persistent nightmares.

“Meanwhile, our counterpart magical community in Germany has assured us that, while not interfering in Muggle affairs, we shall continue to have peace between our

magical populations. Let us all wish them well, therefore, and hope they are not supplanted by the rising threat of Gellert Grindelwald.”

The mention of Grindelwald’s name produced different reactions in different people; some awed, some afraid, some excited, few indifferent. Tom smiled slightly as he imagined a future in which his own name would produce such a strong reaction in any who heard it.

He remembered what he saw in the mirror in the Lost and Found room, and had an urge to go back and view his future again. Looking up meanwhile at the staff table, he noticed that Dumbledore, usually fairly impassive in expression, seemed troubled, and now lost in thought. Tom tried to peer into his thoughts, but met with, as far as he could tell, the usual nothingness he got from Dumbledore all the other times he had tried this. He wasn’t sure if a moment’s image of Grindelwald that flashed through his own mind was actually from Dumbledore, or just because he knew that this would be the topic of Dumbledore’s thoughts. The Grindelwald in his mind’s eye was younger, but then, he had seen younger pictures of him in the paper, and was all so busy drawing connections between Grindelwald’s activities and his own many ambitions, some of which seemed in line with those currently playing out in the Eastern parts of Europe.

By the end of Dippet’s introductory announcements, the start-of-year feast was quite welcome indeed, but by the end of that, a long-awaited return to the cosy subterranean Hogwarts home that was Slytherin House was more welcome still. It was good to be back.

Chapter Five

Hot Cauldrons and Cold Curses

The day of travelling up to Hogwarts had been a Friday, which meant a convenient and pleasantly relaxing weekend back at Hogwarts before lessons began. The first-years had their orientation, and Quidditch trials were announced for the following weekend. With the impending Potions Championship, a fashion had emerged overnight of brewing potions all over the place; in the dormitories, and in the Common Room. In the cases of potions that had to be left to brew for a length of time, people had taken to either sticking by them no matter how long it took, or else placing protective Enchantments over them to avoid sabotage. There had definitely been at least one incident of a decoy booby-trapped potion, and a subsequent trip to the Hospital Wing for the miscreant would-be saboteur.

Needless to say, Slughorn loved this - the enthusiasm for potion-brewing, not the sabotages or booby-traps - and spent far more time than usual in Slytherin House, treating the weekend much like a two-day-long Potions lesson.

Tom did not brew anything of his own during this time, even though Jana had made good on her promise to provide him with much cheaper standard Potions ingredients, but he was instead content to help Tiernan and Antonin with their own bedside brews, conserving his own ingredients for more directly useful occasions. Over the course of summer, he had made several efforts and become quite adept at preparing his textbook-prescribed Antidote for Common Poisons, Sleeping Draught, Strength Potion and Shrinking Solution; he also had produced a few other potions that he had not tested, such as the Draught of Living Death, and, related to each other, the Befuddlement Draught and Confusing Concoction. Despite sounding similar, those two did have slightly different functions; the former should produce a state of befuddlement and general fuzzy-brained thinking, difficulty concentrating, and such, whereas the latter should produce the illusion of still being able to think clearly, while in fact making wildly erroneous assessments of things. He hoped to test these later, perhaps on Tiernan sometime (he'd surely take it if directed to do so) but not while he was brewing things in the vicinity of Tom's bed.

Tom had also produced a successful Levitation Lotion during the holiday, and a right pain that had been, trying to go to dinner surrounded by Muggles while it was still in effect. He managed to keep himself on the ground by force of will, but he felt like a deep-sea diver walking in one of those strange suits.

Here at Hogwarts, however, he could experiment freely - well, a lot more freely than in London, in any case - and by and large, nobody cared if something was a bit odd. Here was a place that he could truly feel at ease; at home.

On Monday morning, Tom and his fellow Slytherins ascended the winding staircase up into the Alchemy Tower, which rose in height second only to the Astronomy Tower. It seemed to Tom that there was no pressing need for their classroom to be so high up, but then, maybe there was some Alchemical marvel at hand that he knew not. Or then again entirely, perhaps it was merely akin to the Hospital Wing being on the seventh floor, up quite so many flights of steps, surely a fun escalade for those who were sporting injuries. At least the a visit to the Hospital Wing didn't involve a trip up a spiral staircase, unless

one was injured whilst in a tower, of course, or certain parts of the dungeons that were accessed by such.

Right now, however, nobody was having to convey a stretcher, and movement was not too impeded as they soon arrived to their new classroom. Belinda Jabez was the first up to the door, and as she stretched out a hand to push it open, it parted itself, a seven-pointed star-shaped hole appearing in the centre of the door, and spinning outwards, increasing in size, until a moment later the door was nowhere to be seen, only the doorway and the classroom beyond.

“Good morning”, called their new teacher, already, his arms outstretched in greeting. “And a morning of good things I have for you. Please, come in, take a seat, make yourselves comfortable while we await the others”.

The classroom was strange in layout, in that it had a spiraling arrangement of cylindrical cushioned stools to sit upon, and no tables. Some Ravenclaws were already present, and looked a little on edge, perched on their seats.

“Come in, come in” repeated the teacher, hurrying the Slytherins up as they filed in, but his warm smile not lessening, even though it went largely unreturned. Abraxas made perhaps the best effort to return it.

By the time the Slytherins had all taken their seats, Gryffindors were now arriving through the doorway, with Jana at the front; as a change from any shared lessons last year, Valerie Clemence was not within arm’s reach of her, and instead she was followed immediately by Xavier Vermeil. Of course, this was an elective lesson, so there might - and probably would - by representation from all four Houses here, but as with the Slytherins, only a representation, those who had chosen the subject, not the whole of their year.

Another three Gryffindors later, and the doorway closed itself again, while the teacher made similar greetings to the newly arrived Gryffindors, whom he looked no less pleased to see.

“Excellent, excellent”, said the teacher, “that just leaves...” - here the doorway opened again - “Hufflepuffs!”

Ezra Dunston stood framed in the doorway, his hand outstretched ready to open the door that was no longer there, frozen in position, a look of surprise on his face upon both the door disappearing from him unexpectedly, and also being greeted in such a fashion.

“Yes, yes”, said the teacher, “You’re in the right place. Come on in, take a seat. That’s it. Welcome, second years, to my classroom”. He gestured to the room around them like they might not previously have noticed it. It was large, circular in plan, though the centre of the room was notably lower than the edges, as the seats ringed around it, rising like a theatre, around a central stage, upon which stood a single large golden cauldron. Or, more strictly speaking, above which hovered the cauldron, as nothing besides magic appeared to hold it in place above the small pit of fire beneath it. Looking up, Tom saw that the steam rising from the cauldron fled out of a small hole in the centre of the conical roof, quite some way above them.

“So, I am Professor Al-Muharik, and I have the extra-fun task of teaching you the arcane wisdoms of Alchemy. Who can tell me what - fundamentally - Alchemy is?”

A good few hands went up.

“You, lovely Ravenclaw girl”, said Al-Muharik, indicating to Naomi Howard. She seemed momentarily taken aback to be addressed so, and she was not the only one, but nevertheless gave her answer:

“It’s the most fundamental of magical arts and sciences, and pertains to transmuting the root Elements of things, to affect change in the foundational fabric of matter and substance”

That sounded like a lot of fluff to Tom, but was the basic gist that he had got from his reading also. He’d have put it more simply as adjusting the Elemental nature of things, at a more primal level than that of Transfiguration, which concerned itself more with the outer manifestation of things. Alright, maybe her version hadn’t been so fluffy after all. In any case, Al-Muharik was pleased with it.

“Good girl, ten points to Ravenclaw”

Howard looked conflicted about simultaneously receiving a compliment and ten House Points, while at the same time being addressed like a dog.

Much of the lesson, however, was given over to the discussion of diagrams that Tom had already grasped in his cursory studies in the library the previous year. On the bright side, he won a few sets of House Points for Slytherin, but on the downside, it seemed they wouldn’t be turning lead into gold or synthesizing the Elixir of Life anytime soon.

By the end of the class, in which House Points had been distributed liberally throughout the Houses, Tom had learned little new about Alchemy, and his main take-away lesson had been to not concern himself too much about the quality of his answer, so much as to be quick about producing one before others did likewise.

Naturally, at lunchtime there was much talk of Professor Al-Muharik and his class, but soon, talk turned to Quidditch, and the impending Quidditch trials.

Of the previous years’ three Quidditch Cup matches, Slytherin had won two games out of three, but one of those two wins had been a match in which the Gryffindor’s Seeker, Oscar Lucien, had been injured. The other win had been considered a walk-in-the-park victory, against Hufflepuff’s rather lacklustre side which had offered little opposition.

Hufflepuff’s only victory that year had been a win by default, when Gryffindor’s replacement Seeker, Jana, had also been injured. So, not a victory to really cheer about, and perhaps a reason that Sylvester Murdock was really out to prove himself as Seeker this year, given that he’d never really got a chance to shine, last year. Well, he did, in the final, versus Ravenclaw, but had not exactly succeeded in capitalizing on that chance. The rest of the team had been playing well, but Ossapheme Fame - the annoying Witch, as any Slytherin might agree - had got to the Snitch before him.

Belinda Jabez and a small army of other Slytherins were also equally keen to prove themselves, in the same role.

“I’ve got to have my chance this year”, said Belinda, happily. Nobody pointed out that she had also had her chance last year. “What about you, Tiernan? Did you decide if you’re going to try out for Chaser?”

“I think I will”, said Tiernan. Tom privately wondered what use Tiernan’s half-hearted effort would be against the more Quidditch-crazy Slytherins who would happily kill for a

position on the team, but it didn't seem likely to cause any problem for himself either way, so he remained quiet and contented himself with listening.

"How about you, Abraxas?", continued Belinda. "Gonna go for Beater?"

"Nah", said Abraxas. "Think I prefer the more civilized position, that is, spectator"
Tom nodded, thoughtfully.

"I don't know what you're nodding at though", said Abraxas to Tom, "I've seen the way you duel; you're a lot more sporting than I am"

"I don't know about sporting", said Tom, "But I like besting everyone else at something I enjoy, it's true".

"And that is why I'm going to be Slytherin's new Seeker", said Belinda, with a grin.

A Herbology lesson, a History of Magic lesson, and an evening meal later, Tom was dwarfed by the high-backed armchair in which he sat in the Slytherin Common Room. He had his copy of *Thurlow's Compendium of Duelling* in his hands, and was perusing the final chapter, "Banned Curses for Reference Only". He'd read it before, but now he had spent a summer not wishing to do them in his place of residence for fear of attracting attention. Here in Hogwarts, though, it'd surely blend in to all the background magic - or at least, even if detected, they wouldn't know who did it, like when he had gone to pay the unicorn a visit last year.

Of course, he was not about to use these spells in Duelling Club, or even against some random student in a corridor. But he did want to try them out, and was prepared to start small. What he needed presently was something like a rat or a mouse. Even a spider would do, but the House Elves kept this place far too clean for such. He cast his mind back to last year, and remembered Belinda reporting there to be Doxies in one of the dungeons, where she had served a detention. That'd do, he thought, clambering out of the giant seat and striding towards the door.

"Where you off, Tom?" asked Meredith, from a nearby seat, a copy of *Witch Weekly* in her hands.

"Just going to try something. I'll be back later", he replied.

Some while later, Tom had still not found Doxies, or indeed anything immediately useful, down in the dungeons. The pesky House Elves had not left so much as a cobweb in place, so far as he could find. He reflected on whether there were better hunting methods to be found, and it occurred to him that he need not find an animal himself, perhaps. Owls hunted small animals with ease and regular success. Brega could bring him one, provided the owl was capable of not killing its prey on sight. Well, on contact, anyway.

Nothing killed its prey literally "on sight", though that'd be a great power to have, even if a tad inconvenient at times were it not selective.

The way to the Owlery went without incident, beyond nearly being seen by a pair of patrolling Prefects up on the third floor, but Tom was able to hide behind a statue of a hunch-backed old crone with an eye missing.

"Brega!" called Tom, upon arrival.

"Brega-hahaha-hoo!" replied Brega, fluttering down to meet him. Tom held out a hand, which Brega alighted upon with his scratchy claws.

“Brega”, said Tom softly, “I want you to bring me a rat or a mouse or something, but I want it alive. Can you do that?”

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!”

“Good. Go. Quickly. I’ll wait here”.

With a flapping of wings, Brega departed into the night. Tom paced, in the evening’s chill air. He had not put on Steadywarm lotion or even anything beyond his usual indoor robes, as he hadn’t planned to be up here. He hoped nobody would come by, but if they did, he could just pretend to be doing exactly what he was - waiting for his owl. He resisted the urge to try out his spells on someone else’s owl while he was waiting. He was just about at the point of giving in to temptation, and was sizing up which owl would be best, when Brega returned, dropping a small rodent at Tom’s feet. It began to scurry off.

“Stop” commanded Tom, and it froze on the spot.

“Good work, Brega”, he said, as he picked up the rat.

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!”

“Do well with these kinds of things, Brega, and I might even buy you owl treats”, said Tom.

“Ha-hoo”, chirruped Brega.

“Right now though, clear off. I have work to do”

“Ha-hoo” repeated Brega again, perhaps a little despondently this time, and fluttered up to a rafter, before looking down on Tom with interest.

The rat was wriggling in Tom’s hand, but could not reach to bite or scratch him, even if that was what it was trying to do. Tom couldn’t tell - its mind was too small to enter. He took one of the rat’s hind legs between his thumb and forefinger, and twisted it outwards. With a small crunch, the leg snapped. The rat squealed, and Tom dropped it on the floor. The rat ran frantically, slowly, in a small circle. Tom gave a cold laugh at the futility of its effort.

Tom had two spells he wanted to try out in particular, and it was quite clear to him that he needed to try one before the other, for practical reasons, as the rat would be no good anymore after the second spell. He took out his wand, and, stepping on the rat’s tail to stop it from scurrying even as much as it had been, brought the top of his wand to within a fraction of an inch of the rat’s ribs.

“*Crucio*”

If the rat had been in pain as a result of the broken leg, or even its tail being trodden on, it was clearly in a lot more pain now, as Tom slowly twisted his wand as described in his manual; he could sense the spell reaching out into all of the rat’s body, like fire through its nerves. Tom grinned, almost bestially, at this new and exquisite torture.

The spell’s effect began to taper off, so Tom renewed it with a second round of the same curse. By the third curse, the rat had given up on squealing, and was simply writhing on the spot. By the fourth, it was no longer writhing as such, but just clawing at the air slightly with its non-broken limbs, while the broken hind leg merely twitched. This rat was clearly nearing the end of its utility. Tom raised his wand, and the rat relaxed slightly, now merely twitching all over. Tom sighed, and swished his wand back at the rat’s flank.

“*Avada Kedavra*”

Nothing.

"Avada Kedavra!", he repeated, with a more energetic wand-swish.

Still nothing. Tom frowned, and thought back to his book, wishing he'd brought it up here with him. He was sure he had the wand movement correct, and the incantation was definitely correct. Maybe the vowel sounds were supposed to be longer or shorter though? He tried a few permutations, but to no avail.

"Crucio", he repeated, with a twist of the wand and some measure of annoyance.

The rat curled up and splayed out again. Hmm. Maybe it was the intention that was lacking. He remembered reading that it was vitally important that one meant these spells most sincerely, and frankly, the killing of the rat was of mild experimental value, and nothing at all to him otherwise. After one more failed try, he decided to come back to this spell another time. It was getting cold up here and he wasn't planning to babysit a ruined wreck of a rat all night.

"Brega", he called. "Dinner, if you want it". Brega dropped noiselessly down, and sunk his beak into the near-dead rat. Tom didn't even know that owls ate that way. He thought they swallowed much smaller things whole. Maybe they did, but then, surely they had sharp pointed beaks for a reason, and Brega seemed quite content to attack the flesh of this rat with his beak. Tom headed for the stairs down. An old-looking grey owl hooted at him sanctimoniously.

"Avada Kedavra"

There was a flash of green light, and the owl fell to the floor with a thud and did not move again. Brega stopped pecking at the rat for a moment, and regarded Tom, cautiously.

Tom, for his part, was pleased that his spell had worked now - apparently the anger had been sufficient to make it work, since he truly had wanted the grey owl dead. He was also, however, moderately concerned to have done so in such a fashion that had attracted the attention of quite so many pairs of eyes; most of the owls around were now looking at him. He contemplated killing them all, every last one of them, but put aside this notion as it was unlikely he'd be able to get all of them; some would escape, and a mass owl-massacre would attract a lot more attention than one grey owl having fallen off its perch.

No, he thought, probably best to leave well enough alone now. While the primary function of owls was delivering the messages of others, he did not think that they had any means of actually conveying their own messages to Wizardkind, should they wish to make a complaint about him killing one of their own.

"Go back to your dinner, Brega", said Tom, and with a swish of his school robes, turned to head back down the staircase back into the castle itself.

"Quacumque" said Tom, when he reached the appropriate part of the wall in an empty corridor down in the dungeons. The wall slid open with its usual stone-grating sound, yielding a doorway. According to his Peveronal Glass, the current Slytherin password meant "anything whatsoever", or possibly "by whatever means". Very Slytherin ideals, for sure. According to Belinda, however, it was the name of a furry creature in a distant land, the Quacumque possum. Perhaps both were true. For the moment,

regardless, Tom was simply glad to be back in the warmth of the Common Room, after the night's chill.

Chapter Six

Light and Dark

Despite various potion-assisted efforts over the course of the summer, Tom had as yet not succeeded in casting a Patronus. He had succeeded in becoming uncharacteristically cheerful on numerous occasions, to the point that he had all but danced into the Dining Hall at Wool's one evening, and had decided thereafter to control his Potions habit a bit.

To this end, it was with a mixture of excitement and concern that he approached the first Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson of the new academic year, knowing as he did that second-year students began with a six-week focus on the Patronus Charm.

"Silence", said Professor Merrythought, unnecessarily, as she entered the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. Her admonishment had been rendered superfluous by the customary hush that had instantaneously befallen the class when she entered the room from her office, and there had only been minimal chatter before that, in any case.

"The more observant amongst you will notice we have a new addition to the classroom this year. This," she said, gesturing above them, "is a trophy specimen of a Deinopteryx that I encountered while hiking during the summer". In the barrel-vaulted ceiling-space hung the skeleton of a great winged beast, its bones now gleaming as though carefully polished.

"Now, most of you will fail to produce a Patronus of any substance in the near future. However, be warned: if you break the Deinopteryx, be it with a carelessly cast Patronus or by any other means, you will be asked to acquire its replacement. They live in the Andes, but if it should prove necessary, I will personally arrange for you to be sent there with a bucket of flesh-eating slugs, to clean up the carcass when you've killed one."

Tom did not doubt her, but raised his hand, as he did have a question.

"Yes, Riddle?"

"Professor... I plan to be very careful around your trophy, but if anything did ever happen to it... say, Peeves, for instance... Couldn't it just be fixed with a standard Repairing Charm? Or maybe the Bone-Mending Charm you mentioned?"

Merrythought gave him a stony look for a moment, before responding:

"Ten points for Slytherin, Riddle. Yes, it could. However, I rather wish to instill in my students a sense of personal responsibility. So if you break it, I hope you have confidence in your ability to trap and kill a magical creature much bigger and stronger than yourself"

"Professor", said Tom, deferentially, allowing himself the tiniest of smiles.

Merrythought instructed them regards the incantation required, which Tom already knew as "*expecto patronum*", and the importance of focussing on a powerful happy memory, which Tom also knew about, but in which endeavour he had so far been at something of a loss.

She demonstrated the Charm, and Tom's curiosity regards her happy memory was not satiated, as he was kicked out of her mind - where his presence was already tenuous at best - the moment she spoke the incantation. He narrowed his eyes a little at the brightness of the light that immediately settled into the form of a glowing figure, with a shield and a spear, or was it a staff? The figure was clad in long flowing robes, and a

strange crested hat. It looked like Britannia, the woman on the tails side of Muggle halfpennies.

With a flourish of the Professor's wand, the shimmering ghostly figure - much brighter than any ghost - glided swiftly around the classroom in a circuit before disappearing into a momentary misty shroud, and fading from view. Tom wondered if an actual Witch or Wizard could fly like that, without a broom. He'd been able to stop himself from falling before now, and recalled that even Abraxas had done the same, according to his story of wandless magic before coming to Hogwarts. But to zoom around like this would be something quite different.

"Focus", said Merrythought sharply, "on the happiest memory you have".

Tom went to his usual go-to happiest memory, Dumbledore's departure from Wool's, and Tom being free to go explore Diagon Alley with a sackful of gold. But even this was tainted with the presence of Dumbledore, the chastisement that came therewith, and the depressing shortage of funds when actually buying his things. He tried focussing on the wonders he'd seen in the mirror in the Lost and Found room, but that reminded him that he still had that damned pyramid thing that he hadn't been able to get open. The taunts of the former headmaster's painting rang again in his ears, and his lip curled a little in disgust and annoyance.

"Come on, now, happy thoughts!" said Merrythought, looking at the sea of faces, many of whom seemed to be still searching for inspiration, as though it might be found lurking up by the ceiling, or perhaps hovering outside the window. Tom glanced through a number of minds like a catalogue, and found mostly a contempt-worthy montage of insipid moments amongst families, or else various shining and doubtlessly embellished memories of holidays in places Tom had never been. He could at least appreciate Highcastle's memory of her sense of awe upon first entering the Hogwarts Library. He wondered if he could use the same, but his love of the library was balanced by a feeling of being somewhat antagonised by being so back-footed in this regard; most of his peers had grown up with access to all manner of magical resources, and in the majority of cases had squandered them, while he, far more brilliant and deserving than they were, had languished at Wool's with all of eight Muggle books and no magical ones.

When the bell rang at the end of the lesson, the best Patronus produced so far, aside from Merrythought's, had been a fleeting shining glimmer from Highcastle. Tom, for his part, had produced nothing more than some damage to the wall at the front of the classroom, has he had somehow managed to cast a Blasting Curse despite clearly saying the correct incantation for a Patronus.

After that class, a change in pace was almost welcome, though naturally Tom still was going over the lesson and his possibilities in his mind. It was a challenge, he told himself, that was all, and he'd overcome it, like he did everything else. Time now to focus on the task at hand, though. No need to let other subjects slip, especially the new ones.

Glyphs and Tongues, as a subject, was clearly rather more popular with girls; they outnumbered the boys in this class by two to one, as they arrived to the room and were broadly ignored by the white-haired Witch who sat at the front of the class, at a desk that

held several stacks of books precariously towering over some loose parchment sheets, and a large cage with an oversized ferret within it. A curious thing to have in a languages classroom.

Looking around, Tom saw that all four Houses were represented, but Gryffindor House had not afforded any boys to the class. Tom wondered as to the cause of this disparity, but had come to no conclusion before the last of the students arrived, and the teacher addressed the room:

“Good afternoon, everyone”, said the teacher. “I am Professor Laurie Mipsum, and with me, you will learn the critical skills to communicate with and understand the world at large; as it is, as it was, and as it used to be. And of course as it has been, had been, will be, will have been, and so on and so forth.”

Half of the class looked confused already, but Professor Mipsum pressed onwards. “This class is in a way four subjects; reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This gets described as two subjects - Glyphs and Tongues - and timetabled as just one. To this end it will be necessary for our classes to be quite focussed and intensive, and homework, I’m afraid, will also be quite extensive from me, for which I make no apologies”.

Tom could tell that some of the less studious students present were already wondering if it was too late to shift to a different class. On Professor Mipsum’s desk, the enormous ferret was trying in vain to escape from its cage. It made a rude gesture at her, which she ignored, instead pressing onwards:

“We will be looking more at Tongues than Glyphs, in most of our class-time, since speaking and listening are areas that will require rather more input from me. Some spoken tongues, such as Jarvan in its various forms spoken amongst Jarveys, and Acromal spoken, of course, by Acromantula, do not even have written forms, though they can be represented with Ipaglyphs, which we shall also cover.”

Tom had read about Acromantula, giant spider-like creatures, but had no idea what a Jarvey was.

“There are some languages that are known to exist it has so far proven impossible to learn; such as Parseltongue, named for Paracelsus, credited with discovering it, the language of snakes. Some Wizards have been known to be able to speak it naturally, including Salazar Slytherin, but those that can are so few and far between, invariably Dark Witches and Wizards, and none have looked to make the language accessible to others” Tom could readily understand why no such effort had been made. Antonin shot Tom a glance; Marca continued to regard the teacher, impassively. Of course they were both aware that Tom himself could speak with snakes. Tiernan meanwhile was doodling around a Slytherin emblem he had drawn, and did not seem to be paying attention.

“Another language that is known to exist but whose mysteries have not yet been penetrated by the enquiring minds of Witches and Wizards, is Draconian. It has become obvious that Dragons can communicate with each other, but any efforts to unravel this rich but as yet incomprehensible speech have resulted in them being seriously misunderstood”.

Tiernan looked like he’d woken up again. At the forefront of his mind though, as Tom peered into it, was just a daydream of being able to talk to dragons, commanding them,

and generally enjoying their power. Tom himself could readily acknowledge the appeal of having a great scaly beast at his command.

“For now however, we’ll be starting with Jarveys, as their language is - if nothing else - reminiscent of ours. For those unfamiliar, this is a Jarvey” - here she gestured to the giant ferret with her wand, and as she did so, it began immediately to speak, or rather, shout, as though it had been hitherto impeded from doing so. It sounded like a very drunk Scotsman, but spewing forth completely random words in no particular order:

“Lame otter jewel crusty four King shy teeter pal pebble-fest toe-ring country ally me knit Uralic you Renard sow true Uranus and fee ditto bar kin yore stew Biddulph ACE!” it called angrily, before being silenced again with a swish from Prof. Mipsum’s wand. It continued to gesticulate.

“There, that’s enough of our furry friend’s charming diction for the moment. So, any first impressions?”

“He mentioned my name in there”, said Lana Renard, tentatively.

“Incidentally so”, said Mipsum, “But I don’t think that was intended, yet. Anyone else?”

“He sounds Scottish”, said a Gryffindor girl whose name Tom did not know.

“He is Scottish”, replied Mipsum; “This one’s a local; Jarveys come from all over Britain and Ireland though, and are found in a few other places too. North America, after they stowed away on Muggle ships, and there have been reports of them in certain parts of Norway and France too - but those speak Bergensk Jarvan, Jersiais Jarvan, and the like, so we’ll not concern ourselves with those”

With this back-and-forth questioning method, more snippets of Jarvan, and the use of the *Claritaures* Charm taught by the Professor, by the end of the lesson they were catching enough of what the Jarvey was saying to be aware of how many months’ detention it’d be getting if it were a student slewing forth such a profanity-laden logorrhoea in class.

Professor Mipsum warned them that since Jarvan was heavily linked to the language spoken by humans nearby, it was a lot easier to unravel than many other languages they’d be studying, but that she’d chosen it as an easy introduction to the use of the *Claritaures* Charm, and - frankly - the use of ears, overall (a skill she considered, perhaps reasonably, most people to lack).

For homework, she set them the completely unrelated task of learning the order and base meanings of the runes of the Pre-Elder Futhark, and setting them in an otherwise English language story of their own making.

“Hello Belinda, how was Beasts?”, asked Tom, back in the Common Room.

“Eh, rubbish, we were just doing White-Headed Pen Gwyngs, you know, for quill plumes and all that. I was hoping for a Manticore or something. But never mind that. Quidditch!”

“Quidditch?” repeated Tom. “Oh, the trials, this evening?”

“Yep, and I’m going to slaughter them”, proclaimed Belinda, happily.

“Well, you seem quite motivated”, observed Tom. “And your competition?”

“Murdock’s dead in the water - I mean, there’s no way he’s regaining the spot, not after last year. Others... Yeah, there’s some, but I’m better. And - *petrificus totalus* - I’m feeling good about the odds”, she concluded, as a first-year in Quidditch robes fell face-first into the carpet behind a sofa.

“Who’s that?”, asked Tom.

“Not a competitor”, grinned Belinda.

“Tom”, interrupted Tiernan, arriving from one of the annexes, “Do you know to do an Anti-Nausea Potion? Rosier won’t stop throwing up”

“Must be nerves”, said Belinda, “He was going to try out for Seeker too”.

“I do know how to make one”, said Tom, suspecting the cause of Rosier’s vomiting to perhaps be something other than performance anxiety, “but the potion takes forty minutes with everything pre-prepared, call it an hour total, and I’m not missing dinner for him. Tell him to go to the Hospital Wing”

“I don’t think he’s going anywhere that’s not the toilet right now, Tom”, said Tiernan.

“Then call out Tegner”, replied Tom. “But he’s probably at dinner himself, so shall we head up to the Great Hall?”

“Right... I’ll, er, tell him I’m going to get help”

“You do that”, smiled Tom.

“Shall we?” said Belinda, gesturing towards the door.

“Definitely. Antonin, are you coming?”

“I was to wait for Marca, but she is not here, so I suppose that yes” said Antonin, emerging from an armchair.

Thus gathering up Antonin, and Marca as she now arrived from the girls’ dormitory, they headed off to the Great Hall, soon caught up by Tiernan, and then Emlyn and some others. Tom felt strangely like he was leading a battle-party, even though really he was only striding at the front because he was hungry, and Belinda’s own energy seemed to spur on the group also.

“Save me a place, Tom”, said Tiernan as they entered the Great Hall; Tom and the others took to the Slytherin table while Tiernan went up to the staff table, and cautiously made his way up the stairs of the dais upon which it was found.

Tiernan looked a little out of place up there, and several teachers surprised to note his visit. Tegner, however, greeted him with a furrowed brow of concern, and nodded while listening to what Tiernan had to say. A moment later, a House Elf appeared by Tegner, visible only to Tom through his mental connection to the Healer, since the table was in the way and had a cloth covering that came nearly to the floor, obscuring the Elf. The House Elf bowed deeply, and disappeared again, presumably to fetch the requisite potion and take it to Rosier. Tiernan thanked Tegner, and made his way back down to his friends, where Belinda for just a moment wasn’t smiling and had a look of moderate concern. It was Marca, however, who spoke first, and on an unrelated topic.

“You will be competing, Belinda, after eating so much?”

“Good to have energy”, said Belinda, helping herself to some more hotpot.

Marca looked skeptical, and contented herself with her parsnip soup.

Just as she had the previous year, Belinda invited those who were not trying out (and that included Tiernan, who had now ditched any aspirations of dislodging a Chaser to take a position on the team) to watch the trials. Just as he had last year, Tom declined, as did Marca. Most of the others assented.

“The sun will set within this hour”, observed Marca. “Will the Golden Snitch not become invisible?”

“Yeah, it will”, said Belinda, “Or near enough. But Selwyn wanted to do the trials as early as possible this year, to get in more training time. So this is the slot we got. But! She’s got Cat-Eye Potions for us, so we’ll all be able to see fine. ‘Course we can’t use those sorts of Potions in the Quidditch Cup itself, but for the trials, her word goes, you know?”.

“Did she make the potion herself?” asked Tom, curious. He’d readily accept being able to see like a cat in the dark himself.

“Dunno”, said Belinda, “Her or her boyfriend, probably, doesn’t matter though, does it, so long as it works?”

“Well, I suppose if it doesn’t, at least you’ll all be in the same boat”, smiled Tom, redirecting the conversation back to the topic of Belinda herself, from whom she was not aware of it ever having strayed.

Indeed, very shortly thereafter, the final rays of the sun were casting long shadows in the golden glow of its last light, as Belinda and most of the others were heading out to the Quidditch Pitch, and Tom and Marca made their way back to the Slytherin Common Room, passing on their way the first-year that Belinda had all so recently paralysed, now high-tailing it breathlessly up from the dungeons.

“It seems that Belinda may have her chances this year”, observed Marca.

“She does seem rather set on the idea”, reflected Tom with a smile.

“Do you know how many other Slytherins she sabotaged?”

“No...”, replied Tom, slowly. “I only know about that one for sure, and she probably poisoned Rosier. I don’t *think* she did anything to Murdock. Can’t comment on the others”

“*Quacumque*” said Marca, and the wall to their Common Room slid aside.

They had both finished the written elements of their homework by the time the others returned; it was obvious from the moment Belinda reappeared in the Common Room - dimly glowing feline eyes and all - that she had this time been successful in her ambition, as she returned with glee to tell any who would listen about her brilliance.

“Well done, Belinda; I look forward to seeing you in action”, said Tom, with a warm smile and without actual sentiment behind it; actually more interested in the current state of her eyes than her Quidditch ambitions.

“And Selwyn says we should have Hufflepuff first in the House Cup... Mellifer or whoever they get this year won’t know what hit them”

“When it comes to you, Belinda, I don’t doubt it”, said Tom. “How’s your eyesight?”, he asked, looking into her head as she looked out of it. Through her eyes, he saw himself, no brighter, but in far clearer detail than he had been seeing the Common Room through his own eyes.

“It’s great”, she replied, “It’s weird, it’s like everything’s the same level of brightness, but I can see everything so clearly - wish I could keep my eyes like this”

“Isn’t there a way to make the transformation permanent?”

“Nah, the potion only lasts a few hours”, said Belinda.

Tom’s mind reached for other solutions, ways to work around the potion’s deficiency. Perhaps it could be modified, like the Draught of Peace, to have a permanent effect by overdoing an ingredient or two. Or perhaps Transfiguration could be used. Or maybe a Charm to make the potion’s effect stay. Or when it came to changes, could it be that Alchemy held the answer? He needed to understand more about that, and also more about his body. A pity Tegner wasn’t a teacher. In his stead, Slughorn would probably be the teacher to whom to turn on the topic.

“Hello?” - Belinda brought Tom’s attention back to her.

“What?”, asked Tom, somewhat irked at the distraction. He tried to mentally tidy up his thoughts.

“You should have seen Caitlyn Filkroy, she was really good, but I was that bit better - and I didn’t know she was going to try out, so I hadn’t even... I mean, I hadn’t prepared to compete against her, but it all worked out just great in the end”

“Congratulations”, said Tom mechanically, his gaze still fixed thoughtfully on her eyes. The slitted pupils widened a little as he watched, presumably all the better to take in what she was seeing. Tom realised that what she was seeing was his face, which made him a little more conscious of his expression. She was now looking into his own eyes, which reminded him of how boring and ordinary they were. He scowled slightly, and she withdrew a little, nonplussed, with a frown of her own.

“So yeah”, she said, recovering her usual demeanour almost immediately, “and it’s really like I owned that Snitch while I was out there; there was only me who caught it”

“Great”, said Tom, after a moment’s silence.

“You’re just really not a Quidditch person, are you?”, said Belinda, with a small laugh now, shaking her head. “I’ll leave you to your... whatever”, she said, with a dismissive gesture at the assorted homework materials on the nearby table.

As she headed off to regale more Quidditch-oriented listeners with her tales of glory, Tom returned to his study of the Pre-Elder Futhark. If he would just memorize this stupid story he’d written, then the meanings of each of the runes should stick in his mind just fine. Then he’d only need to concern himself with actually being able to actively reproduce the runes from memory.

It wasn’t long, though, before he’d really tuned out of that homework, and, his legs swung up onto the arm of the chair, he allowed his mind to wander more freely into the realms of transforming aspects of himself to be better than mere human.

Chapter Seven

The Choosing of the Champions

When the time came for Divination a couple of days later, the classroom turned out to be quite near to the Lost and Found room that Tom had discovered last year; specifically, it was in the room that Tom had taken to be some form of games room.

The first students to try to climb the rope ladder had as much fun as Tom had had the previous year, swinging and swaying on the thing before discovering how to make it behave - for those who discovered it, at least. It was not until the first Ravenclaw had discovered how to tame the ladder, that they conveyed the secret to the others - simply to hold the ladder with one's palms towards oneself, instead of like a normal ladder. By some unknown magic, this caused the ladder to hang straight, and not veer away from the user.

The teacher was already present when they arrived, and was a smiling young Wizard by the name of Adam Sortsun.

"Yes, hello everyone, I've been expecting you", he said, grandiloquently, as though the lesson had not been timetabled. "Do be seated", he added, gesturing to the room.

Presently the students were clumped around near the entrance hole, because this classroom looked every bit as unlike a classroom as it had last year. "Sofas, stools, wherever; make yourselves comfortable", he urged. "Being relaxed is an important prerequisite for good Divination"

Sortsun certainly modeled this for them, and seemed to broadly treat the lesson to a large extent like a casual social occasion. Like Slughorn, he showed an interest in individuals and their families and such, but unlike Slughorn, he showed something akin to an equal measure of interest in everyone, rather than hovering around specific favourites and treating less favourably the other members of the class.

Somehow, despite being so very far from the kitchens and the Great Hall, or even the staff room, he had what appeared to be a large mug of coffee; at the very least, it was a black and steaming liquid. He added a tot of something to it from a small flask in his robes. Tom wondered if it was some potion that aided with Divination. He entered Sortsun's mind, but got no information about the added liquid, aside from that whatever it was tasted sweet, like honey, and gave a warmer feeling than coffee alone did.

"Ah, that's better", he said, with a warm smile. "Oh, but I forget my manners! Here..." he added, and with one flick of his wand, a large copper kettle appeared in the fireplace near him, giving a low whistle as steam spouted from it. With a second flourish of his wand, chintzy teacups descended from where they had been sitting on a wooden beam above him, and they snaked down to the students like a flowery train in white, pink, and gold. A teacup settled in front of each of them.

Like a street magician or clown, the Professor flicked his wand upright and produced a bunch of flowers. Tom cast his mind back to the Transfiguration lesson with the flowers the previous year, and tried to remember who had had this kind of flower.

"Camomile", said Sortsun, now stuffing the flowers unceremoniously into a giant teapot that had previously gone unnoticed, by Tom in any case, on a small table to one side of the fireplace. "Always good for relaxing nicely".

Soon, everyone had a cup of camomile tea. Tiernan clinked his cup against Tom's, in a "cheers" gesture, with smirk. Tom rolled his eyes, but gave a smile nevertheless. As far as Tiernan was concerned, this lesson was clearly going to be a opportunity to drop any semblance of being in a classroom and actually working.

For the moment the tea was far too hot to drink, but the class went through the motions of periodically blowing on the tea and sipping it, while Professor Sortsun lectured them for a short while on the various forms of Divination they'd be practicing.

"Let's have a little fun, shall we, and see what we can divine about the coming Potions Championship, its final result, and the Champion who will find his or her way to the end of the event!"

He divided the class into two groups, according to where they had been sitting, rather than by any sensible division such as House or general competence. As Divination was an elective subject, there were all four Houses present of course, but that was divisible easily enough by two, and as for competence, well, he might not have taught them before, but surely he could have looked at their exam results from last year, or something of that ilk.

Jana and her friend Valerie had both ended up on Tom's group. Jana tried to stand close to Tom; Valerie tried to stand away from Tom and the Slytherins in general, and both of the girls tried to stand next to each other. The result was a slightly oddly spaced line, with the girls trying to send messages to each other with their eyes. Tom, at liberty to access both their minds, found they were both quite clear about what they wanted but also quite stubborn about their positions.

"Looks like we've got the archery thing", said Tiernan softly to Tom, with a smile, distracting his attention from the entertaining friendship politics, and to where Professor Sortsun was now stringing a strangely shaped bow - the top "half" of the bow was notably larger than the bottom "half", but when Sortsun notched an arrow, and took aim at a target, the arrow aligned itself perfectly horizontally in any case. He relaxed the bow again without firing, and turned to the class.

"Now, these arrows are blunt-tipped for safety", he said, tapping what looked like a leaden end to the arrow in his hand, "But they'll work just fine on the straw targets" - here he gestured to the array of targets, which sure enough were a wall of tightly packed straw, with paper targets upon them.

"Notice the targets are comprised of red and white rings; let's say red for female and white for male - the Champion for Hogwarts, in the Potions Championship, I mean. That's almost arbitrary, but if we all hold it in our minds while practicing the noble art of Belomancy, it'll have meaning nevertheless"

Tom reflected on this, the idea of a thing's meaning coming from the mind and what one gives to it, not from some external truth. Then his mind shifted to the rather unimpressive fifty-fifty odds this would be producing. Still, archery might be fun. "So, I want you to take turns shooting at the targets, and I want you to keep track of hits for red and white. Note them down, keep a tally. Don't worry about your aim at all; it's not important whether you hit the target centrally or not. It's important that you were engaged in the process"

“Sir, were you in Hufflepuff House?”, asked Tom.

“Haha, yes, I am indeed an old Hufflepuff; well divined”, he chuckled.

Soon their half of the class was having a merry old time shooting at the targets, while Sortsun went and attended to the other half of the class, who were assembled at some tables. As they had four targets, the students had self-sorted into groups according to House. Tom was now here with Tiernan, Belinda, and Emlyn. The other two Slytherins in this class, Iolanthe Oannes and Meredith Keenhaven, had been divided into the other group. In between shooting arrows, this side of the class watched each other's shots, and at some peril, retrieved arrows from the targets.

After a near miss when Belinda had gone to retrieve the first arrows shot by Tom - he had gone first, having been handed the bow by Tiernan, and she was keen to have a go next - Tom took to retrieving the arrows by summoning them back to his hand. Errol Carter, a Ravenclaw boy, had the idea of copying this, but with a Charm, raising his wand and saying “*Accio* arrows”. They'd not been taught this Charm, and Tom had little use for it, but Carter seemed quite pleased with himself, until one of his arrows reversing towards him with something of a spin rapped fellow Ravenclaw Millicent Bagnold in the side of the face, making her more than a little cross with him, and soon he was retrieving all the Ravenclaw arrows by hand.

The Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors were sticking with collecting their arrows manually without experimenting with Charms they'd not been taught, and presently Jana was retrieving arrows from the Gryffindor target.

There was a flurry of robes next to Tom, and Jana whirled around, clutching her backside as she gave a cry of pain, at the same time then raising a hand to protect her face. An arrow had glanced off her rear - being dull-tipped, it hadn't even penetrated her robes - and now clattered to the floor nearby.

“Sorry, didn't see you there”, said Belinda, who had already notched another arrow and levelled it at her. Jana froze on the spot, her mind on her wand, and Belinda grinned, savouring the moment, before turning her aim back to her own target, and releasing the shaft. The arrow landed with a thud into the straw. After all, she could hardly get away with not seeing her classmate there twice in the space of a few seconds.

“Slytherin must be losing all hope for Quidditch then”, called Valerie at Belinda, “If they chose someone that short-sighted as Seeker”. Valerie had her hand in her pocket, the long inside-robe pocket where most students kept their wands when not in use. Jana made use of the moment's distraction to draw her own wand, though she kept it by her side, not raised yet.

“Oh, we'll see who's losing all hope for Quidditch”, retorted Belinda defiantly. “If you get her as Seeker again, I reckon we could have a sweepstake on how long she can stay out of the Hospital Wing this year”.

“Did someone mention a sweepstake?” asked Sortsun, appearing from nowhere behind them, and looking cheerful. He didn't seem to have noticed the conflict, and nobody answered him immediately. He continued:

“Well, competitions like that are good tests of Divination, and always a bit of fun, whatever *some* teachers might say”, he added, “But it’s time to swap over now, so do give me your scores and head over to those tables where the others were, will you?”

The other half of the class was what Tom had thought it to be when glancing over from time to time during the first session; casting Lots. Lots of what? Bones, they now found out. They had a collection of shiny off-white bones on the tables, and Sortsun explained how they would toss a bunch of them onto the table at once, and repeat this until they formed a sign, which may take the form of some rune or similar, or in the case of this exercise, modern letters.

“In this half of the class, a break from the Potions Championship Divination, let’s do something that’s always a bit fun, Divining for enemies”

He looked like he considered this a party-piece, and not something that should be taken very seriously, but nevertheless, Tom payed attention while Sortsun discussed the state of mind required, holding the question lightly in one’s mind, and being open to receiving an answer upon casting the Lots.

Soon, it was time to try this out. Tom cast the bones onto the table. Despite his doubts, quite clearly in the centre landed immediately, on his first try, what looked like it might be a pair of initials. The first could-be-initial had two vertical long bones, and one horizontal. The topmost parts were almost touching, and it looked like it could be an “A”. The second possible letter had one vertical long bone, and two curved ribs, meeting each other to make a larger curve lying against the long bone slightly unevenly. It could be a “D”.

Tom’s mind went immediately to “Antonin Dolohov”, but then, didn’t Antonin’s father share those initials? Oh, and Antonin’s mother, for that matter. Granted, so did Albus Dumbledore. And Armando Dippet. And Armstrong Diggory.

“How you doing there, Mr. Riddle?”, asked Prof Sortsun congenially, arriving to the table.

“I appear to have... six mortal enemies so far, Sir, and the list is growing rapidly”, said Tom with a wry smile.

“Oh, I see”, said Sortsun, rubbing his brow thoughtfully. “From the initials, you mean? And, how are your present relations with these future prospective mortal enemies?”

“Varied”, replied Tom, measuredly. “Strained with one. Comfortable or negligible with the others”.

“Well, usually best there might be to keep a special eye on the strained relations candidate, but watch out for any back-stabbing from the others”

Tom reflected on this for a moment.

“But Sir, how then did the bones change anything? Surely I’d have done that anyway?”

Sortsun gave a chuckle.

“It’s not in the nature of Divination to change things - just to foresee them. Then it’s a matter of what we do with that information”

Tom didn’t fully consider this a satisfactory response; after all, the information had been utterly useless. He opted, however, to not labour the point.

“Sir”, interrupted Tiernan, “Have you done this? What initials did you get?”

“A cheeky question, Mr. Lestrangle, but I’ll answer nevertheless; a dangerous soul with the initials of “AS” appears to be the one to watch for me!”

Some of the class gave a laugh (or rather, such occurred in a few small waves, as some were quicker than others to get the joke); Tom managed as far as a smile, pondering the notion of being one’s own worst enemy.

“And you Miss Teires, what’ve you got there?”, asked Sortsun.

“Uh, nothing yet, Sir”, replied Jana, hurriedly gathering up her bones from where she had most recently cast them.

That afternoon, the Slytherins and presumably Gryffindors had free time, as Professor Slughorn was indisposed to teach them their scheduled double Potions lesson, as he and the other Heads of Houses were meeting in their much mentioned “Conclave”, to decide the Hogwarts Champion. Wherever they and their minds were, Tom could not find them when he cast his own mind in search of them. But then, it was very difficult to do this without line of sight at the best of times, and at Hogwarts there was so much magical interference, that even without extra magical barriers, there was little chance of him finding what he wanted to know. He’d just have to wait and find out that evening, with everyone else.

At the appointed hour in the Great Hall, a slight adjustment had been made to the layout; another table, much like the staff table, had been placed in the space by the raised dais upon which the staff table stood. At it sat a collection of Witches and Wizards, of whom, one of them was Horace Slughorn, and the others were unknown to Tom.

“Today we are joined by a symposium of Potions Masters and, er, Mistresses”, said Dippet.

The Witches looked somewhat irked to be addressed so. In truth, it could have been better phrased in a less ambiguous fashion, but there was Dippet doing his Dippet thing again. One day he’d make a speech without saying something stupid, perhaps, but it was clearly not going to be this one.

“We are also joined in spirit by the rest of the teachers and students of the other schools involved in the Potions Championship, who will view the event via a Telespectral Glass network, for which we have, after much negotiation, acquired special dispensation from the International Confederation of Wizards. The use of such is of course usually frowned upon, to say the least, in light of the International Statute of Secrecy. However, we have been assured by several independent Divination Technicians that only the appointed rooms of the schools involved will be able to view the proceedings. Telespectral viewers, therefore, welcome, in spirit, to Hogwarts.”

There was some applause.

“As you know, each of the schools has recently held a Conclave to decide its own Champion, and now, the moment you’ve been waiting for, those Champions can be announced!”

For all their Divination efforts (which, after the swap-around and the totting up of scores at the end of the class, had pointed to the Hogwarts Champion being a female girl of the feminine sex, though if they had only counted the first half’s scores, it would have

been read as a boy, with a girl being indicated only after taking the later score into account as well, so even the fifty-fifty prediction had its wiggle-room), and for all the rumours that had been going about, neither Tom nor anyone immediately around knew who the Champion was, unless Marca knew and wasn't telling, which seemed unlikely. Dippet, for his part, had in his mind an image of a different building, a place with a high ceiling and light streaming in; it looked like it might be a Cathedral, though it probably wasn't. It had all manner of important looking magical folk in. Whatever it was, it was clearly somehow related to the Potions Championship or at least Dippet's attitude towards such, but it wasn't telling him anything about the Hogwarts Champion.

Nor did Slughorn's mind yield any clear answers. His mind was flitting between multiple Potioneers from various years and Houses. In the category of second-years, his mind roamed to the logical choices from their own class (Tom, Marca, and Jana) and from the other class, Ravenclaw's Elvira Highcastle. Amongst the older students in Slughorn's mind, none were people that Tom knew, aside from a girl Tom recognized as Felicity Valentine, a Chaser on the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. Some of the others were Slytherins and Ravenclaws that Tom knew by sight, but not by name or qualities. If only Slughorn would concentrate on the actual Champion, rather than the obvious contenders to the throne, he would know already. Instead, he'd have to wait a little longer, as the other heads of Houses proved fruitless one way or another. Dumbledore's mind was impenetrable as ever; Vassy's confirmed at least that the Champion was not Ravenclaw, as she seemed quite put about that behind her fixed smile, and Diggory's mind was already looking forward to the feast and planning to later catch up with teachers from the other schools.

Dippet produced a set of envelopes that had been stacked on the teachers' table. He opened the first one, and read it, announcing:

"From France, and the Beauxbatons Academy... François Flamme!"

A moment later and to initially scattered applause, a blue-robed boy perhaps a year or two older than Tom arrived in the Great Hall, appearing out of nowhere and looking a little unsteady on his feet. Disoriented, he looked around, to some laughs from a couple of Hogwarts students. Once he had been directed to wait in a spot in front of the staff table, however, Dippet continued:

"Yes, it can be a bit thrilling, traveling by Portkey, can't it? Anyway, onwards we must go, the next Champion is... From the Caribbean Islands and Obiuduhu School of Sorcery, Bobby Tutu!"

It was a slightly longer wait this time, before an older boy, black-skinned and with hair reminiscent of a much messier version Belinda's tight snake-like locks, appeared in turn in the Great Hall. He was clearly much more at ease with the transport method, and arrived with comfortable poise. As he took his place in front of the staff table, Tom wondered if the teeth visible in his happy grin were really so much whiter than everyone else's, or if it was just the contrast.

"From China and the Wūxīng School of Magic, they've done it again, I can't read this, Laurie, would you...." - Dippet trailed off.

“Yú Qiáng Tāo!” called out Professor Mipsum, upon reading the name. A twisting vortex later, a Chinese boy arrived in red and gold robes. Tom wondered if the other schools had Houses too, and if these robe colours meant something.

“From Brazil, and Marajovelho School of Magical Arts... Vinícius Oliveira!”

An appropriately olive-skinned student, well-developed in musculature and ostensibly the oldest yet to appear, arrived. He looked a little uncertain and out of place, but was swiftly directed to a spot to the side of the Chinese boy, and stood surveying the sea of Hogwarts students ahead of him, occasionally glancing at his fellow Champions.

“From the Soviet Union and Koldovstvoretz School... Anastasia Dimi...triy...evna Drago...mirova!” called Dippet, looking pleased with himself to have successfully soldiered on to the end of that name. Almost immediately, the first female Champion arrived, tall and athletic in appearance. She glanced around her, and took her place upon direction without hesitation. She did not look at her fellow competitors, but her eyes roved over the Hogwarts crowd.

“From Japan and Mahōtokoro, hang on, I can read this one... Saito Sumiko!”

Tom was expecting this to be a boy's name, but it was a second girl who arrived, looking like the youngest Champion yet, surely a first-year or young-looking second year. Or perhaps they had a different school system in Japan, and started at a different age. In any case, with a swish of robes and a few dance-like steps, she swiftly joined the line of Champions.

“From Argentina and Yecamojón School of Magic... Agustina Torres!”

Looking not the slightest bit disoriented by her apparition by Portkey, a raven-haired and olive-skinned girl appeared, looking immediately confident and at ease, before striding over to a gap in the line of Champions, as though she already had considered where to go.

“And finally, from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry”, said Dippet, “Jana Teires!”

Chapter Eight

Hyggelixir

Amid much noise, half the school tried to turn to look at Jana, but, not knowing exactly where she was, this resulted in much of the Great Hall now standing up, blocking the view even further for those behind them. Of course, almost everyone except the new first-years knew who she was after her various Quidditch escapades last year. But she was rather short, even with her hair, and right now was probably trying to be even shorter, since she certainly hadn't emerged yet to take her place with the other Champions, and Tom couldn't see her, for all the mass of bodies in the Hall between them.

"Jana Teires, please come forth and take your place", said Dippet over the din, "and everyone else, please be seated, and let Miss Teires pass".

The sea of heads dropped such that most were almost, but not quite, back in their seats. Give her a broom, thought Tom, and she'd be doing aerial acrobatics by now. Or even a wand and a direct adversary, and she'd be back in her element. But right now, on foot and unassailed, Jana seemed to have lost any grace that she might otherwise possess, and stumbled slightly as she left her place to head towards the front of the Hall.

Approaching the other Champions, she hesitated slightly, clearly unsure as to where exactly to go. She looked to Dumbledore, who smiled at her cheerfully and completely unhelpfully. It was Merrythought who rescued her by directing her to a completely arbitrary position, next to the nearby Caribbean Champion, who shot her a wink and a friendly smile. She smiled weakly in return.

"So, now we have our eight Champions", said Dippet, "And let us all make them very welcome while they are here with us. The Champions from the other schools will be joining us for the tasks, of course, and a number of related social events over the course of the year".

The minds around Tom became momentarily loud enough that he noticed the thoughts without trying; it was obvious that the notion of "social events" captured their imaginations rather more than it had captured his.

Nevertheless, to say that Slytherin House were disappointed that the Hogwarts Champion would not be one of their own would be some measure of an understatement. Anger and resentment seemed quite rife, especially after the amount of effort many had put in, not to mention the general atmosphere of Slytherin can-do attitude. Even as they ate and exchanged commentaries on the choice, Belinda was now twirling a knife in her fingers and periodically stabbing the table. Tom did not need to look into her mind to know what was there.

Marca, meanwhile, seemed quite calm, and was stroking her wand thoughtfully, completely ignoring the food though. Slughorn was studiously avoiding everyone's gaze, but when his eyes did flicker over to the Slytherin table from time to time, it was with a distinct note of "It wasn't my fault!" - it was clear that he either had not voted for Jana, or else had been in some manner coerced or cajoled into doing so.

Even back in the Slytherin Common Room and dormitories that evening, rancour persisted.

“A Gryffindor! Seriously, can you believe it?! But Gryffindors are morons... Morons!”, said Tiernan as they retired to bed.

This perception seemed to be widely shared, despite it being common knowledge in their year that for all any faults Jana might have, she was a dab hand at Potions, and far better than most of them.

“Good morning, everyone”, said Dumbledore, when they had arrived to their Transfiguration lesson the following day. “After our little catch-up sessions of late, refreshing all that which we’ve forgotten over the course of such a delightful summer, we’re now ready to move on to something a little bit new”

Disliked as Dumbledore might be, by Tom at the very least, not to mention certain other Slytherins who felt that he was a meddling old fool who favoured his own House disproportionately, new things were a good prospect.

“By now we’re quite comfortable, of course, turning small and simple animals into objects that share some of their qualities, and in the cases of the smallest and simplest of those, back into their original forms, to carry on with their lives quite unperturbed by the temporary inconvenience of having been turned into some artifact.”

This was perhaps a slight exaggeration on his part; many students were still failing to effect complete transformations. Tom was not about to challenge him on this however, as he himself had been doing quite well, and was more than ready to progress onwards.

“So today we will be advancing to the Transfiguration of inanimate objects into animals. We will be starting simple again, but be warned: it is far trickier to breathe even a semblance of life into something that has never so much as crept, crawled, or scurried before, than it is to bind a living thing into a single solid form”

Dumbledore obviously hadn’t seen Tom and Marca’s dancing pumpkins from last year’s Charms exam. Or did he mean something different by “a semblance of life”? The dancing pumpkins had not been animals, so perhaps they wouldn’t qualify by Dumbledore’s definition? But then again, if it was a mere matter of “semblance”, then surely the debate could only be about the extent of the semblance, not so much any actual, real, life.

Today however it seemed that the “semblance of life” was merely Transfiguring tiny twigs into stick insects, little walking things that didn’t look much different than when they had started. Tom wondered at how to make his more exciting, so he Charmed it up in size a bit with an Engorgement Charm, and then gave it a face by combining the principles of growing living wood, which they had studied previously, with some of his own experiments in Elemental control. He didn’t worry about making it look pretty, and was quite pleased with the hobgoblin-like face he’d produced. He was just starting to work on giving it wings, harking back to some of their work with bats the previous year, when Dumbledore’s voice startled him from behind:

“Having fun there, Tom?”

Tom turned around in surprise.

“Yes Sir”, he replied, honestly enough, though even he wouldn’t have expected that answer; after all, this was not generally his favourite class.

“You are quite gifted at Transfiguration”, said Dumbledore, “So I would have thought you’d also want to be extra careful, in light of what I have said many times about the dangers of straying from the curriculum I set for you”

“It’s just a stick insect, Sir”, said Tom, defensively.

“I think, Tom, it is an eater of stick insects”, said Dumbledore, with a nod to Tom’s creation. Tom turned back to look at it, and indeed, it had now crunched its way through the majority of Tiernan’s stick insect. Tiernan was standing back from it warily. Dumbledore let Tom take in the scene for a moment, before vanishing the stick insect eater.

“Ten points... will be taken from Slytherin”, he concluded, leaving Tom - and Tiernan, for that matter - with neither stick insect eater, stick insect, nor even a stick.

Tom could have multiplied someone else’s twig and started again, but he had become quite disillusioned by the class now, and the lesson was nearly at an end anyway, so he contented himself with glumly watching the proceedings at the other tables, and exchanging mutterances with Tiernan, who for his part registered his support, and that he thought it had been brilliant. Oh well, onto a better lesson.

In the Potions classroom, Slughorn was soon doing his best at disaster management, in the category of appeasing Slytherins while not alienating the new Hogwarts Champion.

“I’ll not deny, I would have preferred one of my own House to go through of course, but as it is, we’ll all be looking to you to represent our school, so no pressure eh, Teires?”

“Thank you, Sir”, said Jana, looking like she wanted to hide behind her cauldron.

“Sir?”, said Abraxas, not usually one for speaking up in lessons.

“Yes, Malfoy?”, asked Slughorn, though it seemed he might already know where the line of questioning would be going.

“If you wanted a Slytherin to be chosen, couldn’t you have persuaded the other teachers in the Conclave? I mean, you are the Potions Master”

“My dear boy, I am but a humble academic, and only one member of the Conclave. While my opinions may be respected, I’m not the only one to hold views on the matter, and I cannot honestly claim that Miss Teires is anything but a good choice”

“But Sir...” began Belinda, before being cut short immediately by Slughorn.

“But nothing, Jabez. You’re in no position to complain about the Hogwarts Champion coming from another House when you yourself rendered unusable no fewer than three cauldrons last year, not to mention the catastrophic voodoo noodle incident in the Common Room not two weeks ago. If young Castor Devine and the others hadn’t received prompt attention from Healer Tegner... No, Miss Jabez”, he added, showing clear signs of annoyance now, “You would do well to take a leaf out of Miss Teires’ book and actually pay attention in Potions classes!”

A moment’s silence fell over the class, and Slughorn took a deep breath.

“Now”, he said, “Today we’re going to be brewing a potion we could probably all use by now, Hyggelixir. Can anyone tell me the function of this potion? Come on now, don’t be shy, House Points for the correct answer”

Of the various hands usually the first to rise, Tom’s and Jana’s went up; it would seem that Marca didn’t know this one. Jana, now that he checked, knew it from home; it

was a recipe included in Marte Boney's Book of Household Potions, of which Tom also had a copy, having received it as part of a Christmas present from Jana last year. He, for his part, had rather skimmed over this potion and barely remembered anything about it.

"Yes, Mr. Riddle?", said Slughorn, hopefully.

"It makes cosiness, homeliness, a warm relaxed feeling of happiness, and.... and togetherness when taken by groups together" said Tom, for once taking the answer from Jana's mind rather than Slughorn's.

"Right you are, Riddle. Ten points for Slytherin", said Slughorn, with a smile.

Tom returned the smile, though the Slytherins at large still seemed more than a little conflicted after Slughorn's recent tirade, seemingly blaming them for his inability to get a Slytherin Champion to represent Hogwarts.

"The recipe is up at the front", said Slughorn, "As you won't find this one in your books... Or rather, not in your schoolbooks", he added, with a meaningful look to Jana. Clearly, he had dug out his copy of her great-aunt's book, that he had previously mentioned having received as a birthday present, or was it a Christmas present, many years ago, from... the publisher, was it? Anyway, he had a copy. He waved his wand, and indeed the recipe appeared at the front. Jana frowned at it for a moment in some semblance of confusion, but dismissed the thought before Tom could catch what it was.

"Now, as ever, some of these ingredients are quite standard: Tortoiseshell powder, Essence of Poppyhead, Bedbug syrup, Mistletoe berries, Honeybees, cinnamon sticks. Some are not so standard, and can be collected at the front, so everyone come and get one Singing Sweet Potato per pair, and one Magnatum truffle per pair. Be very careful with your truffle, as Professor Diggory found these for us, but we only have so many".

There was a scraping of chairs as everyone got up to try to get the best-looking ingredients.

No sooner had Emlyn picked up his Magnatum truffle than he had dropped it again as though it had burned him. Belinda caught it as it fell, with a grasp more delicate than Tom would have expected of her, but giving Emlyn a more than exasperated look. This latter, for his part, looked unreasonably horrorstricken. Belinda made her way back to their workbench, Emlyn hung behind for a moment, contemplating his hands. They didn't seem to have anything wrong with them. He went to wash them before assessing whether Belinda had also acquired a Singing Sweet Potato, which she had, so he rejoined her. She rolled her eyes and otherwise ignored him for the moment.

"These alright, Tom?", asked Tiernan, of the ingredients he had procured.

"Should be", said Tom, though really he had no idea what would be ideal in this potion. True to its name, the Singing Sweet Potato was issuing forth a faint "oooooooooooooooooooo" sound. Tom put it to his ear, the better to hear it. He put it back down, and wandered to the next section of bench. He picked up Antonin's potato, and put that to his ear. "Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee". Hmm, different tones, or notes, or whatever this thing was called. He wondered whether they had different properties relevant to the potion, according to their sound. Antonin looked at him expectantly.

"Just curious", said Tom with a smile, and handed it back to him.

Soon, the Singing Sweet Potatoes were singing no more, and instead were boiling merrily in the cauldrons. There was a fair amount of time before the next ingredient to be added, and that was only a teaspoon of Tortoiseshell powder, and like many of Slughorn's lessons, this lull in activity became an opportunity for chatter. A number of the Slytherins were still somewhat mutinous, but more were coming around to the fact that maybe it hadn't been Slughorn's fault after all.

"Tom, do you think that..." began Tiernan, but Tom held up a finger to shush him. Tiernan fell obediently silent as promptly as if Tom had cast a Silencing Charm. Tom was listening to Jana telling Valerie about adjustments that had been made to the potion in the revised edition of the book.

"...it really makes a difference grating one half of the truffle super-finely, to melt in straight away, and the other half roughly, so it melts in slowly. And this with the cinnamon stick, using it to stir 21 times, in the later edition it says do that spiralling inwards; that way it makes an Aulan vortex"

"An owl and what?"

"An Aulan vortex, it's just a fancy way of saying that all the good stuff circulates properly, and it's kind of like the effect of the potion really. There was this time when..." Tom stopped listening as Jana descended into a cheery but boring anecdote of no obvious value.

"She was talking about the updated version of this potion", said Tom, to Tiernan.

"Right, so..." replied Tiernan, trailing off, clearly unsure as to why the updated version of the potion was something Tom cared to hear about.

"So, we can produce a better potion than the standard recipe", said Tom.

"What use is that?", asked Tiernan, "The Hogwarts Champion has already been chosen. I mean, I understood the supreme effort the last few lessons, the need to impress, but shouldn't we just relax a bit now?"

"You were Sorted into the House of great ambition", said Tom. "Why are you now content to settle for being mediocre?"

"I'm not, I'm just... Being down-to-earth about it, I mean, what's in it for us? It's just a stupid Hug Elixir"

"Hyggelixir, Tiernan", corrected Tom.

"That's what I said"

"Excuse me", interrupted Marca. They both turned to look at her. "I do not wish to interrupt your... squabble, is that the correct word? The word I want is like an argument but small and silly, like an old married pair... But anyway, the timer has run out, so if you care for points for Slytherin, I recommend to add the Tortoiseshell powder now"

"Thank you, Marca, where would we be without you", said Tom acidly, adding the Tortoiseshell powder all the same.

Tiernan rolled his eyes and smiled slightly.

"Anyway", said Tom, once the potion was ready to be left alone for a short while again, "About this potion and doing it better... Being better is rather a good habit to have, regardless of the endeavour. Especially when others are watching" - here he gave a nod in

the direction of Slughorn, who was in fact not watching - "But even when it's just a matter of practice".

"Well, if we can make it better than Marca's, I'm all for that", said Tiernan with a smile.

"That's more like it", said Tom.

Soon after carefully adding the juice of two mistletoe berries, he was stirring in the Bedbug syrup with the cinnamon stick, spiralling inwards as Jana had suggested. There was no written instruction regards going clockwise or anti-clockwise, so Tom just copied Jana and went clockwise, contrary to what he would have guessed.

"And now the bee", said Jana on the workbench behind, perhaps to Valerie or perhaps to nobody in particular. Tiernan, on cue, picked up theirs very carefully and looked expectantly at Tom.

"Ready to finish up are you?", said Slughorn eagerly, appearing to their workbench.

"Yes, Sir", said Tom, with a nod to Tiernan, who dropped the bee into the centre of the potion. Although the bee was dead, there was a moment's buzzing sound anyway, and the bee vanished. The potion gave off a golden glow for a moment, then subsided back to its normal colour.

"Excellent", said Slughorn, "Brilliant work. Ten points for Slytherin there"

Tom and Tiernan were taking a moment to bask in their glory when Slughorn said to Jana behind them, "And what are you doing there, Miss Teires?"

Tom turned, and saw Jana shielding her bee with her hands, as it lay on their workbench.

"Final touches, Sir", said Jana.

"Well, may I see?", asked Slughorn, clearly not in a tone that intended to take 'no' for an answer.

"Yep, just don't breathe on it, please, Sir", said Jana, now bent very close to it with a pair of tweezers and a scalpel.

"Are you adding the bee, or dissecting it?" asked Slughorn.

"Just the bee's knees, Sir", said Jana, looking up from it again. "Trust me"

Slughorn looked highly skeptical, but watched and waited. Jana finished her delicate work, and picked up the now disembodied knees with the tip of her wand, dropping them into the centre of the potion. It shone with a golden glow like Tom and Tiernan's had done, and Marca and Antonin's at the next place along, but unlike those potions, the glow did not instantly subside completely, but rather lingered; slightly diminished from its initial brightness, but still clearly extant nevertheless.

"Twenty points for Gryffindor", said Slughorn, slowly and quietly.

Tom wished he had waited to copy her, before allowing Tiernan to add the bee, but then, even if he had done so, the copying would have been obvious. He needed to get special lessons or something. His mind flashed through various possibilities, but could not settle on anything that seemed likely to be better than just amassing tips from Jana; after all, even Slughorn had not known or guessed at this latter modification. He felt a surge of hatred about this inadequacy, but there didn't appear to be any quick or even reliable

method of plugging the holes in his knowledge of potioning, where those holes were ostensibly not even mentioned in their books.

Still, at least he was better than *almost* everyone at potions, and the best at many other things. Duelling, Defence Against the Dark Arts (apart from this term's Hellish start, in which he was floundering in the six-week Patronus class, and now looked dearly forwards to the end of it so they could do stuff he was good at again), Transfiguration even saw him as a top student, however much he and the teacher might dislike each other; his Charms were second to none in their classes, and that was even with Highcastle competing for the title. Tom liked to overlook Herbology, but his knowledge of, say, History of Magic was now starting to put Pureblood students to shame. He had so far been quickest off the mark in collecting House Points in Alchemy classes, and his natural talents gave him a serious edge in Glyphs and Tongues. Divination remained as yet a degree of an unknown quantity, ironically enough, but Tom was sure he'd be able to take it by storm if it had any merit.

Yes, he had some catching up to do, he told himself as he and the others of the class decanted Hyggelixir into flasks, pouring a small glass each to sample, but he was still better than the general student body.

Chapter Nine

Fears to the Forefront

So far, most of the Defence Against the Dark Arts class had, completely in accordance with Professor Merrythought's initial prediction, failed to produce a Patronus of any great substance. This was not to say that there had been no successes at all; in fact, there had: Highcastle had all but perfected the production of a Patronus in the form of a great bird of some description, something eagle-like in any case, and fellow Ravenclaw Enid Albertstone had by the end of the course a fairly good success rate in producing a recognizable gorilla-shaped Patronus, almost comical next to his own rather less imposing form. Slytherin's only fully corporeal Patronus produced so far had been Marca's, a glimmering and majestic wolf.

About half the rest of the students, in turn, had been able to at least semi-reliably produce a more abstract shield-form Patronus. Tom had initially been merely annoyed to not be able to do this, but this sentiment was compounded with a more practical concern when he learned that some of the functions of a Patronus, such as repelling Dementors and Lethifolds, could not be reproduced by other means such as more standard Shield Charms. This made the adequate production of a Patronus a more pressing matter than it otherwise might be. Still, for now he'd rather quit making a fool of himself in class, and go back to working on it purely in solitude.

To this end, he was pleased when Professor Merrythought confirmed that their six week Patronus course was now at an end, urged them to continue working on them in their own time (as Tom would in any case), and informed them of the next area of study:

"Boggarts", said Professor Merrythought, "Are Dark Creatures that are not usually very harmful in and of themselves, but can nevertheless cause serious problems for the unprepared Witch or Wizard facing one. That is why you are now going to *become* prepared. First things first, who can tell me the fundamental attributes of a Boggart?"

Various hands went up. Merrythought chose Tom's.

"It's a creature that manifests itself as whatever the person it's confronting fears the most. As for classification, it's an amortal non-being"

"Good. Precisely. Ten points for Slytherin. Now, if your greatest fear is of something physical, the Boggart will take that form. If your greatest fear is more of an abstract idea or concept, then the Boggart will take some form representing that and presenting it to you in a manner that will be disturbing to you"

There had been a conversation in the Slytherin Common Room way back last year, when the students had talked about what their Boggarty fears either were or might be, depending on whether they had encountered a Boggart or not hitherto. Tom, for his part, had no idea then, and still no idea now. Nevertheless, it seemed he would find out soon; it would be very unlike Merrythought to teach them about a thing that she could reasonably physically inflict upon them without actually doing so.

"When fear is one's enemy, one of the greatest weapons in one's arsenal against it is good humour, and that is precisely what we will be employing here".

Tom was a little wary about this. He had many talents, but he was not renowned for his sense of humour.

"You are going to meet a Boggart today. When the Boggart takes its form, you must vividly imagine something amusing, that is connected enough to the feared thing in theme, insofar as it must be relevant enough to take hold, and become part of the Boggart's form. If you can trick the Boggart into shifting its form from frightful to funny, most of the battle is won. We don't have to do all of this purely in our minds - although that is the most important battleground - as we also have the Charm, "*Riddikulus*", to assist us.

Here, Merrythought spelled, as many teachers customarily did, the incantation onto a blackboard at the front of the class.

“I’d like you all to take a moment to reflect on what your worst fear is, how that could possibly be represented by a Boggart, and how you could in turn make it funny. Whatever it is you need to add to the scene or change about the scene, that’s what you need to hold in your mind when you say the incantation”

Tom’s mind raced, but wasn’t going anywhere; he was completely at a loss on this one, and at this rate would have to face the Boggart completely unprepared, and make something up on the spur of the moment. Still, he wasn’t bad at improvising, he thought. He’d be alright.

“The brighter amongst you”, said Merrythought, momentarily making eye-contact with Tom and a few other students, “May already have noticed that if you are all going to be facing a Boggart in this class - and you are - that this will also be exposing your greatest fears to each other”

Tom had in fact *not* noticed this. Having not been able to identify a fear, he naturally had had no reason to be concerned about what others might know about it, whatever it might be. And whatever it was, it clearly couldn’t be anything important, or else he’d be aware of it already.

“However, I’m not one to expect things of my students that I would not demand of myself, so I shall go first, and you will see how a fear can be addressed and tackled, and need not be kept locked away like a Boggart - hopefully this way you will come to understand that fear itself is not a thing to be feared, but rather something to act upon”. Tom’s mind took a moment to conceive of what could possibly frighten a great Witch like Professor Galatea Merrythought, Order of Merlin, Second Class. He hit upon the idea that it must be something quite terrific indeed, and immediately sought out the answer from her mind, impatient to wait for the Boggart itself.

Strangely, the only momentary image he got from her mind was clearly of Hector Fawley, the Minister for Magic. That was quite unfathomable indeed; he had not seemed very imposing at all last year, when Tom had overheard him practically begging Dumbledore for help with regard to Grindelwald, and the Daily Prophet did not exactly paint him as a tyrant.

“My greatest fear” she began slowly, “...is that idiotic notions of the inferiority of the female sex will cause harm to me and others in the same boat, that is to say, Witches at large”, she said through gritted teeth, clearly seething beneath an almost calm exterior. “This is an unfortunate fear, because it’s a fear I see actualized and realized regrettably more often than I encounter Boggarts.”

Tom wasn’t so sure about this; Wizards and Witches seemed to occupy more or less equal status in Wizarding society; granted it was called “Wizarding”, and not “Witching”, but that was just a word, no? Even this school - founded by two Witches and two Wizards - was called Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, in that order, not the other way around. And Merrythought herself was well-respected. She might not be a Head of House, that was Dumbledore for her old House, though granted she’d been here longer and was surely the better teacher - but she was the Deputy Headmaster, or - Mistress, or whatever it was called... His Deputy, anyway, which was also an important position, if anything should happen to Dippet, and hopefully it would, because he wasn’t very inspirational in any matter other than his longevity. And she had an Order of Merlin, Second Class, of course, and even Second Class wasn’t bad for slaying a dragon in her nightgown when it attacked the town where she was hunting vampires and had been up for three nights straight protecting a Muggle boarding school without their knowledge.

While Tom had been thinking through this, Merrythought had caused a large wardrobe-like thing with spikes to advance and settle on the floor at the front of the class. He’d seen one of these, or perhaps this very one, in an otherwise empty dungeon room,

when he had been looking for Doxies at the start of term. Here however, it was obviously serving the function of Boggart-lair.

"A Boggart's magic works by much the same mechanism as that of dreams, or should I say nightmares", explained Merrythought. "To this end, the same idea might manifest in any one of a number of different ways. Boggarts for me have always manifested themselves as variations on a few themes, but even I don't know exactly what form this Boggart is going to take when we face off with each other. However, I can still have an idea how to arm myself. Ideas, class? Yes, Miss Bagnold?"

"Well, if the Boggart's going to represent the male end of the battle of the sexes in some fashion, then you're going to want something that underlines the opposite, or strength of Witches, or a weakness of Wizards... in some funny way?"

"Good, ten points for Ravenclaw. So now I have a few *very* simple ideas in that category, which I can hold in mind as I face the Boggart, as you'll see soon enough".

With a flick of her wand, the spiked wardrobe thing opened with a series of loud and heavy-sounding clanking noises. The room seemed to get darker, and the class waited with anticipation. They didn't have to wait for very long, but it felt like much longer. When the Boggart did emerge, it surprised even Tom by having taken the form of a half-man, half-goat creature, looking quite diabolic with its horns and blank red eyes. These did not keep Tom's attention for long, though, remarkable as they were, since his eyes were drawn to a very clear representation of masculinity, located at the point where the mostly human upper body met the two-legged but otherwise much more goat-like lower body.

"*Riddikulus!*", came the steely voice of Professor Merrythought.

At Merrythought's spell, the Boggart crumpled instantly onto its knees, as though it had been kicked savagely in the groin. It gave a low growl, and staggered back to its feet.

"*Riddikulus!*" repeated Merrythought, and the magic repeated itself as she smirked.

She had an uncomplicated sense of humour, it appeared, but it seemed to be doing the trick, noted Tom with a smile of his own.

"Alright, your turn", said Merrythought to the class. "Form a queue; don't bother pushing, you'll all get a go before it ceases to be"

As Ravenclaw Millicent Bagnold found her place at the front of the queue, the Boggart took the form of a great snake. Tom smiled, as did some of the other Slytherins. The snake began to hiss, but it was strangely like it couldn't speak, and the hisses were unintelligible. At first, Tom wondered why Bagnold would be afraid specifically of a snake with a speech impediment, but then realised that perhaps - since this was just a manifestation of Bagnold's fear - this was merely how she, not being a Parselmouth, perceived a snake's speech. It was surprisingly creepy, the snake hissing away without being able to talk.

"*Riddikulus!*", cried Bagnold. Nothing. Then the snake opened its jaws, as though to yawn, and a dozen or so smaller snakes burst out of its mouth and onto the floor.

Bagnold let out a scream of surprise, and then "*Riddikulus!*" "*Riddikulus!*", backing off now, and brandishing her wand at the smaller snakes, now making their way across the floor. It looked like she was trying to hex them aside, but for whatever reason had forgotten all about trying to make the scene funny. Tom, however, did find the scene a bit funny, and broke a smile as Bagnold stumbled into a desk, and other students were now backing off too.

"Tom?" said Tiernan, glancing at Tom momentarily before returning his gaze to the snakes. Tom could see he was clearly afraid, but also trying not to show it, and looking to Tom for guidance. He didn't know whether he should back off or not. Tom shrugged with a slight laugh.

"*If Tom thinks it's alright...*", thought Tiernan, steeling himself but no less fearful.

"Bagnold!", called Merrythought commandingly. "Stop! Think!"

“Right, Professor”, said the ashen-faced Bagnold, now with one foot on a chair and the other on a desk.

“*Riddikulus!*”

Finally, she’d made something work. The smaller snakes had now changed to party streamers, and the larger snake was looking surprised at this transformation.

“*Riddikulus!*” she incanted again, encouraged by this turn of events. The larger snake bit its tongue, and suddenly deflated like a long balloon, with a low trumpeting noise that made even Bagnold laugh. The Boggart flickered and seemed to be struggling to maintain its form.

“Good, next!” called Merrythought.

When it came eventually to Tom’s turn, he still had absolutely no clue what his fear might be, but it certainly wasn’t any of the things he’d seen so far, which while a little thrilling in some cases, hadn’t exactly frightened so much as excited him. Mentally reading himself as though for a duel, he raised his wand and stepped forwards.

The Boggart, currently looking a little the worse for wear as the father of Gerald Page, a Ravenclaw Mudblood, now merely playing dead instead of actually being dead, but errantly still wearing make-up from being an evil clown for Julia Nettleskip previously, glanced up at Tom, and seemed to be having a lot of trouble getting to his feet, before looking not yet dead but clearly dying, this time now clearly with Tom’s own features, and Tom’s old Muggle clothes.

Boggart-Tom looked up at real-Tom, its breathing laboured, rasping and wheezing heavily, slowing down, with gaps now between the breaths, increasing in length. It looked up at Tom not with the malice with which it had confronted various others, but rather with a face laden with lamentable weakness, as though pleading for something, but not finding the words. It reached forward with one hand, pitifully not quite managing to grasp the hem of real-Tom’s robes. Here was a terrible vision of him dying, contemptibly and ignominiously, soon to be forgotten as a stupid, disease-ridden Muggle.

“*Riddikulus!*”, incanted Tom, but to no more effect than many students’ shoddy first efforts. Tom however had had quite enough of being average or worse in this class. It was time to show what he was made of:

“*Avada Kedavra!*” he spat. There was a flash of green light, and for just an instant, the Boggart-Tom’s eyes seemed more alive. A second later, and the Boggart had vanished in a whirl of blackness.

“Circe’s crispy bacon, Tom”, exclaimed Emlyn. The classroom was otherwise silent. Professor Merrythought now advanced and stood between Tom and where the Boggart had been, looking momentarily at a loss for words. Tom wondered if he was not supposed to use the Killing Curse in class, even though it was clearly a non-being to be destroyed, not an actual person.

“Riddle,” she began sternly, wand in hand, but Tom and the class were distracted by the reappearance of the Boggart behind her, once again taking the same form it had with her previously.

The Killing Curse had not killed the Boggart. Maybe it somehow did not count as alive enough to die. Maybe that was the trick, Tom thought. Didn’t seem like a bad basis for existence, even though a Boggart itself must have a fairly poor quality of life - or, well, “existence”, at least - doing nothing discernibly more than living in dark places waiting to scare people. Really, thought Tom, the Boggart was practically at their beck and call. The joke was on it.

“Professor, it’s behind you!” called out Naomi Howard, clearly concerned for the teacher’s safety.

Merrythought stopped speaking, and froze still for a moment. She did not turn around. The Boggart was becoming more solid, and about to touch her any moment now.

“Oh no it isn’t”, said Merrythought.

Tom smirked at the pantomime reference. He'd seen a pantomime or two during his time at Wool's, and had generally hated it, but in this context it was funny.

"Oh yes it is", he said, going with it.

"Oh no it isn't", she said, overly dramatically.

Some of the class were tittering already.

"Oh yes it is", they chorused, half-laughing.

"Oh no it isn't", she replied.

The Boggart had now fully regained its form, but was losing it again already, and when it also went cross-eyed, most of the class lost it completely, and were all-out laughing. The Boggart vanished once again, and this time did not return.

"As we no longer have a Boggart, this class is at an end", said Merrythought measuredly, "This class is at an end. However, before you go: this is a Defence Against the Dark Arts class. Dark Magic will not be tolerated in this class unless I say so first" Well, this was promising. Maybe Dark Magic was considered alright sometimes.

Merrythought looked at Tom directly now, and continued:

"Riddle: if you ever use the Killing Curse in this castle again, expect it to be your last day here. Meanwhile, fifty House Points will be taken from Slytherin, and you will serve detention tonight. Report to my office at seven this evening. Now, get out of my classroom."

"Yes, Professor", replied Tom, as she did not seem to be in the mood for discussing it at this moment. He could work on ameliorating her perception of his act later, perhaps. He turned and left, but lingered outside. He listened to Merrythought reiterate her position on such matters, and additionally that as a class they'd better get their act together, or else she would cancel her plans of a field trip which she had intended to give them in the very near future. She then dismissed them too.

The first student out of the door was a Ravenclaw girl, Katrina Gwynt, who checked her pace mid-step upon seeing him lurking outside the classroom, but then continued on down the stairs with her friends. Slytherins soon emerged in the stream of students also, and after a smirk and a shake of the head from Abraxas, the first Slytherin out, Tom joined up with Tiernan, who clapped him on the shoulder and said only "That was something, Tom".

"Yeah, I didn't think it would be a problem to use it on a Boggart", said Tom.

They had got only partway down the staircase when Belinda caught up with them, and was clearly very appreciative of Tom's spellwork.

"Tom, that was brilliant, the other Houses are going to be terrified of you now" she enthused, prompting laughter from Tom and the other Slytherins nearby.

As it had been the last lesson of the day, and there would soon be food appearing in the Great Hall, the Slytherins swung by their House only briefly to drop off things, and quickly headed out again to dine. Talk at the table was on two clear topics; Tom's Curse, and the various classmates' Boggarts.

"Really, Emlyn... Mushrooms?"

"They disturb me, alright? They're not quite dead, not quite alive, they make everything around them die. Anyway, you can't talk, Tom... Your worst fear is of garroting gas? There's a Charm for that, you know, *apneo* sorts it out right away"

Naturally, he had completely missed the point of Tom's Boggart, but that worked for Tom. All things considered, he'd sooner people have less insight into his mind rather than more.

Still, Tom remained fairly quiet in the conversation, preferring to learn about other people's fears than to discuss his own Boggart. As someone mentioned Bagnold's Boggart, it occurred to Tom to wonder why Slughorn's Charmed snake-decorations last Christmas had been able to speak Parseltongue when Bagnold's Boggart in snake form had not. His previous assumption that it was about not being a real snake would have

applied also to Slughorn's decorations, so that was not entirely it. There was something else he was missing, and that something else might be the something that would let him into that infernal puzzle he had picked up from the Lost and Found room, that the portrait of Headmaster Black had let slip contained something powerful and could be opened with Parseltongue.

"What's up, Tom?" asked Tiernan, noting the frown. "Merrythought getting you down? Fifty points is a lot..."

"No", said Tom, shaking his head. "I'll make up the points in no time; fifty House Points, that's a few questions and a well-made potion or two" he added dismissively, "Or maybe two good nights at the duelling club now that people will actually be going to it instead of staying in their Houses and practicing potions. So no, I'm not concerned about that - though obviously I'd prefer that she not have taken them, of course"

"What then, the detention? I know she can be pretty harsh, but I think she likes you really, and..."

"No, really, I'm fine", said Tom, cutting him off. "She's not going to get me killed, is she? Whatever she's got in store, I'll weather it and see you in the morning at the latest; I really don't care".

"You're a mystery sometimes, you know, Tom?", said Tiernan, shaking his head.

Tom did not need to reply, as they were interrupted by a note arriving by owl that Tom did not recognise. The note, however, was addressed to him, and turned out to be from Professor Merrythought. Inside, it read simply:

You will now be serving your detention this evening with Professor Dumbledore, who has requested your services. You will now present yourself to his office, not mine, at 7pm promptly.

- GM

Oh, joy. Tom guessed they had met and spoken in the staff room, as neither of them were yet present in the Great Hall. Well, this was unexpected, and not an improvement. Dumbledore was seriously living up to his reputation as a meddling old man, interfering in everyone else's business.

As the clock approached seven, Tom unhappily knocked on Dumbledore's door.

Heh, thought Tom, *it's a Dumbledoor*. He smiled at the silliness, despite himself. He straightened his face immediately as the door opened, however, in an effort to appease the insufferable troublemaker and get away as soon as possible.

"Thank you for joining me, Tom", said Dumbledore, as though Tom had responded to a social invitation. "Do step inside"

Tom did so, but did not reply. He was now wishing that he had spoken to Slughorn and endeavoured to secure some manner of extraction from the detention, as Dumbledore had arranged for Jana, when this latter had received a detention from Merrythought.

"I trust you are aware of the seriousness of your actions?"

"Yes Sir, although..." Tom trailed off, unsure if he might worsen his situation.

"Although?"

"Well, in fairness, it doesn't take a lot to be more serious than the *Riddikulus* Charm, does it?"

"Unlike Boggarts, this is not a laughing matter; Tom, this is Dark Magic. Where did you learn this spell?"

"*Thurlow's Compendium of Duelling, Sir*", said Tom. "It's in the library", he added, in what he hoped was an innocent tone. While it didn't concern him too terribly if he should have his copy of the book confiscated - after all, he had all but studied it to death by now - he'd rather the library lose its copy. In fact, that'd be a bonus, as then other students wouldn't get to read it there.

Dumbledore gave him a penetrating look, and Tom wondered if Dumbledore too could read minds; an idea nearly, but perhaps not quite, capable of producing a new Boggart manifestation for him. He concentrated on the copy of the book in the library. His mind went back to seeing it there on a table, Jana studying it while waiting for him at the start of last year. No, it wasn't Jana studying it, it was him studying it. He corrected his memory.

"Very well", said Dumbledore slowly. "I believe you. I shall have a word with Madam Redmond, and I think the book will find a new home in the Restricted Section".

Tom tried not to think about Slughorn's offer to write a note for any Slytherin who wanted access to that area for something even vaguely credible. If Dumbledore was reading Tom's mind now, though, he was going a funny way about it, as he had touched his wand to his own ear - no, it was his temple - so much hair - and withdrew a silvery bluish thread of light from it, like he was drawing out some horrid worm. Tom imagined Dumbledore full of worms, and smiled very slightly. Dumbledore, for his part, now put the wormlike thing into a small bottle, which he set on his desk.

"A reminder for me", he said, with a smile.

"And now I'd like to help you see to a reminder for yourself, that actions have consequences, sometimes dire, and that we are all connected to our deeds, and those whom they affect. Remember, Tom, no man is an island..." - here he broke off, apparently lost in thought. Tom waited patiently for a moment, and then interrupted the old man's reverie.

"Professor? You wanted me to do something while I was here?", he prompted. He might not be keen on whatever Dumbledore's task for him was, but the sooner it was done, the sooner it was likely he could go.

"Yes, I want you to understand that no man is an island, except, of course, in the bathtub"

"Right, Sir", said Tom, uncertainly. "Got it. And I understand you'd like me to do something for you?".

"Yes, Tom", replied Dumbledore quietly. "You will be assisting with the preparations for the Potions Championship. As you can see, I have arranged for a great deal of glassware to be brought up, and it is all in need of polishing, which you will do, in its entirety, without using magic"

Indeed, Tom had noticed that there was a remarkable lot of glassware in the room, but had put it down to Dumbledore's obvious eccentricity. He had been thinking he might just have had to battle Doxies without a wand, something he could probably do with his eyes closed - or, indeed, in the dark, as likely had been the case for Belinda, unsuccessful as her own endeavour had been in that regard. And here he would be polishing glassware like a Muggle. What an odd punishment.

“You’ll need this”, said Dumbledore, producing a clover-green cloth from the tip of his wand and holding it out to Tom, who took it tentatively, before beginning his task without a further word.

The polishing of the glassware took some hours, and during that time, Dumbledore read, or worse, hummed to himself while pacing. Tom’s attention was caught by some of Dumbledore’s furnishings; a set of ancient-looking wooden drawers had small silver signs on them, with inscriptions. His eye was caught by them not merely because they were shiny, but because the top drawer of the pair was labelled “Top Secret”. This more than piqued Tom’s curiosity. What secrets would Dumbledore be hiding in his office, yet with a shiny sign attracting attention to it and announcing - at least thematically - what it was? He looked at the drawer below it. The lower drawer was labelled “Bottom Secret”. Tom sighed at the old man’s attempt at humour, for all he tried to appear so lofty and superior.

Tom wanted to get a chance to see what these drawers contained, but this night did not afford any such opportunity. Dumbledore remained in the room for the hours that it took Tom to finish polishing all the glassware, before informing him of his hope that Tom will get something out of seeing what becomes of all these things in the Potions Championship arena all so soon, after his well-spent hours polishing them, before digressing into how he finds it so important to reflect on all the hours he spends refining his students’ minds and polishing their own skills.

Tedious fool with his stupid metaphors. Still, Tom got to get to bed before midnight, and Dumbledore’s bizarre focus on the involvement of Tom’s polishing activities notwithstanding, it would indeed be good to see the Challenge and how the various Champions would meet it; a first real chance to see what they were all about.

Chapter Ten

The First Challenge

The Potions Championship, or at the very least the first part of it, was being held out on the Quidditch pitch, despite the October weather. Fortunately it was at least not windy or rainy, even though it also saw a remarkable lot of hats and scarves all the same.

The pitch had been divided into eight parts separated by stone walls perhaps ten feet high, and in the middle stood what looked like a large hourglass, with a resplendent many-coloured liquid pooled in the bottom section, like someone had trapped a rainbow and bottled it. The Headmaster was droning his way through some welcomes, and now seemed ready to mercifully pass on the baton to someone else:

“...And so let me introduce our commentator, who has flown in from the United States, and will be joining us for each of the Challenges, the famous Rayman Larsen” Here, there was much applause and cheering. Whatever Rayman Larsen was famous for, that fame clearly extended to here in Britain, too. Tom added a lukewarm contribution to the applause, starting late and finishing early.

“Thank you, Armando”, came an American voice, magically amplified the same as Dippet’s had been. Tom wondered if they actually knew each other, or if the Wizard simply liked to give the impression of being on familiar terms with everyone. “It’s great to be here, even though it’s even chillier here than back in Illinois, and let me tell you something, I wouldn’t have believed that before I came out here today”

He still had everyone’s attention, and even attracted a few titters of laughter through the crowd, but Tom could scarcely believe he had travelled all this way to banter about the weather.

“Now today we have a fine selection of young Witches and Wizards, four of each, I’m given to understand, and if I were a betting man I’d be hard-pressed to know where to put my money. So let’s hear it for....”

He announced the Champions and their schools, again, and again they received applause; in Jana’s case loud cheers too, being as the in-person audience was chiefly Hogwarts students, Hogwarts staff, and general Hogwarts hangers-on (parents, perhaps, some Witches and Wizards from Hogsmeade, and a few who had travelled up from other parts of the country). It sounded like most of the Hogwarts throng had got over the surprise of a young Gryffindor Mudblood being selected, and were now keen to simply support their own Champion, for the glory of Hogwarts, the school that they presumably all wanted to see come out as best.

Belinda seemed to have progressed to the stage of being conflicted on the topic; she clearly could not bring herself to cheer for Jana, but clearly also still wanted to support Hogwarts, despite the school’s Conclave having made, in her opinion, an insane decision.

Tiernan, like most of the Slytherins, did not cheer as such, but he was clearly on the more *cheerful* end of things nevertheless, even voicing a “Woohoo”, though he did this at no more than his normal speaking voice, and with a tone heavy in irony, for all this was belied by a resigned smile regardless.

Marca's lips didn't so much as part, but her applause - socially obligatory for all Champions - quickened upon Jana's name being called out. Her chin held stoically high, she had clearly weighed up the situation and decided that despite her misgivings, she would at least publicly support the Hogwarts Champion.

Abraxas' applause on the other hand slowed down to a heavy slow-clap, looking wearied, and making a point of showing the attitude that made clear his support out of obligation as opposed to any special personal regard. His thoughts were clear:

Well, since they went and chose you, you'd better bloody come through this. To think this is what we've come to, cheering for a Mudblood Gryffindor.

Antonin, on the other hand, had taken on Abraxas's usual role, that of the bored spectator. He didn't seem to be even paying attention to the names now, and was just applauding mechanically on cue.

Jana, down in the arena, was of course used to receiving attention, applause, and cheers now, since she was habitually greeted by such when flying out onto the Quidditch pitch, not to mention in all likelihood when returning to Gryffindor Tower thereafter.

Nevertheless, she didn't seem to know what to do with her hands, which were normally on her broomstick. She made an awkward wave, which did not inspire confidence.

"And today they're going to show us what they're made of", continued Larsen, "They've been given the morning's notice of what they're going to have to do here, and have each had the opportunity to request up to three potions ingredients that are not in the standard stores that have been provided for the challenge - and the first challenge is, that they must, before the timer runs out, produce *something nice*"

Murmuring spread out through the crowd, and Larsen addressed it immediately:

"I know what you're thinking: Something nice? That could be anything, right? And maybe it could, but our judges will be looking for both excellence and creativity, and let me tell you, our Champions are going to have extra fun, as we've baskets full of surprises for them, and I mean that literally, as you can see, baskets are being brought out into the arenas now"

Indeed, tall wicker baskets were now being placed into each of the Champions' segments of the arena; each was held closed with golden clasps. As they were set down, it was clear that something inside was trying to get out. It could be anything from Bouncing Bulbs to Boggarts, for all that could be told from the current view.

"Our Champions will have ninety minutes to produce the "nicest" thing they can, during which time you, dear spectators, will be able to hear me but rest assured that they on the other hand will not, so let's see them at it; Champions, you may begin... Now!"

At the sound of a bell, each of the large baskets burst open, releasing a mixed cloud of Pixies and Doxies, who seemed quite irked to have been sharing each other's company. They emerged fighting each other already. Tom's money would have been on the Doxies, as they seemed to be winning; their venomous teeth sinking into the Pixies here and there, and the Pixies, while notably larger, did not really seem to have a meaningful defence.

Perhaps on account of this, the Pixies spread out from the baskets more quickly than the Doxies did, doubtlessly to flee the painful bites and avoid joining their fallen comrades.

However, once they sighted the Champions and the Potions equipment, their own mischievous instincts took over promptly.

It was probably not only Tom who noticed every Champion immediately wish for their wand; in many cases they physically tried to draw their wands before they remembered, their hands meeting nothing in their wand-pockets, that they were not armed with such, as per the terms of the competition.

An instant later, there was quite a flurry of activity as each Champion made to swat away the Pixies, barely aware yet of the Doxies hot on their tails.

Jana, for her part, caught a Pixie in one hand, then another in her spare hand, and subsequently was surprised by a third Pixie alighting on her face and biting her nose.

Instinctively, she clasped her hands together to save her nose, but as she had a Pixie in each hand, that resulted in two things: firstly, she had now hit herself in the face with two Pixies; secondly, the speed of the motion had been sufficient to crush the middle Pixie.

With a look of mingled post-bite pain and horror at accidentally smashing a thing's body, Jana let the mortally injured Pixie slide off her, whereupon it clunked the edge of the workbench on the way down, and landed out of sight on the floor. She threw the other two Pixies away, where they were immediately assailed by Doxies, and she for her part took a moment to tend to her face.

Most of the other Champions were getting on similarly, fighting off small flying things with varying degrees of success. It was particularly entertaining to Tom to watch them flail like Muggles attacked by bees or wasps, when he himself could have dispersed them with little more than a thought. They should have chosen him as Hogwarts Champion, but then, reflected Tom, it was fun watching from here.

It became clear that the flying pests would need to be dealt with before "something nice" could be made, especially as by now the Champions were starting to pick up venomous Doxy bites, which could not be pleasant working conditions. While not fatal to humans except in very large numbers indeed, Tom recalled that Doxy venom caused obvious stinging and inflammation, at the very least. One by one, the Champions set about making what were probably the roughest and most slap-dash of Doxycide potions of their lives, except for Bobby Tutu, who appeared to be doing something entirely different.

The commentary confirmed what Tom could already tell about this - that from some of the ingredients that Tutu was selecting, it was clear that he had some sort of antidote in mind, perhaps to Doxy venom, but it wasn't anything that either he or the commentator recognised specifically.

"Well most of the Champions are clearly brewing Doxycide, and my, what a rushed effort it is, but then wouldn't you too, if you were in there?", said Larsen cheerily. "But how are they going to use it when they've made it; I don't see any spray cans in there, do you?"

Tom found his tendency to ask questions of the audience annoying, when they didn't have an easy means of reply. Perhaps it was supposed to make him an engaging speaker. However, he did raise a good point, all the same.

Yú Qiáng Tāo was the first to complete his potion, and also the first to solve this problem, but Tom missed how exactly, and Larsen seemed to also. Yú's cauldron simply exploded violently, but Yú was already taking cover under his workbench, so had clearly pre-empted this, and presumably planned it. Tom entered his mind, but Yú's mind had already moved on from the topic of the mechanism of the exploding cauldron, and onto the fact that he had now lost most of his other potions supplies, what with flying bits of metal smashing the glass-fronted cabinets and most of the crystal phials and such inside them.

"Yes, I'm certain that was deliberate", said Larsen assuredly, "Definitely wouldn't see that happen by accident in a classroom!", he chuckled. "Only thing is, I sure wouldn't like to have to produce something nice out of that wreckage now"

Perhaps this was what Dumbledore had had in mind, as though Tom would care if the glassware he had polished just got smashed. On the bright side for Yú, however, he had now covered the area in Doxycide, and his flying-pests problem was clearly no more. Jana, for her part, slung off her outer robe, and bungled it into her cauldron of Doxycide.

She pulled it back out again, dripping, and seemed quite relieved that it hadn't dissolved or anything. She swung it around her like a person shaking out a rug, and it made for quite a convincing weapon. Soon the Doxies were keeping their distance, and the Pixies were getting to be a bit less foolhardy too, though they took their chances with some mischievous endeavours whenever a gap in her mindfulness appeared.

François Flamme took a little longer to complete his potion than those two, but produced a clearly better method of distribution; whatever he did at the last minute caused his potion to billow forth clouds of steam. Like Yú, he too had to take cover beneath his workbench, hiding his face in his robes to protect it, but unlike Yú, he still had the rest of his potion ingredients after the thing finished steaming out the area with Doxycide.

Before long, the rest of the Champions had found a distribution method, either inspired by what they'd heard from the other Champions' areas, or else coming to the same conclusions in most cases, with only one new method of distribution being found, that by Vinícius Oliveira, who dowsed himself in his potion as soon as he had been able to cool it enough to do so. While the potion itself appeared black, it stained his clothes - and to a lesser extent his skin - deep purple. It had been worth it though, as the Doxies now gave him a rather wide berth, and the Pixies flew away again whenever he got close to him, presumably not too keen on the potion either.

Agustina Torres did not find a method of distribution at all, and was getting quite entertainingly bitten, before Tutu saved her.

"Yo, neighbour!" he called over the wall between them. "Here, it's da antidote. Put it on; it'll soothe da bites, and keep da others at bay". He tossed a stoppered crystal flask lightly over the wall. It landed on the soft glass and didn't break. Torres trusted him without thinking, which worked out well for her, since it really was the antidote. She splashed it over her bitten areas, and looked instantly relieved, before her thoughts turned to the task that had become secondary: producing "something nice". Somewhat immune to Doxy venom now, when occasional Doxies did make it as far as attacking her, she swatted them away with less vigour than she had hitherto, and concerned herself more with the Pixies.

Taking up a knife from the instruments rack, she slashed at the nearest, severing it

cleanly into two pieces. The parts fell down onto her workbench, and the wings gave a few more hopeless flutters before stopping. She slashed at a second, which dodged her blade, but seemed wary of approaching further. She never did get much peace from them, but they weren't succeeding in causing any trouble either, beyond their primary function in this challenge, that is to say, affecting her productivity.

As Jana progressed to the next stage of the challenge, she took the same option as Oliveira had, and stopped counterattacking Doxies and Pixies alike with her Doxycide-soaked outer robe, and poured the remainder of her now somewhat cooled potion over herself, albeit with a look of clear disgust as she did so, not to mention an obvious distaste for now being soaking wet. Doxycide might not harm people as such, but it certainly wasn't pleasant. Still, she could work now, as those critters certainly weren't coming anywhere near her. She set out making what was to Tom quite obviously Hyggelixir, though Larsen was clearly unfamiliar with the potion.

"I'm not sure what Jana Teires of Hogwarts is doing, but she sure seems to be going at it like a little potion-making machine there - love that hair by the way - and what have we got here over in the Russian corner? Looks like the lovely Anastasia Dragomirova is going for a Euphoria Elixir, perhaps not the most creative option, but definitely packs a positive punch... And that's definitely a Scintillation Solution going on down there in Saito Sumiko's corner; that could well turn out to be the toast of the town if it comes out well"

The time ticked onwards, or rather, "dripped onwards" as it was being measured by the giant water-clock in the centre of the arena, in which the luminous rainbow-hued substance slowly made its way from the bottom reservoir to the top, drop by drop.

"And there we have it, ladies and gentlemen, Champions, stop your potion-making!"

These last words had clearly been audible to the Champions also, as most of them now looked up and around them, from by their respective cauldrons. It was clear that Yú Qiáng Tāo was not pleased with his production, and Agustina Torres had to be told a second time before she actually stopped doing what she was doing, clearly not fully finished. Even then she subtly gave the cauldron another stir and left the heat on.

"The Champions' potions will now be collected to be examined by the panel of judges, and the results will be announced this evening, at the Halloween Feast, where I hope to see you all later, and I can tell you I'm pretty sure we won't need a Swelling Solution to have a swell time there. Meanwhile, a big round of applause for our Champions!"

After having warmed up in their Common Rooms, and debated in some cases quite vigorously the relative merits of the various Champions performances, the students filed into the Great Hall, where they were surprised to find that the four huge House tables were not present this evening; instead, a large number of circular tables had been added, each laden with food. Apparently this would be a standing affair, a party of sorts.

"I expect, that it is to better include our foreign guests", said Marca, as though she herself were not foreign.

Pumpkins, and in honour of the Potions Championship, cauldrons, bobbed around in the space above the tables, drifting amongst the many candles that hovered there. The usual white candles had been replaced for the evening with black and orange ones.

Peeves, rarely one to miss such an occasion, was currently busy poking a group of Hufflepuffs with spoons, though Tom didn't doubt that the troublesome spirit would find some use for the cauldrons soon enough.

The Halloween Feast was nevertheless every bit as good as last year's, not that mealtimes generally had any shortage of food, though the House Elves clearly made a special effort in the category of quality and variety for the designated Feast days, and had yet even further pulled out all and any stops in favour of impressing the guests, and showing off Hogwarts superiority. Not only had all the usual foods appeared on the tables, but additional things native to the various Champions' countries. François Flamme seemed surprisingly unappreciative of the French food furnished, while Yú Qiáng Tāo had made himself quite at home already with the wide assortment of dishes available at the table of Chinese food, albeit Tom marked him eating in a very strange fashion, holding a bowl close to his face and using small sticks like tongs to pick up food. As he saw Yú help himself to something that appeared to be comprised largely of noodles, this reminded him of the entertaining incident involving Belinda back in the Slytherin Common Room that fateful evening some weeks back, and he glanced around looking for her; he found her in a cluster of Slytherins where she had been met by Tutu.

"We don't Charm them at all", he was saying to her, "We just let 'em do their ting"

"Yeah, I kinda guessed that", replied Belinda.

"So, you not from da islands, right? You talk like a British girl"

"Yeah, I've always lived here", she said, "Well, almost always. My parents came here when they had me. They wanted me to come to Hogwarts instead of Obiuduhu", she added with a grin.

"Hey now, Obiuduhu's a good school", replied Tutu, but looked perfectly jovial about the implicit challenge.

"Maybe, but we're gonna win this one, you know", said Belinda, her own smile faltering partway through the sentence as she remembered who the Hogwarts Champion was, and becoming less keen to brag about her.

"Yeah", laughed Tutu, "Lil Jana Teires, lookin' all shy-ways, she's gonna make an eye-raise..."

"What?" asked Belinda, looking understandably unimpressed by Tutu's improvised verse.

"I like your girl; she remind me of my lil sister, but I'm still gonna bring it home for Obiuduhu, you wait and see"

Tom wasn't sure whether Belinda was more shocked that Tutu was expressing a like for Jana, or that he had referred to her as "your girl", but she opened her mouth to reply, without actually replying for once. Tom replied instead.

"You're going to 'bring it home' for Obiuduhu, or you're going to toss it over to the Argentinians?", he asked, referencing Tutu helping out Torres during the Challenge.

"Hey, we all gotta help each other in da big bad world", said Tutu, turning to Tom now.

"I'm not sure that's the point of the competition", said Tom, with a note of incredulity.

Some further mingling and dining later, Rayman Larsen's voice boomed out above everyone else's once again:

"Good evening everyone! Your attention please. Our panel of judges, as you know, has been made up of the Headmasters and Potions Masters from each school, with no school getting to have a say on their own student's performance, so there can be no accusations of dodgy play", he added with a grin.

Tom's mind raced to just how much room for corruption this still left, what with the clear options of bribery, blackmail, and general bargaining for favourable votes or scores, however they were doing it. He glanced over to Dippet, who was waiting patiently and listening to Larsen's words. It was quite clear that Dippet was no political animal. Looking over to Slughorn on the other hand, he saw the Potions Master drumming his fingers with nervous energy; this was more like it. If Slughorn was invested in it, he'd be feeling a need to make up for his poor performance in the Hogwarts Conclave, and would be at the very least pursuing the battle in the Potions Championship itself.

There was no time to delve into Slughorn's mind on the topic, however, as Larsen was already pressing on with the announcement.

"After totting up the scores, our intrepid Champions have been sorted into four tiers ready for the next Challenge. Those who did better in the first Challenge, will enjoy a slight advantage going into the second Challenge - you'll have to wait and see what that is, though! Right now, however, can I get the Champions to come join me as I call out the tiers... In the fourth tier, with the fewest total points: Agustina Torres and Yú Qiáng Tāo!" There was applause, as though coming last were cause for such, and also a loud clanging of a goblet hitting the stone floor of the Great Hall.

Yú appeared by Larsen's side, and Torres, who had evidently thrown down her goblet in anger, took a moment longer to emerge, adjusting her hair.

"Thank you, and now, in the third tier, we have: Vinícius Oliveira!"

There was more applause, and Oliveira took his place at Larsen's side, looking much happier than Yú or Torres had done.

CLANG

Agustina Torres kept back in surprise a full goblet of some kind of drink landed at her feet, spilling a red substance everywhere including over her feet, followed by the recognizable cackling of Peeves. There was a moment's silence, before Larsen pressed on as though nothing had happened.

"In the second tier..."

CLANG

Another goblet bounced off the floor near Torres' feet; she drew her wand now, and looked around wildly.

"Could something be done about the Poltergeist?" asked Larsen, somewhat impotently.

"PEEVES, get thee out, flawed creation."

The voice was not that loud, but it was deep and yet somehow chilling; it was clear that if the voice had addressed most of the students, they would have obeyed already.

"Eeep - I - Yes of course, my lord Baronship, just looking to liven up the..."

“OUT of this Great Hall”

“Sorry, when I said *liven*, I didn’t mean it as...”

“NOW”

“I’m going”

There was a moment’s hush over the Great Hall, as everyone looked around for Peeves, of whom there was still no sight, wondering if he had now gone. It was the first time that Tom had heard the Bloody Baron speak, and it still didn’t really clear up just what leverage exactly the Baron had over Peeves. Maybe it was so simple as Peeves thrived on mischief and mayhem, and the Bloody Baron seemingly had the power to turn a cheerful event into a solemn rite of silence in a few words?

“Well, aha, thank you, erm, ghost” - Larsen seemed unfamiliar with even the more well-known of the Hogwarts ghosts, but the Bloody Baron had already gone back to brooding silently, and ignored Larsen’s overture completely - “So if that’s that, let’s get back to the results of the first Challenge!”

There were some isolated attempts to laugh off the interruption, and Larsen continued:

“So, in the second tier, we have... Anastasia Dragomirova! François Flamme! Saito Sumiko! Jana Teires!”

Perhaps because they were now announcing the better Champions, or perhaps because there were now four Champions being announced at once, the applause was very loud indeed. It’s perhaps seemed louder still, on account of the dread silence that had preceded it. Larsen shook the hands of each Champion as they arrived, and as three of them were female, went also to kiss them on the cheek, an endeavour that went perfectly smoothly with Dragomirova, but then Flamme expected to be kissed on the cheek too, causing some laughter from those in the Hall not familiar with the way this custom worked amongst male Frenchmen of the same sex; it was then not clear who looked more embarrassed out of the Saito Sumiko and Jana when the time came for their handshakes and almost theatrical cheek-kisses, but they were both clearly competing.

“Yes, well done ladies and gentleman”, said Larsen with a broad smile, “And now, that leaves in the first tier, in a class of his own... Bobby Tutu!”

As Tutu took his place, he and Larsen shook hands.

“Are you gonna kiss me too?” he asked, grinning.

“I reckon we could get away without”, replied Larsen.

“Irie then, let’s risk skipping it”, said Tutu, taking his place at Larsen’s side facing the crowd, laughing.

With the exception of the serious-looking Chinese delegation and the outright unhappy Argentinian contingent, the mood of the evening continued to be bright for some while, only taking a momentary dip when Larsen was loudly talking about Tutu’s brilliance in answering the call for “something nice” by simply producing an antidote and then sharing it with his neighbour in need - this conversation resulted in Agustina Torres storming noticeably out of the Hall, albeit without throwing anything this time.

As for the rest, even the Slytherins at large seemed content with the result; Hogwarts had done well enough, but their unwanted Champion had similarly not been bathed in glory and adulation in any top position.

Chapter Eleven

Catching Up

Halloween had been a day off school for the Potions Championship, but the next day was a school day, so the celebrations did not pass ten o'clock, at which hour Larsen made a short speech and handed over to Dippet, who reiterated congratulations to the Champions, but also promoted the need to be refreshed for schoolwork, and to get a timely night's sleep.

"We can sleep at the weekend!" called out an older Gryffindor, to some laughs and some murmurs of agreement, but the brief jovial effort at rebellion accomplished nothing more than a momentary diversion of the room's attention, inadvertently giving a group of Hufflepuffs time to vanish a substantial amount of food and drink. At first Tom wondered what they were doing and why, but then he realised they were not in fact vanishing it outright as it seemed, but rather transferring it in some manner. He expected they had something like the Undetectable Extension Charm that he had in his schoolbag. Whatever their method, it appeared that the party would be continuing in the Hufflepuff Common Room.

Tom looked over to Slughorn, who was holding a glass of some amber liquid and still talking to a teacher from one of the other schools. It was clear that he wasn't rushing off to bed any time soon - or overly fussed about whether his students were here or in the Common Room, or anywhere else for that matter.

"Come on, Slytherins, wind it up", called a Slytherin Prefect, possibly Parkinson; Tom wasn't sure. "That's it, let's head down to our House; no need to slum it with the Gryffindor peasant rebellion"

"Parkinson!" - it was Professor Merrythought shooting him a stern look.

"...pleasant rebellion, I mean, those cheery Gryffindor party animals", said Parkinson, enunciating every word clearly, to achieve the dual goal of both being sure to give Merrythought no objective reason to punish him, but also to make his scathing insincerity evident nevertheless.

Soon, however, Slytherins were pouring out of the Great Hall, largely preceded by Ravenclaws and followed by the other two Houses, each heading off towards their respective abodes.

"Hey, Tom!"

Tom turned to the voice, to see Jana approaching.

"Wrong way", he said, "Gryffindor Tower's that way", he added, indicating. "What are you doing?"

"I know", said Jana, "I just didn't get chance to speak to you"

"Alright", said Tom, pausing to hear what she had to say, standing off to the side now from the main tide of students surging by them. She, in turn, looked at him expectantly for a moment, but did not say anything herself, instead looking rather like she had when her name had first been called out for the Potions Championship. "Well?", asked Tom, looking into her mind and finding only a blank. Either she had developed Marca's talent for blanking his mind-reading ability, or else her mind had actually gone blank.

“Umm... I didn’t actually... I mean, nothing specific, I just... Hello” she finished, feebly. “And hello”, she added, to Tiernan, who was hanging back, waiting for Tom.

“Lestranger, isn’t it?”

“Yep”, said Tiernan. “Tom, I’ll see you in the Common Room I guess?”

“Of course. Go.” replied Tom, with a shooing gesture. Turning back from Tiernan who now left, he saw Jana was looking happier again now.

“Do you dismiss all your friends like that?”, she asked.

“Just the ones that are hanging around for no reason, I suppose”, said Tom thoughtfully. “Which reminds me... what are you doing here?”

“I sometimes wonder that myself”, confessed Jana, “but, I don’t like to ignore my friends, so I thought I’d catch you up and say goodnight”

“You wasted all this time to say goodnight?”, asked Tom, skeptically.

“Well... yes”, said Jana. “Hey, are you taking up duelling again?”

“I never stopped”, said Tom.

“Oh... I started again last week and you weren’t there”

It was Tom’s turn to look confused for a moment, before he realised where he had been.

“Ah yes, I missed one. I... had a detention and missed an evening”

“A detention?”, asked Jana, with raised eyebrows. “What for?”

“It was in Merrythought’s class, I, well, let’s just say I used a different spell than the one she wanted, and you know what she’s like”

“Is it true then?”, asked Jana, incredulously.

“What?” replied Tom, wondering if there could be any doubt at all about Professor Merrythought’s status as a strict teacher, who was brilliant, albeit a little detention-happy at times.

“There was a rumour that you used a Killing Curse in class, but surely you’d be expelled if that were true, so...”

Tom looked around; most of the students had passed them by now. He expected some teachers would be emerging shortly.

“It was just a Boggart”

“You did use a Killing Curse? And you weren’t expelled?”

“It didn’t even work properly; it came back”

“I know Slytherins are supposed to be into Dark Magic, but...”

“We are? What’s Dark Magic, anyway, really? I set you on fire when we first met; that could kill somebody, but nobody cares about that spell - it’s just how Wizards light fires. Bludgers... Bludgers exist solely to injure people, no other purpose, but they’re not called Dark Magic. If you ask me, Dark Magic is just a name to confuse people, to put them off the powerful spells”

“With good reason, what if it rebounded? You could’ve been killed”

“Jana, you’ve read about it, haven’t you? In the back of Thurlow’s. It can’t be blocked or deflected - so it can’t rebound. In a way, it’s maybe one of the safest spells around”

“You have a funny idea of what’s safe or not”

“Well, so far, so good. I haven’t died yet, and don’t intend to. And you, how many trips to the Hospital Wing are you on now?”

“None this year”, said Jana, looking truly pleased with herself.

Tom was a little taken aback by this news, but then he realized that he hadn’t been duelling with her yet, and the Quidditch season had yet to kick off in earnest.

“Give it time”, he smirked.

“You’re as bad as Jabez. Probably right”, she sighed, “But still, thanks for the confidence”.

“Hey, I’d bet on you in the Potions Championship”, said Tom.

“Would you?”

Tom thought about this. He’d bet on her, then he’d take out her competition. He wondered who’d like to bet on it. Probably not Harry Weasley this time, not after last time, and never mind that it’d mean betting against his own House. Maybe Professor Sortsun? He’d probably also not bet against the Hogwarts Champion though, out of some ill-founded sense of loyalty. Tom reflected on what he’d have to do to eliminate the competition, in any case, without attracting attention. It wouldn’t be so easy as Belinda hobbling her fellow Slytherins; he’d have to sabotage Witches and Wizards from around the world. Well, he could always interfere directly with events in the arenas, he supposed.

He noticed Jana was still looking at him expectantly.

“Yes, I would”, he replied, with a reassuring smile.

“Probably the only Slytherin who would”, she said, but seemed happy regardless.

“Actually, Marca thought you were a credible threat”, mused Tom.

“Oh? That’s... nice of her, I suppose”

Tom neglected to mention that Marca had also suggested neutralizing said threat with a Forgetfulness Potion, which warning he had not heeded.

“Or does it mean I should watch out in duelling?”, she added, only half-joking.

“I think she’s come around to supporting you”, replied Tom, “But you should always watch out while duelling, stupid”.

“Yeah”, said Jana, frowning now in thought. “Especially with Slytherins who cast Killing Curses”

“Oh, it was just a Boggart”, said Tom. “I’m not about to use it in a duel. Merrythought would kill me”

Jana laughed.

“Maybe she’d be glad to be rid of me. Given my tendency to get injured, it often seems like she tries to keep me out of trouble. As for Boggarts, I didn’t get to face mine, as she had us line up in alphabetical order to stop everyone pushing, and the Boggart was used up before I got to it. I don’t think she likes me much... She always says I’m brave but foolish”

“Well, aren’t you?” asked Tom, thinking this was surely obvious.

“I don’t know, but Professor Dumbledore says that bravery is the better part of valour, and it’s the nature of one’s intentions that matter the most”

“Yeah, he says some funny things”, nodded Tom. “He couldn’t resist trying to dispense advice during my detention with him”

“You had a detention with him as well?”

“It was the detention from Merrythought; he arranged for me to serve it with him”

“Oh, like he did for me?”, looking strangely surprised and pleased to have such a thing in common. “You don’t know how much I appreciated that”, she said. “Or maybe you do?”, she added, inquisitively, seeming suddenly thoughtful.

“Frankly I’d have preferred the evening with Merrythought. I guess she was busy at the duelling club, so Dumbledore got his interference head on him”

“Oh, I see”, said Jana, in a tone that was in equal measure both accepting of Tom’s position, and also clearly disappointed that he did not share her mysterious ardour for serving detention with the bumbling pillar of hairy self-righteousness that was Professor Dumbledore. “I’ll bet he gave you an easier time of it, at least”, she said brightly.

“Well, I...”

“Miss Teires, what are you still doing out here? And you, Tom? Not trying to make off with our Champion, I trust?”

Speak of the Devil, and behold, his horns appear, thought Tom. Dumbledore now approached them with a look of polite curiosity that Tom had no doubt masked a desire to see him in trouble.

“Sorry, it’s my fault”, said Jana, replying before Tom had collected his thoughts, “I just wanted to say goodnight to Tom here; he wasn’t trying to make ou... I mean, off, to make off with me”.

There was a moment of silence while Jana cringed.

“Very well, now that you have surely said your goodnights, I suggest you both make off to your respective Houses” said Dumbledore, with some measure of composure. “I would have thought that especially you would be more mindful of timeliness, Jana”.

“Yes Sir”, said Jana, checking her watch as she so often did. Jana was actually pretty mindful of timeliness, thought Tom. What a stupid jibe on Dumbledore’s part. Oh well.

“Now, both of you, off, and do not let me see you out and about after hours again”

“Yes Sir”, they both chimed. Jana gave Tom a smile which he returned with just a nod, and they both made their separate ways off to their Houses.

As he went to sleep, Tom’s mind wandered over the topic of Dumbledore, and what connection he might have to Grindelwald. If only Dumbledore’s mind were so accessible as most, he’d probably already know by now. In the category of mysteries, he still had that pyramid to get into, the one the painting said contained some sort of key, it was said. Or maybe the pyramid was the key? Could it be he was going about it entirely the wrong way? And whatever the key was and however it was used, keys opened things; what was the lock?

Soon Tom was dreaming, and images of the pyramid became enlarged and distorted, to where he was brewing potions in a sunny desert, there was a snake, but he didn’t get to speak to it because of the great wave that came and washed everything aside. By morning, he remembered only dreaming something about swimming.

While much social focus had been on the Potions Championship, those on the Quidditch team certainly endeavoured to stay focussed on that, often showing up for

breakfast in Quidditch gear, after having already spent time out on the pitch. After a few instances of doing this, Gryffindor also adopted the practice, meaning there was now some degree of competition for pitch bookings. Hufflepuff, as the absolute outsider House when it came to the Quidditch Cup, mysteriously started showing up to breakfast with Gryffindor.

At their own table, of course, but at the same time, having clearly been out on the pitch together.

To an extent, Tom could see how training with another team would make sense, and make for better training. Of course, it would mean the other team knowing better about their preferred strategies, and being more familiar with their strengths and weaknesses than otherwise. Perhaps this was why nobody - to his knowledge, anyway - had approached the Slytherin team about training with them. Or then again, maybe it was because sharing a pitch with "Violent Violet" and her squad of bloodthirsty maniacs just wasn't something they wanted to do before breakfast.

Ravenclaw stood alone in not taking up morning practices, instead sticking to their more usual schedule. Then again, they didn't need to sweat about it too much; they had Ozzy Fame, and natural talent clearly counted for something. What did it matter if their Beaters could barely beat an egg, or their Chasers were often confined in their role to chasing after their opposite numbers? Yes, there was definitely something for having a strong figurehead, a name that everyone could fear and respect. After all, Ravenclaw had won the Quidditch Cup last year, largely on the strength of Fame.

This year, it seemed that Slytherin had the best all-round team (even though teamwork might still be lacking a bit - he'd have to wait and see), perhaps followed by Gryffindor if their line-up was similar to last year, and also if they could reliably keep a Seeker in the air for more than half a game.

Belinda was skimping more on her homework than ever, opting to spend her non-training evenings zooming around the Common Room chasing after a Snitch (what with the Quidditch Pitch invariably being in use by another team, on those evenings). While both she and the Snitch itself were irritating and disruptive, nobody complained in any manner more active than the occasional scowl, as they'd have not only Belinda to deal with, but also Violet Selwyn, not to mention making themselves pariahs for being anything less than supportive about something to benefit Slytherin's chances in the Cup.

When the day of the first Quidditch match of the season arrived, the turnout did not seem to have been much affected by the wind, rain, and hail. Tom wondered how the Potions Championship would cope with such weather. Perhaps some manner of greater protection from the elements would be conjured in such circumstances. Today, however, everyone simply donned their overcloaks, and in many cases also hats. After the first few hats taking to the air, a number of hat-owners took to using Temporary Sticking Charms to keep their hats in place.

For Tom's part, he wore his overcloak but had not troubled himself to wear his hat. It was not a hat that would naturally stand up to this weather, though he could have cast an Impervius Charm on it, which would surely have done the job. Rather, he had simply perhaps underestimated the elements somewhat when heading out from the cosy lair that

was Slytherin House; the weather had not seemed nearly so bad when it had been a Charmed illusory ceiling in the warmth of the Great Hall.

“Tiernan, if your hat pokes my ear again, I will turn it into a giant hermit crab”, warned Tom irritably, as they took their places in the Slytherin stand.

“Sorry; I’m trying” replied Tiernan, moving a little further away and clashing hats with Emlyn instead.

To Tom’s other side was Marca; she also bore a hat, but the difference in their heights was sufficient that the brim of her hat merely brushed against Tom’s upturned collar from time to time, which was not nearly so annoying as the ear-poking hitherto from Tiernan’s side. It was also possible that Marca was simply a little mindful of her surroundings than Tiernan.

The match was predictably one-sided. Mellifer got hit by a Bludger that didn’t unseat him but clearly injured his hand sufficiently as to further hamper his already questionable capacity as a Seeker. It was however he and not Belinda who first saw the Snitch, and the commentator noticed this before she did; a forgivable oversight perhaps on account of the weather. Once it had come to her attention, however, Belinda and all four Beaters were soon closing in on Mellifer and the as yet uncaught Snitch. A short skirmish later, Belinda had made her way through the aerial combat arena without colliding with anyone, and caught the Snitch.

Even with an extra ten points awarded to Hufflepuff for Lucretia Black hitting Kieran Thomas in the face with her bat (her only defence for this act being “the Bludger was too far away), Slytherin was off to a very good strong start in the Quidditch Cup. That evening there was a party atmosphere in Slytherin House; not that the result was especially unexpected, but Tom sensed there was some fair degree of relief, since it would have been quite embarrassing to lose not merely the first game of the season, but specifically a game against Hufflepuff who had probably the weakest Quidditch team.

There may also have simply been something in the atmosphere of being in a nice cosy warm place after the inclement weather outside. The elements could do what they would up in the air; down beneath the lake it was all the same to the denizens of Slytherin.

Slughorn spent a little time in the House Common Room, and furnished the House with copious quantities butterbeer, by way of celebration, which was a rather welcome addition to the evening’s festivities, that remained for some time after his departure.

Conversation topics ranged from match highlights retold and embellished as they went along (to include Walburga accidentally dousing Mulciber in butterbeer as she vividly recreated Lucretia’s attack on Thomas, using a bottle she thought was empty and brandishing it like a Beater’s bat), to more serious matters such as the war continuing to head this way; the magical war, that was - of course Muggle Britain was already at war, not like it felt like it here at Hogwarts, where news of it was confined to small “Muggle Affairs Correspondent” sections in the Daily Prophet, and generally not really talked about, not in Slytherin House, anyway. Maybe in some of the other Houses who had more people with Muggle families. There was some discussion of the merits of Grindelwald’s new scheme of having people wear armbands to denote their Blood Status. It seemed logical enough to

categorize people, to have them as known quantities, to know who are the reliable Purebloods and who are more likely to have Muggle interests at heart.

Then again, thought Tom, he himself was in all likelihood Halfblood. Not that he could be sure, of course, but it seemed unlikely that a Witch would give birth and die in a Muggle orphanage, of all places. Still, perhaps he could dare to hope that it was simply that some disaster had befallen her. Regardless, he was unlocking his powers at a respectable pace; he loved the magical world, and certainly would be content to burn any bridges he may have connecting him to the filthy mundane Muggles. Better yet they not exist to burn, but all in all, he knew his position whatever his Blood Status may technically be.

Even if he had Muggles in his family tree, perhaps his magical side was good enough to overcome anything else. No, not perhaps. Of course. Absolutely; of course it was.

Chapter Twelve

Forays in the Forest

“Hey, Zelyonaya, your people are invading Europe” - it was Morgan Rosier, from the year above, as he slid a newspaper over to her at the breakfast table with a laugh.

Marca took the paper, and looked at it.

“Grindelwald heads North?”, she read aloud from the headline, confused.

“No, not that”, said Rosier, “There”, he said, indicating to a smaller section headed “Muggle War”.

“Muggles? They are hardly my people”, said Marca with disdain as she read through the paragraph nevertheless. “You know, that I have nothing to do with the Muggle government, including their little excursions to Finland. Besides, this does not sound like an invasion; it is a territorial dispute”

“Yeah, but it’s Russia; you’re Russian, right?”

“Yes, but I have as much to do with this, as you”

“Don’t you think they might kick you out of the country though, if Britain backs Finland? I mean, you could be a spy”

Marca put down the newspaper and looked at him witheringly.

“Hey, what about that Dragomirova girl in the Potions Championship?” interjected Owen Morton, another third-year.

“You think she could be a spy too?”, joked Rosier.

“She can spy on me, anytime”, opined Morton. Marca was shaking her head, and appeared to have given up on them, as Rosier and Morton clinked goblets.

“Well, I’m done here”, said Tom, “are you coming?”, he added, getting up. Gathering Marca, Antonin, and Tiernan in the process, they had time to go down to Slytherin House, but nothing they needed to do there, as they knew they had a double-period practical lesson first today, the long awaited Defence Against the Dark Arts field trip. It was only to the Forbidden Forest, but still promised to be a fun morning. For now, however, they were to meet in the usual Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, to which they now ascended.

“As I’m sure you’ve all remembered, today we are going into the Forbidden Forest”, said Merrythought once all were present. “It is perhaps needless to say that any silliness, in fact anything other than serious focus and obedience, will be met with swift response and punishment the like of which you have not yet encountered. I am giving you the chance to prove yourselves a little; do not disappoint me”.

The Slytherins and Ravenclaws followed Professor Merrythought out of the castle. They didn’t dare to chat, but it was clear to Tom that he was not the only one who felt excited to be heading out to do something at least resembling battle against some of the creatures about which they had been learning. In Tom’s mind, the anticipation was perhaps similar to that of duelling, though of course what would come today would surely be more varied than that. He didn’t yet know exactly what Merrythought had in mind, however, as her thoughts were all over the place.

Leaving the castle by the main doors, they filed down towards the Forbidden Forest. There was not snow about at present, but the morning's frost lay as yet unthawed upon the castle's grounds, and the snake-like trail of students left dark damp footprints as they went.

The sky was relatively clear today, though the Forest had, as ever, almost its own climate, owing to the thick canopy of trees. As they arrived to it, the ground changed from a neat even frost-covered grassy affair, to a merely chilly forest floor decked in dead leaves, and the smell of slow decay that hung in the air like the faint mist that had not been present outside.

"I have placed a Containment Charm around the area, sealing various nasties out, and, just for you, sealing various nasties in with us".

Tom saw into her mind, and identified some rather uninspiring adversaries; two Boggarts, some Bowtruckles, a number of very large spiders, a small army of strange little potato things with legs in the ground, and Peeves, whose exact location was currently unknown, but whom Merrythought had clearly invited, and thus was probably present, ever-eager to cause mischief.

Tom, meanwhile, wanted to ask if the spiders were actually Acromantula or just regular spiders that had been Charmed up in size, but first would have to encounter such a spider to be in a position to reasonably ask about it.

"In the area I have also placed ten silver Sickles", said Merrythought, "and your job is to find them. For anyone thinking of using a Summoning Charm; don't bother - I have protected the Sickles with an Anti-Summoning Jinx".

There were some mutterings, and she continued:

"You will encounter various creatures during your search, I don't doubt, but you have already sufficient training to deal with them, or else we would not be here now. So remember that in any encounter; you do already know what to do. Draw on what we have done in lessons, and you will not need anything more than that at this time. And when I say *what we have done in lessons*, I mean the things that I have taught you. Now is not the time for experimenting with things you've read about, and Riddle, there will be no need to kill or even try to kill anything".

There were some small titters of laughter, mainly from the Slytherin part of the class, but it was obvious to Tom that he'd need to go with Merrythought's lesson plan here.

Once she gave them leave to begin, the students spread out somewhat on account of the largeness of the area that Merrythought had contained (Tom was a little curious about the nature of the barrier, should he reach it; probably like the one at the Broomstick shop in Diagon Alley, he supposed), and Tom was soon on his own. He smiled at the mist, which certainly added a chilling atmospheric feel to the place. Despite the "forbidden" nature of the forest, he'd been here twice before, but this was the first time he'd been here without a broom, and it was a little odd to be walking around on the ground, minus the option to zoom away if necessary. Not that he was afraid as such; rather he simply felt more alert than on previous occasions, by necessity.

The first creature he encountered while walking was a Boggart, laughably recognisable by taking the form of his own corpse hanging in a noose from a tree; it couldn't really be anything else, and Tom's inexplicable sense of ill-ease in its presence all

but confirmed it. Upon closer inspection, the body was in terrible condition, and, as Tom noted with disgust, crawling with maggots. He took a step back, and the corpse's eyes slowly opened, or rather the eyelids. There were no eyes, and the eyelids had been pushed open by the growing mass of maggots from within, which now began to fall out onto the ground, one by one, like little fat bloated raindrops, or perhaps tears, given that they were dropping off his face.

"Oh, piss off", said Tom, and hit it with a Blasting Curse. It was rendered asunder all too easily, producing a panicked reaction from the person now entering the section of pathway from the other direction, and being showered with the Boggart-bits. The maggots and body parts dropped down to the ground after rebounding off the Shield Charm produced by what turned out to be Naomi Howard.

Tom laughed at her shock and horror, and the Boggart crackled a couple of times and tried unsuccessfully to reassemble itself into a form more personalized for Howard, but this clued her in to it being a Boggart.

"*Riddikulus!*" she incanted, and the body parts reformed onto a barbecue. They both laughed at this, and the Boggart itself went up in smoke, and the barbecue along with it.

"A barbecue, really, Howard?", asked Tom, as the dark smoke cleared, leaving only the surrounding mist.

"Well, it worked didn't it?", she replied. "I don't know, it just came to mind on the spur of the moment as what to do with... Whatever the Hell those fleshy bits were that you produced"

"Why were you heading this way?" asked Tom, as he hadn't expected to meet anyone coming the other way.

"Containment Charm", she said. "Reached the edge, so I thought I'd head back this way and take another turning"

"Right", said Tom. "Goodbye then", he added, by way of dismissal. He didn't intend to turn around just yet, and would check up to the Containment Charm boundary himself.

As she departed one way, Tom headed off the other, smiling as he caught sight of a Sickle in the fork of a tree, being poked at by a little woody Bowtruckle with its long slender fingers. He brought the coin through the air to his own hand with his mind; apparently Merrythought's Anti-Summoning Jinx didn't apply to his own direct interactions with his mind. The Bowtruckle scampered up to a higher part of the tree, and Tom pocketed the Sickle. He turned the corner, and met a surprise that Howard presumably had not.

Tom was now face to face with an exceedingly large spider, its face, such as it was, was perhaps the same size as Tom's. Both he and the creature jerked back slightly in surprise. Tom generally found he could control animals, especially if he had eye contact, and in the present situation he had several times as much eye contact as he usually could muster with one creature. He saw his own reflection in the two largest eyes at the front, and adopted a better defensive position, his wand held above his head, but pointing at the spider. He did not want his wand-hand to be in biting range. The spider twitched, and its great fang-like mouthpiece things seemed to invite exactly that. Tom looked at the four smaller eyes near the two big ones. They looked like they were just for show - but then, maybe it was just natural to only expect two eyes to be real. He could just about see

another two eyes, far around the sides of its head, making eight in total. He wondered if it could see behind it.

"Expulso!" - the spell came automatically, and the spider, which had just made an ill-advised start towards Tom, was blasted backwards. The spider now had adopted a clearly defensive posture of its own, most of its legs drawn in close around it, and the front two legs raised, as though this could possibly parry an attack from a wand-equipped and combat-ready Wizard like Tom.

Looking at the creature, for all it could probably kill a Muggle as easily as anything, it was pretty defenceless against Tom, who smiled, as he resisted the growing urge to use the Cruciatus Curse. While Merrythought had only explicitly forbidden him to kill anything, it was clear that he really ought to avoid using so-called Dark Magic. It was strange, though, since so many spells could be used to effect harm and pain, even when they were intended for other things, and even taught in Hogwarts classrooms. The unicorn last year had learned the less pleasant side of the fire-making Charm, for instance.

Right now, the spider waited cautiously, still anticipating a further attack, merely twitching slightly. One of its fang-tipped mouth-things seemed to have been damaged by Tom's last spell, and this probably hurt, or at least gave it pause for thought.

Tom tried to enter the spider's mind, but all he could find was a simplistic will to survive and feed, nothing that told him anything useful.

"Alright", said Tom under his breath, "She can't possibly complain about... *Petrificus totalus!*"

At this, Tom had the impression that his spell had worked, but it was really hard to tell, since it wasn't exactly moving much in the first place. He needed to test it.

"Diffindo" said Tom, pointing his wand at the loose bitey thing. It was more damage than he'd hoped to inflict, but Merrythought was always telling them about making sure of their safety. The injured part fell to the floor, landing amongst the dead leaves. A clear liquid dripped after it, from the wound, landing on the severed part. Perhaps it was venom; perhaps some strange transparent blood. Either way, the spider hadn't otherwise reacted, so Tom could safely assume it was paralysed by his spell.

Tom smiled at his handiwork, and watched the dripping of the clear substance. Suddenly, a burning pain erupted in the small of his back, and then he became aware of hard hairy legs against his shoulders. He tried to turn around, but it was as though he had been hit with the Jelly-Legs Curse, and he merely fell to the floor, becoming strangely aware of the earthy smell of the dead leaves and tree roots as he hit the ground.

His wand now lay on the floor, well within his reach, but momentarily forgotten as he reached behind him instinctively but uselessly. One of his hands found the second spider's jaw, and immediately he wished it hadn't, as it too now felt like it had been hit by a Stinging Jinx, and he found himself unable to bring his arm back around to the front of him. This was not a good situation at all, thought Tom to himself, and he was about to become spider-food if he didn't get himself out of it. He clawed at the ground with the hand that was still working, but that didn't get him so much as an inch further away from the beast.

He saw his wand, and reached for it. His wand obediently completed the motion,

and found its way into his outstretched hand. He awkwardly pointed the thing behind him, unable to see his attacker.

"Arania exumai!" - It was not Tom's voice, but Professor Merrythought's. There was a white flash, and the spider landed nearby. A second flash of light later, it was bounced yet further away, along with the other spider that Tom had paralysed.

"I didn't kill anything", said Tom, or rather that is what he tried to say. It came out merely as "Didn't... kill...". Merrythought seemed to get the message all the same though.

"Yes, well done, Riddle", she said. "But you must watch your back at all times; I won't always be here to watch it for you. Now, let's sort you out"

Tom was aware of being raised up into the air, but not long after that he found himself in a dark place, so dark that he wasn't sure if his eyes were open or closed. There was no sound. He reached for his back, to probe his injury, but it was as though he had no arms, or perhaps even no body, as he could not feel anything. He tried to speak, but no words came. Was he dead? If this was Hell, it was a lot less exciting than Rev. Peabody had described it. His other senses failing him, Tom tried to reach out with his mind through the void, to see if there was any other being in this realm of darkness.

"Idiot boy", said Professor Merrythought in his mind, though it seemed like a distant memory to him. "How many times I've told them: be aware of your surroundings".

So, Merrythought was criticising him in what might be the afterlife. Maybe this was Hell after all, and he'd have to put up with an eternity of criticism without being able to do anything about it.

Hogwarts. He became aware of Hogwarts Castle. Maybe he'd be able to return as a ghost. He tried to focus on the castle, to make it more solid and real in his mind. He wanted to touch its stones, to cling on to it. Its walls... Its stairs, so many stairs. Up and up and up. No, he didn't want to go too far up, he wanted to stay. His mind fumbled feverishly around it, reaching out for something, anything, to hang on to.

The Hospital Wing. He was reminded of the Hospital Wing for some reason; perhaps his body was being taken there? Perhaps he could be saved. His Unicorn Blood! If he could just get Tegner to find it and administer it, then it would restore him to full life. No, to half-life, and not this non-life in the void. Or was this the half-life? Had he drunk the Unicorn Blood already and forgotten it? Surely not. He reached out for it with his mind, but could not grasp onto it. He focussed on the Hospital Wing, and found Tegner. Maybe Tegner could be made to do his will.

Tom fixed his mind on Tegner's as best he could, and found he was able to see what Tegner was seeing. His body now lay in the Hospital Wing, his skin white, his face like a mask, frozen in a stupid expression. Tom felt a burning surge of rage at the ignominy of the situation, and through Tegner's eyes he saw a crackle of energy spark from the tip of his wand, still held tightly fast in his dead fingers, above his head. He was still connected to his wand! It still obeyed him! Tegner, or Tom through Tegner; it was hard to tell which, reached out for it, but was unable to take it easily from his deathly grasp. He'd have to break the fingers, but either he or Tegner, whoever was in control of this experience, could (or at least would) not quite actually do this, and left the wand in place.

Drawing instead his own wand, Tegner-Tom flipped the body around so that it lay face-down, and then took off the outer robe, and carefully lifted up the bloodstained shirt, to reveal the injury to the back. It didn't look nearly so bad as it had felt; two large puncture wounds, now surrounded by raised mounts like giant bee-stings.

"I put a Freezing Charm on the wounds" said Merrythought, whose presence Tom had forgotten, "To stop them from getting worse while I got him to you".

Perhaps he was still alive, thought Tom, with what might have been a quickening of the heart - if he was still connected to his heart at all.

"Good job", commended Tegner. Tom had not anticipated these words, and so it seemed he was just a passenger of sorts after all. A strange experience. "Just a spider, you say, not an Acromantula?", queried Tegner.

"Just a spider", confirmed Merrythought. "Standard Engorgement Charm, made them about as big as Aegean Fire Crabs"

Tegner tutted softly. "Not nice. Still, better than an actual Acromantula" "The nearest Acromantula to here are in the forests of Germany, and I rather hope they stay there", said Merrythought. "I may take some calculated risks for my students' education, but it'd take somebody truly mad to import an Acromantula".

"Have you the spider that bit him?", asked Tegner, as though she perhaps had it in her pocket. Merrythought looked uncharacteristically caught off-guard by this question.

"That would have been a good idea, wouldn't it?", she said. "No, I just batted them away; they'll have crawled off to die somewhere by now. You know how it is with Engorged creatures; they never last long".

"Yes, they're not meant for this world", said Tegner, distractedly. "Too small for them. The air, the water, everything, it kills them. Still, this will work in our favour here: the venom is also not meant for this world, and will not be working properly".

"It seems to be working just fine", countered Merrythought.

"Yes, but his body will break it down easily, especially with a little help", said Tegner, with a reassuring smile.

"You can sort him out, then?", double-checked Merrythought.

"He'll be fine", affirmed Tegner in a soothing tone. "Don't worry, Téa, you've still a clean record of not actually getting any students killed".

Merrythought gave a small laugh despite herself, and for a moment seemed a lot younger than her very advanced years.

"Thanks, Salvo", she said. "I... I'm glad to have you around".

In the days that followed, Tom regained the use of his body - quite quickly at first, regaining sensation far more quickly than he regained utility. Tom would rather it had been the other way around. By the third day he was still weak, but nevertheless in relatively good order. He asked about going home, which momentarily confused Tegner who did not immediately realise that by "home" Tom meant Slytherin House, and not some other place outside of Hogwarts. Tegner smiled, but advised he'd like to keep Tom in the Hospital Wing at least another day, lest anything bad otherwise happen to the wounds in the rather more rough-and-tumble world that waited in the wider school.

Tom begrudgingly accepted this. He was visited by a few people; Tiernan, who brought him sweets like this would help in some fashion, and Marca, who at least made the more rational choice of bringing his schoolbooks. Then there was Jana, who did not bring him anything tangible, but did try to offer her Potioneering services should anything be required. Tegner thanked her but assured her that they had everything in hand, that the Hospital Wing was very well stocked, and that Professor Slughorn saw to any extra needs in that regard.

In the category of teachers, Professor Slughorn did visit, at least insofar as he dropped in to briefly see Tom when he was clearly visiting the Hospital Wing anyway to see Tegner. Slughorn seemed to think it was all quite entertaining, but his good cheer was not annoying, and Tom did not mind his company. Professor Merrythought came to check up on him, but did not actually visit Tom directly, rather preferring to simply get an update from Tegner. Dumbledore, of all people, also opted to pay a visit, much to Tom's displeasure. The last thing he wanted presently was to endure Dumbledore's sermonizing about the dangers of overestimating his abilities. Dumbledore did not take Tom's hints about him leaving, but Tegner did, rescuing Tom by asking Dumbledore to kindly leave his patient in peace, as he needed rest now.

"Thanks, I really can't stand him", confessed Tom, after Dumbledore's departure.

For some reason he was sure he could say such things freely with Tegner.

"He wants what's best for you", said Tegner, "But I can readily understand if he might be a bit much at times".

Chapter Thirteen

Midwinter Messages

“So, I can go now?”, asked Tom, his prostrate body now relaxed for the first time in a while, after fighting off the urge to murder Tegner for the past half hour or so, while the latter applied prodermal ectoplasm to his wounds painfully slowly, and that after dabbing around the punctures themselves with a stargrass-and-murtlap solution.

“Not yet”, replied Tegner. “This needs to set, and then when it has set, it needs to be undisturbed and unbroken for a couple of hours”

“A couple of hours?” exclaimed Tom.

“That’s right. You’ll need to stay as still as possible during that time”

Tom’s relaxation was a distant daydream, a fleeting blissful error that had now passed.

“Are you in pain?”, asked Tegner.

“No - I’ve told you: I’m fine, why?”

“You’re digging your fingers into the bed as though something hurts a lot”, replied Tegner evenly.

“Yes, this, being here; it’s boring, I’m fine, and I have things I want to do”, said Tom.

“A couple of hours, and you’ll be good to go. Meanwhile, you have your books that your classmate brought for you; feel free to read if you like, but if you’re sitting up, don’t make any sudden movements, and definitely don’t lie on your back”

“I’ve read these books! If I could just go to the library...”

“I’m afraid I can’t recommend getting fully dressed at this time, let alone reaching up and about, stretching, and such”, said Tegner. “And really, I’m sure you could find something still to learn from these books”, he added, picking up a copy of *Basic Elements of Alchemy*, and leafing through it.

“No, I assure you, I’ve read them thoroughly”, said Tom.

“Tell me the Four Principles of Metastasis”, challenged Tegner.

“Three Principles of Metastasis”, replied Tom in a wearied tone. “First: Intransient substances untouched will tend to remain in their state unless acted upon by an external force. Second: Transient substances untouched will tend to seek simplicity over complexity unless given power towards the opposite. Third: Power against transience needs necessarily be precisely equal to and opposite the power of transtropy and will require sustaining power equal to the square of the powers interlocked. If there’s a fourth one, it’s not in this book”, he concluded.

Tegner nodded.

“Good. And what about Tryllekoppe’s First Suppository?”

“Supposition, I think you mean”, said Tom. It was clear that Tegner was not making these mistakes, but simply trying to give him trick questions. It was tedious. “Acting agents acting with agency react with reagents reacting redundantly in synergistic systems such as can be safely supposed to be equal to the equilibrium of the Elements equalised”

“That’s what she said”, said Tegner, with a smile. “Madam Tryllekoppe, I mean. Still, these Arts are not all about rote learning - alas I don’t have time to test you in any more thorough fashion, however”

“Professor Al-Muharik seems to like quick and snappy answers, in any case”, replied Tom glumly. “Speed, not depth. Can’t help thinking it doesn’t do Alchemy justice. Do you know any better learning resources?”

Tom observed Tegner to momentarily think that Tom should have been a Ravenclaw, before dismissing that notion as something he’d heard all too often about himself in his youth.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to speak against my fellow staff members”, said Tegner, “But as you may know, Healers undertake extensive studies in Alchemy also. I don’t have time to stop and chat now - I have to go down to the Quidditch pitch in case of accidents - but let me grab some books from my personal library that may interest you”.

“You’re going to the Quidditch match and I have to stay here?” objected Tom.

“Yes, as people may get injured, and I don’t have a back covered in prodermal ectoplasm so I don’t have to stay put as you do”, he replied as he selected a few books in his office, visible through an open door between them.

Tom did indeed find the books engaging, though he was frequently distracted by the Quidditch commentary audible through the window. It was Ravenclaw vs Gryffindor; Gryffindor were doing well, though in all likelihood their efforts would come to be mere damage limitation when Fame would likely be the one to catch the Snitch, which she’d never missed once last year, and Tom had heard tales of her never missing previously. Was she cheating, or just that good?

Neither, it seemed, as eventually the announcement was made that Jana Teires had caught the Snitch, putting Gryffindor close second to Slytherin in the Quidditch Cup, with one win each out of the two matches played so far, as Slytherin had fared marginally - but only marginally - better against Hufflepuff than Gryffindor had done against Ravenclaw.

By the time Tom was granted his freedom from the Hospital Wing, one of Tegner’s books on loan to him, he was more than ready to see the back of the place.

“Well done on your Quidditch performance”, said Tom when next he saw Jana as they waited for their Potions class, out of earshot of Belinda who had yet to arrive.

“Thank you, were you at the match?”

“No, I was still up in the Hospital Wing”

“How are you now?”

“Fine. Got a nice book out of it too. Just on loan, I mean, but still”

“From Healer Tegner? He’s so lovely, isn’t he?”

“He has his moments”, said Tom evasively.

Before long, it was time for Hogwarts students to either put their name down for a Hogwarts Express ticket South for Christmas, or to put their name down to stay up in the castle. This year, Antonin would be staying at Hogwarts for Christmas itself, and then going down to London to spend some time with his parents thereafter for a few days. Marca, for her part, would once again be spending the entire holiday at Hogwarts, rather than returning to Sverdlovsk. Tom wondered if the fuss with the Muggle governments had

caused a problem, what with the Soviet Union being expelled from the League of Nations. Tom wasn't sure what exactly the League of Nations was, beyond the obvious that it was a group of countries in some alliance, but it seemed a lot like the Russian bear was being provoked into baring its teeth, and this could spell yet another war to add to the mix.

"Will they not miss you?", asked Antonin to Marca, as this was discussed over lunch in the Great Hall, a weekend before Christmas.

"Obviously not enough to suggest my return" said Marca, with her usual air of indifference. It was difficult to tell whether she was implying a criticism of her parents, or just stating it as she saw it.

"And you, will you not miss them?"

"Yes", she replied. "I will, but also I know that I could grow tired of them also. I will write to them, and I will see them in summer, if not at Easter. I will continue to get good marks, and we will all be happy".

A simplistic but entirely workable assessment of her situation. For Tom, of course, things were more simple. With no parents, Hogwarts was his home. He wondered dimly what it would be like to have a close-knit family, like the Lestranges, the Blacks, or even the Malfoys or Crabbes. He had a vague image of what it was like; he'd heard stories, and caught enough glimpses of people's thoughts to know it wasn't entirely a myth.

The warmth of a hearth, a big table with relatives around it, singing of songs, smiles and laughter, parlour games, the threat of arguments, shouting and crying, fear and resentment. From what Tom had gleaned, this "family life" lark was a bit of a mixed bag. In some ways he had it hard; in some ways he had it easy.

On Christmas eve, Tom woke with a start during the night; he wasn't sure what time it was, but no lake-filtered sunlight was making its way through the porthole-style windows of the dormitory yet. Through the darkness, however, he did notice something moving near his bed; he reached out and grabbed it, his fingers finding the familiar scaly touch of a snake that had been rising up by his bedside. Despite being grabbed, it did not bite him, but instead wrapped itself around his hand with lightning rapidity. Tom felt the coils tighten, but was used to snakes holding on this way, and was less alarmed now than when he had woken up, rather than more. If it were going to attack him, it'd have done so already.

"*Who are you and how did you get in here?*", asked Tom.

"*We are a messenger and we have always been here*", replied the snake, its head levelling to meet Tom's gaze. Tom's eyes had now adapted to the darkness enough to see its forked tongue flickering around the sibilants as it spoke.

"*We? Always? What is the meaning of this? Explain yourself*", commanded Tom.

"*Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four, spoke to us, and we speak to you*" said the snake, creating only more ambiguities.

"*And? What is the message?*"

"*Yesss*" hissed the snake, and vanished.

"Good morning, Tom", said Antonin sleepily. There was light now. How much time had passed? Had Tom fallen asleep after the snake's visit? Had it been a dream? He focussed

on remembering the snake's words. Perhaps it had been a dream, as the memory was quickly becoming fuzzy and distant.

"Yeah", replied Tom. "And Christmas, Happy Christmas", he added, swinging his feet out of bed and onto the... "Aargh!" - the pain in his foot caused him to crumple into an untidy heap on the floor. He clasped the foot with which he had stood upon the small stone pyramid from the Lost and Found Room; the thing had somehow made its way out of the coffer that lived beneath his bed.

Antonin looked at it with some interest; he clearly wanted to ask, but was reluctant to press Tom for information when the latter was in a sub-optimal mood.

By the time they had dressed, Tom had almost stopped limping. Putting the pyramid back in his coffer, he noticed his gifts for Antonin and Marca were now missing; presumably they had made their way to under the tree in the Common Room. If it was House Elves doing this, Tom would have a little chat with them about interfering with his things unbidden.

In the Common Room itself, indeed, the presents were found to be not under, but hovering around the tree, as they had last year. Tom had forgotten that. There were also presents for the boys from Marca, but no sign of Marca herself.

"I wonder, if she sleeps still?", mused Antonin out loud.

"Well, let's return the favour she paid us last year, shall we?", said Tom, making for the girls' dormitory where Marca might be found.

Sure enough, one of the beds contained a small lump the top part of whose head could be seen protruding from the covers that had been pulled snugly up around her. Her steady slow breathing indicated she had not mysteriously died, and was indeed simply still asleep. Tom tried assailing her mind; sometimes he could catch parts of people's dreams, but got only the usual nothingness from her.

"Perhaps, we should let her sleep?", said Antonin, who was loitering back near the doorway, as though reluctant to come further into the room.

"Should?", said Tom, and gave short high laugh. Still smiling, he resisted the urge to flick a Stinging Jinx at Marca to awaken her, however amusing that might be, and instead went to shake her shoulder. He didn't see her shoulder, so instead of pulling back the covers to find it, which might be considered rude, he rapped her twice on the head instead, as though knocking sharply on a door.

"Wake up, sleepyhead", he said, causing Antonin to laugh, despite himself.

"Ugh? What?" began Marca, lifting a hand to guard against Tom's hand, and also against the morning light, muted as this latter already was.

"Good morning, happy Christmas, and all that", said Tom, "Now get up"

For an instant, during Marca's momentary confused state, Tom caught a glimpse of something from her mind, a flying horse, perhaps from her dream. It vanished almost immediately, though, as Marca spoke in turn:

"Good morning, happy Christmas and all that" she echoed, "Now get out"

"Alright", chuckled Tom, "See you in the Common Room in a few minutes though?"

"No, wait, it is not problem, I come with you", said Marca, pushing her hair out of her face. Apparently her English skills plummeted when she was just waking up. Getting out of

bed, she stretched, and put on a warm-looking black dressing gown over her silken white nightgown. "Hey, you are already dressed", she observed as she tied the belt of the dressing gown.

"Yes", replied Tom simply, for lack of a more meaningful response. "Shall we?", he added, indicating to the door.

"We shall", replied Marca, drawing herself up to her full diminutive height, and nodding as though she were a head of state agreeing to some new national policy. It appeared that morning-Marca was now gone, and usual-Marca was back.

Back in the Common Room, Marca took the lead again with a few quick dance-like steps, approaching the tall Christmas tree, devoid of decorative snakes this year as they had been destroyed by the trio's duel last year, and plucked out a couple of the presents that floated around it. Fortuitously, or perhaps by design, they had been hovering within reach. Mind you, perhaps Marca would know the Summoning Charm that that Ravenclaw had demonstrated near the start of term, not that they would have been inaccessible to Tom in any case.

"These are for you boys", she said, "I have got for you both the same thing this year, however I am sure that you will not complain, because it is a very good thing"

She held out a small box in each hand, made of papyrus-like card; perhaps pressed paper of some description. Tom took the box offered; it felt empty. Undoing the ribbon, the box unfolded itself as Marca's wrapping paper had done last year, revealing a small thread-like thing that faintly glowed with a very dim pulsating greenish-yellow light. It rose up into the air like a snake in water.

"They are nice; what are they?" asked Antonin, looking to Marca and also glancing across to Tom, who did not know any more than he did.

"They are Bookworms", she replied.

"Bookworms?", asked Tom, to prompt further explanation.

"Yes, they are like a small personal librarian; they are very good"

"How does it work?"

"They will lead you to which book or books you want or need", said Marca. "You can speak to them, though they also often seem to just know what is best; it is an impressive natural magic"

"It's a creature?" asked Tom. "They don't... eat books, or something?"

"They thrive on the magic produced by the mind when reading occurs", said Marca, "So they want you to get as much reading stimulation as possible"

"They steal my magic?", retorted Tom, backing off from it a little.

"No, they are just nourished by its presence, without diminishing it. You can think of it like being warmed by the sun. You benefit from it, but you are not taking anything from it that it was not already sending out"

"Hmm. Do I need to do anything for it? I have many talents, but looking after small weak things is not amongst them, as you might have noticed in Herbology"

"Indeed I had noticed. Just keep it in your pocket or schoolbag, and be sure to read often. Then when you want to use it, take it out and it will be a happy worm and will lead you to which books are best".

"I see. Thank you. Here, I have something for you both too", said Tom, summoning the appropriate packages and passing them to them.

"A potion" divined Antonin, taking hold of his present. Naturally, the feel and perhaps sound of the liquid in the bottles gave this much away, as any movement of the parcel would result in the weight distribution shifting.

"Just some silly things, a friendly token, nothing spectacular", said Tom, hoping to contain any high expectations.

"It is unmarked; what is it?", said Marca, who was now examining the unlabelled bottle and its crystal-clear contents.

"I made it myself", said Tom. In the case of yours, take a mouthful, and for a little under an hour and a half - or perhaps slightly longer, with your frame - friction will be optional for you. Should be fun for your dancing skills, though I don't know when next you'll have opportunity to do so."

"Well, I can try now, as it seems it contains many portions", said Marca. She unstopped the bottle, and smelled it. Standing up, she took a mouthful, and put down the bottle exceedingly carefully, like a drunk who is trying to avoid showing it.

"So..." she began. "Yes, I feel that..."

She kicked off, and then spun on the spot like an ice-skater, the lower part of her dressing gown flaring out around her. Tom had of course seen people skating on the ponds in the parks sometimes if it froze over strongly enough in winter, but Marca's performance far excelled theirs in terms of elegance. On each turn, she seemed to momentarily leave her head behind the rest of her, and then whip it around to catch up.

When she eventually stopped, she did so instantly, perfectly, looking for a split second the very model of flawlessness, until her hair (still moving under momentum), caught up and hit her unceremoniously in the face.

"Well, that was fun", she said, removing hair from her mouth. "I will experiment with it, thank you"

"You are welcome, and Antonin, yours is... different", he said, as Antonin crashed to the floor after taking a sip of his potion and then attempting to copy Marca.

"I realize that now", said Antonin, on all fours.

"Yours increases friction, again it should be at will, but maybe it misunderstood your will there"

"What use is that?"

"Well, try the wall. Just for amusing silliness"

It took a moment for Antonin to realize this meant he could climb the wall like a lizard, not to mention walk (or rather, crawl) across the ceiling. Relatively useless, but entertaining.

"With this, I could climb up the Astronomy Tower", said Antonin, peeling down off the ceiling to land next to them unsteadily.

"I wouldn't recommend being up there when the effects wear off, though", advised Tom.

“Anyway, if we are opening our presents from each other, there are these two from me”, said Antonin, changing the subject, and indicating to two parcels that seemed to be identical.

“Are they the same?”, asked Tom, taking one.

“Not entirely”, replied Antonin, and Tom saw from his mind that they were the same but in different sizes, being cloaks. Tom and Marca swapped parcels, as it was clear from the labels that they had each other’s.

“I have guessed at the sizes but they should fit”, said Antonin as they unfolded their remarkably black cloaks. “They are woven with Vantamantine thread through the cloth”, he explained. It was almost as black as the front door to his London residence. Certainly very pleasing wear, as Tom and Marca expressed.

From Tiernan, Tom received a book; *Unlocking Your Past: The Twenty-Three Keys of Wizarding Genealogy*, which could indeed be an enlightening read if it lived up to its title. Tom also once again received a Christmas gift from Jana, a weighty item that appeared at first glance to be a bronze and copper compass, but it bore a self-descriptive inscription on the back of it, saying:

MORAL COMPASS
for the Witch or Wizard
who wants a second opinion
may this moral compass
keep you on your path

There was a card with the Moral Compass, which read:

Dear Tom,

Happy Christmas!

I hope you like this helpful thing. It can be fun too! It takes some practice to interpret it well, but I’m sure you’ll do just fine.

Have a great Christmas, and I’ll see you soon!

Much love,

Jana

What a useless gift. Tom would rather have had more potions. And to think that he had carefully adjusted a Training Snitch for her, purchased by Owl Order - second hand, but with his modifications, it was in practical terms more valuable for her than a new one. He had set a Charm in it to accelerate it, and also a deliberately weak Oppugno Jinx set to

attack Jana; such that it'd partially counteract the Snitch's Evasion Charm, and essentially stop it from getting too far away from her, while still flying swiftly and erratically around, making it difficult to catch but also difficult to outright lose. And here she had given him this junk. Oh well.

Tom set the device down in front of him, and the little arrow spun into motion.

"Well?", asked Marca. "What is it, that it thinks you should do?"

"It's pointing at you", said Tom hesitantly, unsure that he was reading the thing correctly, though it certainly had settled upon indicating in Marca's direction.

"No", said Marca, "It is pointing to the card. It is clear, that it is pointing out that you should send letters of thanks to the givers"

"They'll cope", said Tom. "Gifts are gifts. If they require something in return, then they weren't gifts at all".

Chapter Fourteen

Quid Pro Quo

When it came to Tom's birthday on New Year's Eve, it received more recognition than it had done last year - not that this was difficult, last year it had received none whatsoever.

This year, the morning of the thirty-first saw Tom visited by two owls at breakfast; Brega, and also Aerid, Tiernan's owl.

"More Christmas presents?" asked Marca, the only other person at the Slytherin table, as Antonin had now gone South to see his parents in London.

"No, it's my birthday", Tom replied.

"Oh, happy birthday; I did not know"

"No reason why you should", said Tom, distractedly.

"Well, I see that Tiernan knew, and somebody else perhaps"

"Indeed", said Tom, no less distractedly, cutting the cords off the small parcel that had been delivered by Aerid.

"Brega-hahaha-hoo!"

"Wait your turn, Brega", said Tom to the owl who now seemed to be doing a walking-on-the-spot dance atop the squashy parcel he had brought, much like a cat making itself comfortable.

Tom, meanwhile, opened the box from Tiernan, and up out of it rose a silver pocket-watch. He took it in his hand, noting it to be quite heavy for an object that had just lifted itself elegantly out of its box. It had a hinged lid, which he opened, revealing a slightly glowing clock-face inside. Judging from the time shown on the Great Hall clock, the time on the watch was already correct. There was a bevelled dial around the outside edge, which he turned. The clock-face itself became much dimmer, but now additionally showed a moon, waning, in the last quarter. He turned the dial again. The moon vanished, and in its stead a semi-orb of stars appeared, with some tiny coloured pinpricks of light amongst them, which he took to be the planets in their positions amongst the constellations. He turned it again, and it became a perpetual calendar, similar to the kind he had seen in the Muggle world, only he suspected it would actually be perpetual, instead of lasting only fifty years or so.

That was a thing that Tom liked about the magical world; things could be ancient and still have modern purpose and power; things endured. Even people, in some cases, living to multiples of ordinary lifespans. The way he saw it, the life a Wizard had already was in essence a springboard, a free hand, a means to an end - the time with which he could discover how to get more time. Because without life, what did one have? Without life, what use had anything else? What value? He snapped the watch shut and smiled. "May I see?" asked Marca politely, and in a tone that suggested "No" would also be an acceptable answer. Tom passed her the watch, which she examined as Tom had done.

While she did so, Tom took up the other parcel. The handwriting on the address was Jana's - obviously she'd used the Owl Office service rather than her own owl, to send the parcel. Perhaps she figured Tetu was not up to the journey from England up to Hogwarts.

The parcel from her was a squishy package, probably nothing exceptionally exciting, but since he had it here, he opened it. Taking out the thing that he found therein, it turned out to be a very lightweight decidedly musty-smelling cloak with a vine-leaf pattern in greens and browns. It felt like silk, though was surely quite old indeed, by the faded look of it, the loose threads here and there, and the smell. He folded it back up and was momentarily confused as the pattern on it vanished and he could see his hand through it. Upon investigation, the pattern was only on one side. On the other side was, well, nothing; it was transparent. As he folded it over again though, his hand also vanished, or near enough. He could see its outline, but it was sort of hazy and had taken on the look of the table behind it. He withdrew his hand, which had been unaffected and looked perfectly normal. He stood up and put on the cloak, wrinkling his nose at the smell. Looking down at himself, he was all but invisible. The cloak had made him like a chameleon, a mystical beast that despite possessing the magical quality of blending in almost perfectly with its background, had found its way into Muggle literature such as the Bestiary at Wool's. Tom wondered how, if the chameleon was so good at hiding, Muggles had ever found it in the first place. In any case, this cloak, this chameleon cloak... This could be a useful thing. He took it off and folded it up; ironically, he didn't want too many people to see him in it, and while there were only the two of them at the Slytherin table, there were a few more over on the other Houses' tables.

"Impressive", opined Marca, "Not often to find an invisibility cloak"

"Certainly better than the Moral Compass", said Tom with a smirk.

There was a letter with the cloak also, which he had hitherto ignored. He unfolded it also, and read:

Dear Tom,

Thank you so much for the Golden Snitch! You shouldn't have spent so much on me but I love it! When I first opened it, it flew up and I panicked and missed it in the first grab, then I soon figured out it would only go so far from me - it's still hard to catch though, it seems a bit faster and better at dodging than Snitches usually are, and they're usually pretty good. Did you do that to it? Your mind is incredible you know, with the stuff you can do.

How has your Christmas been? I hope you've not been too lonely at school with almost everyone gone. It's been nice here, but I miss my friends - you're all so good to me. I got so many presents this year, it's weird but brilliant. But it's not just that, it's so great to feel accepted and wanted. I got a card from my mum and dad, which made me cry, because it's like they go out of their way to make it clear I'm not the child they wanted, but they try to say they love me but they think I am how I am just to spite them and how I must hate them and all that. They signed the card from my sister too, but then she went and wrote a nicer thing in the separate card my brother sent, so that's something, maybe I'm not a complete outcast from home.

Anyway, I don't mean to go all of a downer on you, so on a happier note I've got so much new Potions stuff from people - you were one of very few people who sent me something that wasn't Potions-related - so I'm brewing merrily down here, not that I wouldn't be anyway but it's so exciting with all this new stuff. I'm feeling really good about the Potions Championship, even though it's still a bit scary, more scary than Quidditch, maybe four times as scary because I have the whole school counting on me instead of just Gryffindor?

I don't know what else to write, so I'll draw this letter to a close here and see you soon enough back at school.

Much Love,

Jana

PS, here is a thing for your birthday too!

Tom folded the letter and pocketed it. Normally he vanished or burned letters, but he wanted the option of rereading the confusing part about family. Or maybe it wasn't properly confusing and his mind just struggled to process familial love and similar such alien concepts. Either way, it was news to him that Jana had a brother and sister. Not that it made a huge difference to anything in practical terms, but Tom was somewhat contemptuous of her apparent affection for her Muggle relatives. Worse still that she should be somehow beholden to them, crave their love and affection in return.

"Things are alright?" asked Marca quizzically.

"Yes, fine", said Tom dismissively. Marca did not pursue the matter, but instead went on to discuss the properties of the watch from Tiernan.

After breakfast, they returned to their Common Room, and read each other's library books. The library was closed over the holiday, and they each had taken out only so many books. Tom was also making his way slowly through the Wizarding Genealogy book he had received for Christmas, but it was clear that in order to make proper use of it, he'd need to also have access to the archives in the library. He wasn't sure what security the library had aside from the obvious locked doors, and there was nothing so urgent that it couldn't wait until Madam Redmond returned and the library reopened; no pressing reason to risk being caught breaking rules, not to mention potentially breaking locks. Tom was pleased to see that even the Moral Compass agreed with this sensible choice, as there was no way it ever pointed to the library or even the Common Room door, when he was considering the matter. Maybe he wasn't such a bad person after all, he thought to himself.

So, instead of breaking into the library, he lay on a sofa reading *Legends of Long-Lost Wands of Yore*, which Marca had taken out, while Marca reclined near one of the lake-windows, reading *Burning the Void: The Moste Powerulle Innovations in Alchemie*, which Tom had taken out.

Marca was good company at lunchtime, as they were now both conversant regards each other's books, though by evening time they had quarreled on a point of wandlore, as

they had made their way down to the traditional - albeit always little-attended - Hogwarts Hogmanay Feast, and this meant that while Tom feasted, and Marca picked at this and that, conversation kept returning to the question, such that they ended up roping in the nearby Ravenclaws on the next table, in an unusual display of inter-House discussion, not something that often happened in the more commonly crowded Great Hall. Alas, the resident bird-brains were as divided in opinion on the topic as Tom and Marca, and it seemed the matter would remain unresolved until further research could be conducted, or, perhaps, Professor Wood (the teacher of Wandlore) pestered on the topic. For now, it would have to remain a mystery whether a wand's allegiance could shift from one Wizard to another without one of the Wizards being defeated by another in a duel with the wands in question.

Tom found it difficult to accept that any wand would not rather be with him, a notion that made some of the Ravenclaws laugh, but also at least one third-year to argue that the typical Slytherin vainglory aside, wands are not Chocolate Frog cards to be won or lost by simple calculations, and as they share a much deeper connection with the owner, it might not be too much of a stretch - under some circumstances - to conceive of them switching allegiance for reasons other than a victory or defeat in a duel.

The evening wound up with Tom challenging all five Ravenclaws to a simultaneous duel, with Marca as his second. If Marca was alarmed at this prospect, she didn't show it, and merely watched with some interest as the Ravenclaws argued about whether to accept this. In the end they did not, preferring on balance to keep duelling to the duelling club, with its rules and supervision. Tom felt he could probably win them over if he tried to persuade them, but was happy to accept their decline as a statement of inferiority on their part.

On New Year's Day, Tom awoke late, perhaps on account of the previous evening's extensive eating followed by a rather late night. Now it was late morning, and as Tom saw upon checking his new watch (previously he'd have to ask someone or else go visit the clock in the Common Room) far too late for breakfast. Marca sat cross-legged in an armchair that was decidedly too big for her, with a small pile of books hovering to the side of her, and one book hovering open in front of her.

"You just need to put a Hover Charm on yourself as well, to complete the scene", said Tom, by way of greeting.

"Good morning", she replied. "A Hover Charm will not work on a person because the animate spirit disrupts it in an effort to remain grounded", she added. "I could Charm a rug or something and sit on that, but I find it quite distracting to sit upon a floating object"

"I was only joking, but thank you for the information", said Tom. "What about clothes?", he wondered out loud.

"With a Hover Charm? Well it is possible, but it would be very far from comfortable or elegant to be held up in the air by one's clothes, and very difficult to control, and even more difficult to maintain"

"Hmm, a fair point", conceded Tom. He would have to experiment with these things. But not now, not with an audience. Perhaps it could be a project to entertain him at Easter if he had the Common Room to himself again.

Soon everyone else returned, and they no longer had the Common Room to even just the two of them, but this was not so bad as it meant also the library reopening, and additionally, lessons recommencing. While Tom was not a fan of all his lessons; he'd quit Herbology already if it were possible, for instance, and he considered he could learn more about History of Magic if he spent the time in the library than in Professor Binns' class, most of his lessons he appreciated. Even Transfiguration, wherein he despised the teacher, he found the lessons themselves engaging, and enjoyed the stimulation of constantly improving his abilities, which he pushed perhaps more than anyone knew.

Everyone's return also meant a renewed social web, with holiday stories being swapped, and people catching up with their friends after time apart, like the week and a bit had been such a terribly long time. Tom was pleased that people seemed to be rusty when it came to duelling on duelling night. Antonin's *Budni Večer* arrived again, but this time he went out and stealthily got his log for himself without Tom's aid, and darkly clad in his own Vantamantine cloak. Then, after only a week of being back to school, it was already time for the first Quidditch match of 1940.

Tom wasn't initially sure if he'd bother watching the Gryffindor vs Hufflepuff Quidditch match, as it seemed likely to be rather one-sided, especially in light of Gryffindor having firmly trounced Ravenclaw all so recently; but then, with last year's Gryffindor vs Hufflepuff match in mind, perhaps it would be worth it in spectatorial value nevertheless. No bets were taken today. Out on the stands, however, it seemed Jana had now acquired a chant. It took him a few rounds of it to catch all of the words over the overall hubbub of the crowd:

There's only one Jana Teires!

There's only one Jana Teires!

She's a beast in the air

With frightening hair

We're gonna have the

Quidditch Cup in hand

Gauging the atmosphere of those around him, it was clear that the grudging Slytherin support of Jana when it came to the Potions Championship certainly did not extend to anything less than animosity in the context of Quidditch.

Tom noted Belinda's attention flitting from Jana to the Hufflepuff Beaters. Her eyes narrowed as she regarded them with contempt. One of them, Thomas Kieran, was definitely also a Mudblood. The other, Rastus Warren, Tom wasn't sure about, but Belinda at least seemed to be flinging him into the same conceptual basket. Their Keeper, Edmund Peterson, was also a Mudblood, and with Chaster Eunice Pascal definitely having a Muggle father, then even if the rest of the team were Purebloods, the overall blood purity of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team must be just under half. *Surprised they even stay up in the air*, she thought to herself.

Tom laughed, but only for an instant before it struck him that his own blood purity was also likely around half, but then, he had been through this before. Still, he resolved to

do the various checks advocated by his Wizarding Genealogy book, regards his potential connections to the various Pureblood families. He mused on how it would be to find out he was related to Tiernan or Abraxas, or both, for that matter, since he was fairly sure those families were at least distantly connected somewhere in any case. Or Slughorn, even, what an odd one that would be. Gringott's had considered Slughorn to be his legal guardian, what if he turned out to also be a relative? Not that Tom pressingly wanted or needed any father figure, it was a strange exercise in thought all the same.

The Quidditch match was short and sweet, as Jana lived up to her Gryffindor House's expectations on this occasion, rather than living up to most of Slytherin House's hopes for her (that she would be as impressively injured this time as she had been last time she flew against Hufflepuff). Tom wished the more grumbly of the Slytherins could be distracted as he was by Mellifer's internal turmoil regards his idea of resigning his position as Seeker for his House.

Social gossip seemed rather less significant however, when at lunch after the match, an owl that Tom did not recognize brought him a note sealed with a Hogwarts crest. He opened it, and read:

Tom Marvolo Riddle

Please present yourself to my office immediately after your lunch today.

Regards,

A Dippet

Well, this was concerning. Was he in trouble? What had he done this time? Tiernan asked him the same questions as he had asked himself, with no less a note of concern. Tom reached out with his mind to try to locate Dippet's, but did not find it. He hastily finished up his food, and made his way to the Headmaster's office to find out one way or another, whether he was being summoned for something good or bad.

Professor Dippet's office was in a turret jutting out from the uppermost part of Ravenclaw Tower. Tom wondered if Dippet was an old Ravenclaw himself, but then, surely the Headmaster's office did not move in location in accordance with the House of its current occupant. Then again, perhaps it did. Architectural features that moved about were hardly unthinkable at Hogwarts, as numerous staircases and doorways made quite clear.

Maybe the Headmaster simply had his office wherever he wanted. If Tom were Headmaster, then he could see the appeal of having a subterranean office well-shielded from everything, but also the appeal of having an office up in a tower, up over the castle. Maybe he could have one atop the Defence Against the Dark Arts tower, for instance.

For now, however, he had come to where he had been assured the entrance to the office was, but found his way blocked by a statue of a birdlike thing with claws.

"Move aside", commanded Tom. "I'm here to see the Headmaster"

It did not move.

"I have an appointment. He asked to see me"

It did not move. Tom drew his wand and pointed it at the statue.

"*Reducto*"

The statue now leapt into action, but only to bat the spell aside with one of its wings. It still did not yield the pathway, though Tom's rebounded spell took a chunk out of the nearby wall.

"*Expulso*" essayed Tom, but with the same unhelpful result.

Then for reasons unknown, it moved aside, and a staircase took its place. Tom ascended it, taking a moment to repair the broken bit of wall as it occurred to him it might not endear him to the Headmaster to damage the masonry around his office, especially if he was already in trouble for something.

As he went up the winding staircase, he saw that Dippet was standing at the top of it, in an open doorway. Presumably he had caused the guardian to step aside. He did not look too severe.

"I would have mentioned the password in my note", said he, "But it's better that not too many people know it". From his mind, Tom divined the password to be *open sesquipedalia* - not that this was terribly important now. Later perhaps, who knew.

Meanwhile, Dippet gestured for Tom to enter his office, with a sweep of his black-robed arm. As Tom passed the old man, he noticed he smelled of licorice.

Inside Dippet's office, a large round room with a lot of paintings on the wall, periodically divided by sections that were instead covered in books. Tom looked around him; not a bad place, though personally he'd get rid of the paintings. Especially that one of the same Headmaster that had been in the painting he burned in the Lost and Found room last year, and from which he now averted his gaze.

Dippet, meanwhile, took a seat behind his desk, and steepled his fingers, regarding Tom with piercing blue eyes. He did not invite Tom to sit.

"So, Professor Merrythought"

"Excuse me, Sir?", queried Tom, as Professor Merrythought was nowhere to be seen.

"How are you feeling?"

Tom looked at the Headmaster, confused. He had a slightly sick feeling in his stomach, but he wasn't going to mention that.

"I'm fine, Sir", said Tom, hesitantly. Was it a trick question? Why was Dippet mentioning Merrythought? He looked into Dippet's mind, and got a glimpse of Professor Merrythought, which was not helpful. Hopefully rumour had not reached Dippet of Tom's use of the Killing Curse in class, though if Dumbledore knew about it, then who knows, anyone could.

"Good", replied Dippet, with a smile. "I've been contacted by Mendax Pratt, do you know who that is?"

The name did ring a bell, but Tom wasn't completely sure. Then it struck him:

"Editor of the Daily Prophet, Sir?"

"That is correct". Somehow, it felt to Tom like he should be getting five points to Slytherin for his answer. Tom realized he didn't know what Dippet used to teach before he

was Headmaster. "Now, this in itself is not very unusual; Mendax and I, well, let's just say that he's done editorials about me once or twice before".

Tom did not reply, but did his best to look interested. He liked Dippet talking about himself more than he liked Dippet asking him about himself. The Headmaster continued:

"The thing is, word has reached Mendax's not inconsiderable ears about your little incident in the Forbidden Forest"

Tom hoped dearly that Dippet was talking about the recent encounter with the spider, not anything from last year, when he had killed a werewolf in human form, before going on to trap and kill a unicorn, sparking an investigation that while in principle still open, they seemed to have dropped after a few months due to a lack of leads, and which Tom did not wish them to reprise. He raised his eyebrows, without reply, in the hopes that Dippet would continue, which he did:

"Please tell me in few words, what happened"

Well, that wasn't helpful, but a look into his mind showed a spider, which was good, not that Tom would have talked about the other matter in any case. Tom explained the attack, with as little detail as possible. That he had defeated one spider, was surprised by the other, and that Professor Merrythought got rid of the spider and took him to the Hospital Wing, where Healer Tegner had loaned him some books, the last of which he intended to return very soon, honestly.

"You do not seem to be very troubled by the matter, is that fair to say?"

"Erm... Well, no Sir, that is to say, it is fair to say, I'm not troubled by it, no"

Tom cringed slightly; he was not accustomed to tripping over his words like this; he was usually more well-spoken.

"I see. And if I may ask, and you may speak quite freely, what is your overall opinion of Professor Merrythought as your teacher?"

"Professor Merrythought is an excellent teacher and I greatly enjoy her lessons", said Tom.

"Very well. As I'm sure you know, student welfare is very important to us at Hogwarts, so I'm glad to hear everything seems to be well with you. If, perchance, Mr. Pratt should send you an owl asking about your little escapade in the Forest, it may be best for all if you simply do not reply; he is... not the most exceptionally trustworthy of individuals I have encountered, and you may find your version of your events somewhat distorted by the filter of editorialization, should you share your story with him".

Finally Tom understood; he was not in trouble, but Merrythought potentially was, and Dippet by extension. Well, he liked her, and had no reason to wish either of them removed from their posts, and did not mind the opportunity to have them both in his debt.

"Sir", he replied reassuringly, "Avoiding spending time writing is a speciality of mine", he said with a smile. "If the Daily Prophet writes to me, I shall be glad to not burden myself with the task of responding".

Dippet smiled and was about to reply, when an owl arrived through the window, and landed on his desk. It bore a small parcel, addressed to the Headmaster.

"From the Daily Prophet, Sir?", asked Tom, not that it was likely they would send him a parcel, come to think of it.

“No, just a friend of mine”, said Dippet, who seemed rather more relaxed now after their conversation. He didn’t open the parcel, but rather replaced it with an even smaller one, addressed to his friend, a “Mr. Nicholas Flamel”, of Winkle Cottage, Evermorton, Somerset. He sent the owl back on its way, and turned back to Tom, as though surprised he was still there.

“Well, thank you for coming for this little chat”, said the Headmaster, “And if you’ve ever any problems, don’t hesitate to come to me”, he added with a smile, getting up and showing Tom unnecessarily to the door.

Tom was certainly glad to be on his way again, as he practically skipped down the stairs from the Headmaster’s Office, to go quash any rumours of his expulsion.

Chapter Fifteen

The Crepuscular Garden

The second challenge of the Potions Championship was not to be held in the afternoon, as the first one had been, but rather in the early evening, such that they still had lessons during the daytime - it was again on a school day - with the exception of Jana who had been granted the day off to prepare. Knowing Jana, she had spent it larking around on her broom. But then, perhaps a clear head was better than a head full of schoolwork and day-to-day trivia.

In the category of changes from the previous challenge, this time it was also not to be held in the Quidditch pitch, but in a separately constructed arena, down from the castle and not far from the Forbidden Forest. Happily, the weather was pleasant enough, by Scottish standards in any case, especially considering it was but approaching the end of January, and a Thursday at that, which Tom understood from Professor Sortsun was a day more commonly given over to tempestuous weather than other days of the week. It was not too crazily cold, not raining, not windy, and had only mild mists and general dampness.

The path down from the castle had been outlined with warmly glowing lanterns that made the walk feel rather warmer than it really was, but were also a little irksome since they rather prevented eyes from adjusting to the darkness, and thus rendered the night a thicker and more impenetrable black than it might otherwise have been. Tom, Tiernan, Antonin, and Marca wore their Vantamantine cloaks, which had turned out to also provide rather good protection against the cold.

Unlike with the Quidditch pitch, where Houses had their own stands (to which they had naturally made their way for the first challenge, even though it was not a Quidditch match, more out of habitude than any pressing requirement), here there were no divisions in the seating, and furthermore it was difficult to tell at a glance what House people were from; even in the cases of those wearing House scarves (not nearly so many as would be sporting them for a Quidditch match), the colours were tricky to make out in the half-light. While the way down to the arena had been lit with the warm orange glow, here the arena was illuminated with a ghostly greenish hue, which did not provide any better visibility, and simply made everything look like pallid shades of green instead.

"We're going to be watching potion-making in this half-light?" asked Tiernan rhetorically.

"Could be worse", mused Tom, "we could be *doing* potion-making in this half-light" They took places in the seating area build up around the arena, and managed to get relatively good seats near the bottom; the seating went up quite a number of levels, and the view from the top could not be good without assistance of some kind. Hell, the view from down here wasn't that spectacular.

"Evening everyone", said a voice from behind them; it was Marvin Clay, a Hufflepuff in their year. It felt odd to have random members of other Houses filling in the seats around them. Tom cast his eyes around the various crowds making their way in, any those already present. Using his ability to connect to people's minds, he was able to confirm a lot of identities with which he might otherwise have struggled. Belinda - more recognisable at

a glance in low light than many - was not too far away from them, a row up and along slightly, with a couple of the third-year boys from their House. The staff and Championship officials had their own section of seating area, and Slughorn was quite easy to pick out there. Near to him, someone stood up, and then became recognisable as Rayman Larsen when he spoke:

“Good evening all, once again! How great it is to be here tonight for the second part of the 77th International Potions Championship!”

There was some applause, and he continued:

“Today’s challenge will be testing our Champions even more than the first challenge, last time they had to merely produce something nice while we provided a few distractions for them; this time, they will be producing the most *horrific* potion they can from the ingredients available, but as you can see, instead of a store cupboard, they have a garden, and will need to find and harvest their own ingredients. As some of you will know, this one’s an old favourite of the Potions Championship, though the ingredients and hazards - oh yes, there are hazards - are once again different this year”.

This was met with general murmurs of approval, and Tom for his part was certainly interested to see what the various champions would produce.

“I’m sure you’ve all noticed the delightfully atmospheric lighting we have here, the lamps adding just a little to the last light of dusk, but don’t worry; you’ll be able to see better than the Champions - if you’ll all just reach under your seats, you’ll find pairs of noctacles, which will let you see the arena as though by daylight”

There was a brief tumult of spectators bending down and fumbling for the aforementioned noctacles, but soon everyone had the little opera-glass-like devices in hand, which indeed as promised did permit the viewer to see without the shroud of darkness that otherwise obscured the scene.

“That’s it, they’re really great little things these noctacles, aren’t they? The competitors won’t have the same luxury though, and will be having to source ingredients and brew potions in just the light that remains in the arena. As usual with this kind of challenge, each of our Champions has been allowed to select one special ingredient to take in with them; a chance for them to be sure of having something that they might not otherwise be able to find in our little garden.”

Tom held up his noctacles, wishing he had Cat-Eye Potion instead, but settling for this as-though-daytime vision, just without the extra clarity. Surveying the arena, it seemed to Tom that to call it a “garden” was an interesting word choice, as not many gardens looked so. Granted, many ill-kept gardens had nettles in, but they didn’t usually have venomous tentacula mixed in with the nettles. Similarly many gardens had ponds, but ornamental ponds were generally less slimy than this one, to Tom’s knowledge anyway - or maybe he had become biased on account of his experience of the parks in London.

“Now, not even I know all the surprises that this garden has to offer, so we’ll be discovering some of them together as we go along, and let me tell you, that’s gonna be pretty exciting, I can say that much. And now, let’s welcome the competitors, who this time need no introduction; they should be arriving any... moment... now!”

As he spoke his final word, indeed the Champions appeared in the arena, clearly by Portkey, as they each were touching an amulet that they wore around the neck. There was loud applause and some cheering, while the Champions themselves got their bearings, and visibly struggled to peer through the darkness.

The competitors were reminded of the rules, advised of the time limit, and wished good luck, as though that still counted for something when he was wishing it to all of them.

There were no dividing barriers this time, but physical contact between participants (who again, did not have wands) was disallowed, as was interfering with anything at each other's potion stations. There was a ring of cauldrons, marked with a small glowing school-crest banner hanging over each denoting their respective schools, and a small working area, all within plain sight of each other - or as plain sight as it could be in the present conditions. Really, there didn't seem to be much chance of them copying each other. They took their places, in most cases adding their personal chosen take-in ingredient to the table, and waited for the signal to begin.

Tom had an edge on most spectators and even on Larsen, insofar as he was able to access a lot of the Champions' thoughts, and know either precisely or at least approximately what potions and intentions they had in mind.

In Jana's case, her head was a constant chatter of ingredients being repeated one after the other, along with an oft-repeated mental plea for the ingredients in question to have been provided in the arena. Through her mind, Tom also accessed a memory she was recalling of Slughorn talking to her about the challenge:

"The thing you have to bear in mind is they want a good show, so if your chosen special ingredient makes it easy for them to guess the potion, and the potion's impressive, they'll hundred percent certain, well, ninety percent certain, well, probably anyway, make sure the other ingredients can be found somewhere, even if they make it difficult to get them"

Her thoughts leading from this memory were invariably about her special bring-in ingredient, which she now clutched in front of her like a priceless treasure, a jar of three-week stewed lacewing flies.

Upon one by one (in accordance with their performances in the first round) being given the signal to start, they all made off to various parts of the garden. Jana started away from the working area, then momentarily returned to it to put her jar on the workbench, admonishing it with a "stay" gesture, before heading off back into the wilder part of the arena. Tom didn't know the potion she had in mind, as she didn't think of it by name or even the result, but only of the ingredients and method, which did not enlighten him much.

Right now, she was running around apparently aimlessly, but seemed like most of the competitors to be broadly scouting out the place and finding what was where in more general terms.

While having promised excitement, so far the proceedings seemed fairly tame, and the most entertaining thing so far was Jana tripping and falling down after catching her foot in some tangly weeds while running. Tom laughed as she landed hand-and-face first into some nettles, but she didn't seem to be too bothered by this turn of events. As she reached to untangle herself, she was positively pleased, in fact.

Aha, thank you, knotgrass, she thought. She bundled up some of the knotgrass, cutting it with a small curved knife, and took it back to her working area, dumping it there.

She looked briefly at Bobby Tutu's work area, where he was counting mushrooms that he had picked. Then, realising she perhaps had more pressing things to do, she headed back into the rest of the garden.

There was a sudden shout, and attention was drawn to the French competitor, who now flailed wildly at nothing that could be seen.

"That's François Flamme of Beauxbatons there" said Larsen, "But what on Earth has happened to him? He seems to be hitting himself in the face and panicking, yet I'm not seeing any Healers rushing to him, so it must be something they know about"

Flamme soon stopped dancing on the spot like a maniac, and now the meaning of his behaviour became clear, as he plucked rapidly at various parts of himself: he was pulling off cobwebs, into which he had walked, and been alarmed at the prospect of potentially being bitten by some dangerous and unseen spider. More collected now, but with his heart still pounding, Flamme began to gather as much of the web as possible into his hand, still carefully on the lookout for whatever spider had spun them. He wanted the web but not its maker, evidently. He took it back to his workstation, and began weaving it into the preparation of perambulatory pickle pus that had brought with him.

It was not long before another cry of horror pierced the evening's misty shrouds, and this time it was accompanied by the Chinese Champion, Yú Qiáng Tāo, falling from a tree. With the benefit of noctacles, it was easy to see why; a vivid green snake had fallen with him, clearly equally alarmed. Yú grasped one of his hands with the other, from which blood dripped visibly - or at least, it was visible to the audience with their noctacles, not so clearly to him, Tom observed, when looking without noctacles. Yú had a knife similar to Jana's, and now brandished it as a weapon, swinging at the snake, which hissed and bit him in the face for his troubles. This did turn out to have some minor passing benefit for Yú, though, since his unsuccessful attempt to protect his face was too slow to block the incoming snake, but just fast enough to catch the snake with the blade as it withdrew. The snake's head was cut clean off, if a long diagonal cut could be considered clean. The body of the snake twitched and writhed, as Yú felt his face with his hands, blood trickling down as he did so. He looked all but blindly at his hands, which he must by now know were covered in blood from their wetness if nothing else. Evidently deciding to soldier on as he did not seem to be succumbing to any venom, his mind went to the fangs of the snake, a common potion ingredient. A couple of the other Champions had now approached, but as per the rules of the competition, were not approaching too closely. Jana, Tutu, and the Russian Champion, Dragomirova, all lurked nearby. Tutu in particular seemed conflicted about not interfering.

Yú let out another cry of pain as he tried to dislodge a fang, only to be bitten on the finger by the disembodied head. This really wasn't his night, and the third bite seemed to break Yú's spirit like the previous two had not, as he tried to get the head off his hand without causing further injury to himself. He called out for help, and was met by Healer

Tegner who led him out of the arena; Larsen soon confirmed that Yú had withdrawn from the challenge.

Meanwhile, Jana and Dragomirova were back at their workstations; Dragomirova was now getting the fangs out of the dropped snake head, and Jana was stripping the skin that the tree snake had been in the process of shedding when it was disturbed.

For a while, things seemed to have quietened down in the arena, with little more exciting than Agustina Torres picking flowers and Saito Sumiko testing which slugs were flesh-eating and which were not; the closest thing to nail-biting action being this latter student finding a tenacious gympie-gympie bush and nearly touching it with her bare hands; Larsen explained how disastrous that would have been: there were horror stories of Wizards Hexing off their body parts in an attempt to be relieved of the suffering this would cause.

The attention shifted back to Jana, however, when something burst out of the pond at her, prompting a brief but rather high-pitched scream of surprise as she stumbled back away from it. While collecting leeches from the pond, she had found a crocodile, not something usually found in British ponds, but then, this was a special arena, as Larsen reminded everyone.

As with previous encounters, nobody rushed to her aid, but she scrambled backwards away from the crocodile that now stood motionless for a moment, before lurching at her again. This time there was no scream, but an overhanging branch cracked and fell just in time to be caught in the beast's jaws that had sprung for her nearest leg. Jana groped automatically for her wand, which obviously wasn't there, and backed up further. The crocodile jerked its head around a little, wrestling with the fallen bough like a dog that had chased a stick and found a tree branch. Jana picked up her jar of leeches, and even took the trouble to usher one of the leeches that had escaped back into the jar, before backing off to her workstation again, leaving the crocodile be.

"Now's no time for personal grooming, Bobby", joked Larsen (whom Tutu would not be able to hear), as this latter plucked hairs from his own chin with a pair of tweezers. Brazil's Champion, Oliveira, had amassed quite a collection of ingredients, and was now regarding them with some measure of horror; it was evident to Tom that he had no idea what he was actually going to produce with his haul. The Japanese Champion Saito Sumiko was ostensibly having a better time of it, looking a little spooky with his face uplit by the glow from his cauldron, in which he already had something bubbling.

"And that's fluxweed now that Teires is bringing back to her station... is she making a Polyjuice Potion? That doesn't seem too horrific to me... Her special ingredient was twenty-one day stewed lacewing flies, so it stands to reason it might be that, but I'll be surprised if there's a bicorn horn in there for her to use... And if I remember my Potions right, doesn't the fluxweed need to be picked at full moon? Anyone know what the phase of the moon is right now? It's kinda foggy, you know; I can't see the moon anywhere... We could do with a werewolf in the audience, they'd know what time of month it is! Aha, I'm told by Armando that we do indeed have a full moon tonight, alright then, maybe best that we don't have a werewolf in the audience, haha!"

Passing by the pond again, Jana stopped; the crocodile was motionless over by the other side of the pond, but her attention had been caught by a little glowing light that

hadn't been there previously. She approached it, and it moved away. She followed it a few more paces.

"Looks like she's following a Hinkypunk into the swamp there... What do they teach them at these schools?"

Jana stopped following it for a moment, and the Hinkypunk's light shone more brightly, as though to re-attract her attention. As it did so, its body became much clearer, illuminated by the light. She dived at it, and caught it, despite it leaping aside in a very respectable effort to dodge her. She grinned at it, then peered with some concern in the direction of the crocodile, which had indeed turned to look her way, though was not advancing yet.

"Well, I have to tell you, that's a new one on me, catching a Hinkypunk by hand", confessed Larsen, "I had no idea that was even possible, though I must say I also have no idea what she's going to do with it now; do Hinkypunks have any useful properties as potion ingredients?"

All the things Larsen had no idea about notwithstanding, Jana stumbled to her feet, slipping slightly in the mud but keeping her balance, and headed back to her workstation with the Hinkypunk, which she simply put in the jar from which she had already measured out her lacewing flies. It can't have been very pleasant in the jar with the stewed-fly remnants, and the Hinkypunk flared up angrily, illuminating Jana's little brewing area very nicely indeed. There were some cheers and applause from the audience, not that Jana would be able to hear it. Maybe she could see, if she looked up. Right now she was busy ignoring everything else and working on her potion.

Suddenly, the potion-making part of the arena was lit up with a vivid green flash of light, stunning even Rayman Larsen into silence for a moment; Tom's first reaction was to wonder who had just killed whom with a Killing Curse, but the flash recoiled back into the cauldron from whence it came, and then a loud bang startled everyone anew, as Saito Sumiko, who had instinctively moved to check on her potion after it produced the flash, received a faceful of emerald-green steam, and recoiled with her hands to her face, screaming.

This time, Healer Tegner didn't wait, but was in the arena and heading straight forward already. Tom grinned; if the competition was about producing the most horrific potion, this girl was winning any prizes, for sure, as she now clawed at her ostensibly undamaged face ineffectually, and fought off Tegner who had come to help her. Tegner turned to look in his bag for something, and as he did so, Saito had scrambled to her feet, and was zig-zagging as though drunkenly towards the pond.

Several things then happened at almost once: Saito plunged her face into the water, as though trying to wash off the potion, but then also clearly trying to drink the water too; the pond's resident crocodile made a dash for her, with the clear and quite credible ambition of biting her head off; and the crocodile was hit by three stunning spells.

No, the crocodile was hit by two stunning spells; the third had hit Saito, but perhaps that was just as well. Tegner lifted the girl up and put her down again a short distance from the pond, now once again looking in his bag, and pouring into her lax mouth what Tom took from Tegner's mind to be simply a Calming Draught. This seemed to be a little bit late,

as she was now stunned, but then, she'd be waking up soon, and perhaps it was indeed best that she not awaken in the same mental condition as she passed out.

As Saito was transported from the arena on a stretcher, Jana passed by going the other way with her Hinkypunk-lamp in her hand, and a cringing "don't mind me just going about my business" look on her face. She made a trip to a log, already upturned by another Champion, and squatted by it, looking at the various little critters scurrying away from the light.

Alright, you and you will do just nicely, thought Jana, taking up a rather bloated flobberworm and a large beetle with with a pair of impressive-looking nose-horns.

"I see where she's going with the beetle, but I don't know if that's going to work, substituting the horns of another two-horned creature for the horn of bicorn... and I'm intrigued with that other thing, was that a maggot? If it's a Polyjuice Potion, I don't think they work for animal transformations, if that's what she has in mind... And my word, what has happened to Bobby Tutu?!"

Attention was drawn to Tutu, who was now sporting a sizable beard, and growing; no, it was not a beard, it was some other kind of growth, and was spreading to the rest of his face, as he just stood there grinning, with an open-armed gesture to the crowd.

"It looks like Tutu has gone and tasted his potion, and is it supposed to do that? Yes, I'm told that is indeed what's to be expected of the Fungiface Potion; the Champions weren't asked to do anything with their potions once completed, but what a way to steal the show when he had time to spare"

Tom cast his eyes and mind around the remaining Champions; Jana had just now also completed her potion, having added something she squeezed out of the flobberworm as the final ingredient, her nose wrinkled in disgust as she did so.

Maybe I should drink some of mine too, she thought. *No, that would be a terrible idea,* she reasoned, and from the truly horrific image in her mind's eye, Tom certainly agreed.

Anastasia Dragomirova was still finishing the brewing of her potion, stirring it with a stalk of hemlock, and clearly had no intention of drinking any of hers. Agustina Torres, over at her own workstation, was looking smug, and did not seem to be about to emulate Tutu. Vinícius Oliveira was dejectedly stirring things into his potion and frowning; whatever he had been trying to produce, it was not going the way he wanted. François Flamme, meanwhile, was working rapidly with a knife and what looked like pond slime, but seemed to know what he was doing. From his mind, Tom took it to be some mysterious kind of layering, but was not sure yet what the overall result would be. Larsen's commentary revealed this potion to also have something to do with bubotuber pus, and finally came to the conclusion that it was a modified form of a Swelling Solution, that his advisors told him would produce uncontrollable swelling that would continue and continue until the taker burst from it. Tom smiled, and wondered if the Champions would need to drink their potions, as Tutu had done.

"And stop your brewing!" called Larsen, and with these words the light level in the arena also rose notably. The only Champion who had not already stopped now was

Oliveira, and he stopped immediately, not bothering to try to salvage his potion which was clearly incomplete, incorrect, or both.

“Well done to all the Champions”, said Larsen as though it were not so that several of them had clearly failed miserably. “Those of you still in the arena, please leave your bottled potion at your workstation, and make your way out through the exit beneath the commentary stand; you can all see me? Good. Everyone... Well, what an amazing evening this has been! We’ll all be meeting again in the Hogwarts Great Hall, so I invite everyone to make their way up there, for another sumptuous feast, and the results of tonight’s most impressive Potioneering!”

Chapter Sixteen

Prior Preparation and Planning Prevents...

In the Great Hall, there were circular tables here and there as there had been at Halloween, though they were a little more lightly loaded this time, doubtlessly on account of the different timing; after all, everyone had eaten before going to the arena.

Nonetheless, Hogwarts was not known for poor hospitality, and there was still a wide variety of potential supper-foods and drinks.

The Champions themselves arrived somewhat after everyone else, but were predictably mobbed upon entry, especially Jana, who as usual had the largest crowd of supporters, what with having the home advantage.

This time, however, before very long Jana sought Tom out; he separated himself from his fellow Slytherins a moment, to see what she wanted.

“Did you do that?”, she asked. Tom raised an eyebrow.

“What?”, he replied, looking into her mind for the answer at the same time. It was a mess of images, including:

“The crocodile, the tree branch, it was, well... like magic, the way it just cracked off the tree and all but leapt into the thing’s mouth”

“Ah, yes”, nodded Tom. “It did look like magic, and it probably was, but it was nothing to do with me”

“Hmm, I wonder who then. Is it part of the event for them to intervene like that? They didn’t waste subtlety when it was Sumiko’s turn to receive help, they went in with blazing Stunning Spells and all that. Do you think maybe Dumbledore...?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised at any interference from him”, said Tom curtly, “But”, and here his voice softened once more, “I think it was more likely just you”

“Tom, I can’t do wandless magic like you can”, objected Jana.

“No, of course you can’t”, agreed Tom, “But I’ll bet you can do it like most people can, well, most Witches and Wizards I mean, in moments of shock, surprise, anger, fear, all those sorts of things. Haven’t you ever done that?”

“Well yes, but not since I was... well, not for a very long time”

“There we are then; the mystery is solved”, proclaimed Tom, wishing all mysteries were so transparent to him; not that he had actually thought this one to be particularly mysterious, but evidently she had.

There was a ringing of a bell, no, it was not a bell, it was a silver spoon in goblet, that had been Charmed and was now behaving like a bell, high over the head of Rayman Larsen. It did the job, though, and attracted the attention of those present.

“Witches and Wizards, dear guests all”, he began as though he were the host and not, in fact, a guest himself. “We can now announce the results of today’s challenge.

Firstly, I may mention that we have lost two of our competitors, that is to say, Messrs Saito and Yú both receiving the highest quality magical medical treatment after their injuries, mental and physical, respectively, and we wish them a speedy recovery. And let me tell you, they’re both heroes in my opinion; I know I sure wouldn’t like to go toe to

toe with an angry boomslang, and while it backfired horribly, that Drink of Despair was obviously a pretty potent potion indeed”

Here Larsen initiated some applause; it wasn't clear to Tom why, but there was much applauding and nodding. Tom did at least agree that it was a potion well worth investigating.

“Now, this time the judges have ordered the remaining six competitors, ranking them in accordance with their performances. So without further ado, in sixth place we have Vinícius Oliveira, who produced a spectacular mess - personally I think it was quite horrible actually - but rather you than me in that arena, Vini”

There was more applause, as Oliveira shamefacedly took his place, looking somewhat sheepish. Had this really been the best that Brazil had had to offer? Then again, perhaps anyone could have a bad day.

“In fifth place, we have Bobby Tutu, with his rather frightening Fungiface Potion” There was more sincere applause this time, and Tutu looked quite happy about his placing, even though he had come first in the previous challenge, and one might have expected this to be recognized as something of a come-down.

“In fourth place, Mr. François Flamme, with an Uncontrollable Swelling Solution - yes, if you drank that, you'd just swell and swell until you burst all over... Well, you get the idea; it wouldn't be pretty”

Flamme seemed to be doing his best to look pleased with his fourth-place slot.

“In third place, I owe her at least two apologies for doubting her, I hope she'll forgive me, Jana Teires, who brewed a first class Polyjuice Potion completed with Flobberworm mucus; a mouthful of that foul sludge and I'm told you'd become a half-human, half-flobberworm mess, and remain that way indefinitely; there's no known reversal for it. And that, boys and girls, is why you don't brew Polyjuice for non-human transformations! Quite scary; I hope they find a cure for it soon, but happily, none of our judges were tasting these ones!”

Jana seemed to be genuinely content with her score, even if a little uneasy at all the attention.

“In second place, and I think this one was simply brilliant, we have the lovely Agustina Torres, with, wait for it, Veritaserum! Used on an unsuspecting victim, even just a few droplets of this potion will cause someone to answer truthfully to any question posed... imagine that! I'm sure you'll all agree, it could be quite a horrifying prospect indeed! Like the Polyjuice Potion, this one should normally take much longer to produce from scratch, a full lunar cycle - but like Miss Teires and her lacewing flies, Miss Torres took the ready-fermented Babbling Grapes into the arena with her, what a stroke of foresight”

Tom wasn't sure it was exactly the sign of genius to use one ready-prepared ingredient when permitted to use one ready-prepared ingredient, but he certainly did agree that the Veritaserum sounded quite alarming, and he made a mental note to find a way to protect himself against it.

“In first place, I see she's already smiling, the judges have nicknamed her Nasty Nastja after this one, we have Anastasia Dragomirova with an exquisitely crafted

Evisceration Preparation! Whoever invented a potion to disembowel the drinker, well, that person's not invited to any tea party of mine, I can say!"

Due to the later start, the festivities in the Great Hall were rather shorter this time than last, and when they finished, Tom even made it back to Slytherin House without being accosted by student or teacher, let alone both.

In the wake of the second Potions Championship challenge, it was soon that time of year when students took to obsessing over romantic entanglements both real and imagined, and would-be lovers took to Owl Order services to arrange gifts, not to mention there being a not inconsiderable trade in products to improve one's chances, ranging from love potions to personal styling products.

Tom had never been overly focussed on his appearance, valuing more highly his more personal traits. He knew people called him handsome, and he even knew that most of them meant it. He knew to be glad of that when it was useful to him. However, beyond cleanliness and as much of a nod to decorum as circumstances required, it had never been much of a preoccupation for him.

The same could not be said for a large contingent of others, and Tom had learned that many people's efforts at magically modifying their appearance did not go swimmingly in the first instance. From Iolanthe Oannes' disastrous first attempt to Charm her eyebrows, to the incident with Arthur Harding's ears, even though some people thought they suited him, and were disappointed when Healer Tegner reverted them to their normal form. A number of girls clearly habitually did mystical things with their hair; from Jana's spikes to Belinda's tight locks to Marca's super-sleek angel-hair, but when people stepped out of the realms of what they knew how to do, the results were often comical at best, and infrequently also dangerous to boot.

Even Marca, who had complained about her utter lack of bust when every other girl in their year had developed notably in a forwards direction already by the start of this year if indeed they had not previously, had not tried to do anything about this. She had mentioned it to Tom in a way that sounded like it might have been wondering if he knew how to do something, but he was most certainly not getting magically involved with her chest that he knew nothing about. She could research it herself or just wait patiently like the level-headed girl she generally was. It's not like it was important for anything, anyway.

Nevertheless, the trades in potions, lotions, and general beauty aids and accoutrements existed in both above-board and in black market forms, with students weighing up the higher costs of Owl Order to the higher risks of relying on their fellow students to not only be honest about their wares, but also competent in their production and application.

"Tom, I have something for you", said Jana one morning, glancing around furtively before reaching into her robes and producing a small crystal flask with a pearly-white liquid in it, that had a slight mother-of-pearl iridescent sheen to it.

"What is this?" asked Tom, eyebrow raised.

"Should be an Antidote to most of the Love Potions that are going around at the moment", said Jana.

"Should be? And why are you giving this to me?"

“Put it away, quickly”, said Jana.

“Just for you, Jana”, said Tom, pocketing it. “But why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”, said Jana. “The whole school’s barmy about Potions at the moment and it’s nearly Valentine’s Day. Everyone will be trying to give Love Potions to the people they fancy. You need to protect yourself”

Tom gave a slight laugh.

“How very thoughtful Jana, though I’d rather expected I’d have most need of protection from you and your potions, in that matter”

“Oh come on, Tom, if I’d have wanted to give you one I’d already have done it”, said Jana, with a very slight blush. Then her face changed a little, and she hastened to add

“And when I say *give you one*, I meant a Love Potion, not, you know...” she trailed off, as she failed to find the right words. She looked to Tom to rescue her from her embarrassment. Tom, for his part, merely regarded her, amused.

“So, who do you think will try to slip me a Love Potion?”, he asked.

“Well there’s that Zelyonaya girl for a start”, said Jana, “And I bet Jabez wouldn’t think twice - not that I expect she could brew one herself; her brewing skills don’t seem to stretch to anything much more difficult than brewing tea. But I’m sure she could get one, all the same. And you’re probably at risk from half the girls who’ve seen you duelling; a lot of girls go for the refined-but-dangerous thing”, she added, with a flicker of a smile at it herself. “You know, if you played Quidditch as well, the other half would want you too” she concluded, looking slightly crestfallen now at this train of thought.

“It’s all about being sports personality, is it, then?”, asked Tom. “You must have it made, superstar Seeker *and* daring death-defying Potions Champion for Hogwarts”

“Well, I, er... don’t know”, said Jana with a modest smile. “I’m still single anyway; must be one of the few on the House Quidditch teams who are. Mind you, Ozzy Fame seems to have a new boyfriend every month or so, so maybe she makes up for it”

“Ah”, said Tom, “the life of celebrity.”

“Fame isn’t all that”, said Jana, causing Tom to briefly wonder which kind she was talking about, “I guess it’s all small potatoes in the grand scheme of things, just very easy to get caught up in the moment”

Jana’s philosophizing notwithstanding, neither such notions of perspective nor even the oncoming Valentine’s day were going to get in the way of enthusiasm for the next Quidditch clash of the season, Slytherin vs Ravenclaw.

Of course it was very important for Slytherin to win this match, as now Gryffindor had already two wins to its House, after the matches vs Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, putting them currently in the lead for the Quidditch Cup. Naturally, Slytherin had only one win so far, having only played one match as yet, versus Hufflepuff. So they were not behind, but the pressure was decidedly on Belinda to ensure that they not become so.

It was clear that Belinda felt this pressure, but far from cracking under it, became stronger. Anybody could tell that she trained hard, and in terms of her attitude, hers was quite evidently one of steely determination, fire and fury. She had said before the previous match that she would get the Snitch or die trying, and she had kept to her word. If anything, she seemed excited to be going up against her more famous Ravenclaw

counterpart now, Ossapheme Fame, since beating her would result in rather more glory than beating Hufflepuff's Ben Mellifer to the Snitch. Last year, Hufflepuff had won only one match, and that was by default, after the Gryffindor Seeker lived up to expectations to "paint the Quidditch pitch red" in entirely the wrong fashion; face-planting into the frozen ground after a full-tilt descent on account of first catching a Bludger to the face. So, entirely nothing to do with Mellifer's skill as Seeker; as Belinda herself noted: "You know, he could have been replaced by a teddy bear attached to a broom with a Sticking Charm, and Hufflepuff would have achieved exactly the same overall score for the season". That he was still Seeker at all was something of a mystery to the Slytherins.

Today, as the players took their positions above the pitch, Tom gazed at Belinda and noted her main concern of the moment to be that Ozzy Fame had a chant to her name, and she, Belinda, as yet did not. This thought did not distract her for long though, as she resolved to show she was worthy of having one.

"And they're off! Flint in possession of the Quaffle for Slytherin, nice escort work from Beaters Black and Crabbe there - no, not that kind of escort work - a pass to Morton, there's no way Flint was getting past Larkin with the Quaffle there, Morton passes to Darkwater, nice interception by Dorcas, oh! Near miss with that Bludger, Crabbe looks angry that she missed, Colin Merle for Ravenclaw sending it back at her - it's not tennis folks - Black takes over the hot Bludger while the Quaffle's with Plaxy now, where's the other Bludger? Ah, there we are, Belinda Jabez, this is only her second match as Seeker; no sign of the Snitch yet but she'd better shake that Bludger! Howard and Black are both on it; who's going to get there first? It's Howard by a nose, but what a brilliant roll by Jabez; she's out of the woods and Ouch! Dorcas isn't so lucky for Ravenclaw as the other Bludger stops him from scoring - he doesn't seem to be injured but that's Rebecca Flint with the Quaffle again for Slytherin - Darkwater - Flint - Tabitha Plaxy dives for it, and oh, Walburga Crabbe does not like that..."

The game went on for some good while; only one goal got past Violet Selwyn, and that as she was dodging a Bludger while on her way to the goal-hoop in question. Belinda patrolled high in the air like a hawk, but Ozzy Fame caught the Snitch before Belinda had even seen it. Then Belinda made a speedy descent, even though it was far too late, to the point that the Ravenclaw Beaters actually sped first one and then the other to intervene, lest Belinda actually attack Fame on the pitch, which seemed entirely credible.

Slowed down enough by the intervention of the Beaters, Belinda held off however, but clearly fuming nevertheless. It was obvious to Tom at least that Belinda felt cheated in that Fame had caught the Snitch before she, Belinda, had had the chance to do so, having not seen it yet.

They came into the Common Room arguing ferociously. Tom's first intuitive assessment was that Selwyn had kicked Belinda off the team, but it quickly transpired that this was merely being held as a threat if Belinda didn't soon calm down and also lay off the attacks on her fellow team members. From Selwyn's point of view, for instance, it was not Walburga and Lucretia's fault that Belinda did not get the Snitch first, and suffering interruptions while looking for the Snitch was part of the job of being Seeker, and that if

Belinda didn't like that, then she, Selwyn, would draught another Seeker before one could say *Prymnesiophyceae coccolithophorid*.

"So, she doesn't want to rush anything, then", smirked Tiernan.

Belinda, for her part, seemed to have taken it as the basest of treacheries that her team-mates would not let her murder Ozzy Fame.

"And you all protecting that self-indulgent harpy; I'll knock her off her bloody perch..."

Rosier and Nott all but won themselves honorary places in Gryffindor for their bravery in trying to get her to see reason, while Emyln acted on the better part of valour and kept out of sight. Tom kept back, but also kept his wand in hand; he knew how these things could go.

What brought the situation to a close, in the end, was one of Tom's Venus Rug Traps from last year. Of course, it must have been walked over without incident a thousand times since he had been playing around with the Jinx in question, and he thought it had worn off, but either his strategic concentration on Belinda wakened it, or it just needed a victim who was behaving like a buzzy fly.

When the rug did close up around her, it startled everyone including her into momentary silence, before her ranting, now extremely muffled, recommenced almost immediately. Tom was sure he could make out the words "spiky Mudblood", but how this was anything to do with Jana was anyone's guess. Her vociferations continued for a very short while, before she started trying to blast her way out of the rug. Upon succeeding in catching herself with one of her Hexes, she finally went quiet and motionless.

"Still breathing", proclaimed Mulciber, upon gingerly checking the well-wrapped lump on the floor.

Chapter Seventeen

Highdays and Holidays

More than a week after Belinda had expressed her disappointment in the Slytherin Common Room, relations between her and Selwyn had been long-since smoothed, and Slytherin once again had their brooms flying in formation, metaphorically if not literally.

Presently it was breakfast time, and the Slytherin war machine, otherwise known as the Quidditch team, had not yet returned from their morning training session, since they had the pitch today and were making the most of it.

As the stream of owls poured into the Great Hall with the morning post they had collected from the Owl Office, Tom saw a small parcel heading straight for him, and narrowly avoided it landing on his head.

“Brega-hahaha-hoo! Hahahoo!”

“Shut up, Brega”

“Hahoo” chirruped the owl happily, until a glare from Tom persuaded the bird to adopt a less distracting demeanour.

A rather larger portion of the school than usual had post today, on account of it being Valentine’s Day, and many people sending such tokens via the Owl Office, rather than directly with their own owls. Tom had not received anything last year, and this year he now regarded the packet with some interest. He’d rather have not received it at the table. He’d have to have words with Brega on this topic, though right now he simply opened the parcel cautiously. It had better not sing at him.

Mercifully, it did not, and simply contained some chocolates, with a note written in Jana’s familiar loopy handwriting:

*Tall dark and handsome
My heart held to ransom
I’ll try to pay in sweetness
But your my greatest weakness*

Love,

You Know Who

Tom’s mind lingered on the word “your”. Even his lessons at Wool’s with Rev. Peabody had taught him when to use “your” and when to use “you’re”. Evidently Jana had either paid less attention to her own schooling, or else had received even worse schooling than his, on account of being a girl. Still, Rev. Peabody had let girls into his reading and writing class, so really she should probably have had something similar or better. Oh well.

“And so it begins” said Tiernan melodramatically.

“What, breakfast?”

“No”, laughed Tiernan. “Valentine’s Day, and the Charms and Potions that come with it - I bet they’re not just chocolates, for a start”

“Hmm”, mused Tom, tapping his fingers on the table in thought. On the one hand, they were ostensibly from Jana, potioneer extraordinaire, who seemed to be quite taken with him. On the other hand, she herself had forewarned him about such efforts, and given him a love potion antidote. On a third hand, if she wanted to poison him, she’d surely not give him the antidote to her own poison, or she might even put the love potion in what she had claimed was the antidote - though she had seemed sincere when giving it to him, and Tom did not usually fail to identify a lie. On the next hand in the sequence, it would be imprudent to simply trust to Jana’s good nature when the consequences could be quite disastrous. Of course one hand further along, she clearly did value her own moralizing, as evidenced by trying to share such with her gift of the Moral Compass.

“You alright, Tom?”, asked Tiernan, regarding Tom’s frown.

“Too many hands”, replied Tom.

“Eh?”

“Never mind. The chocolates shall be investigated”, he said with a smile, pushing them aside for a moment and certainly not breakfasting upon them.

Tom waited until they were back in the Common Room, to address Marca on her own before classes, to ask if she knew how to check on possible potions laid into the chocolates. Ignoring Julia Nettleskip and Meredith Keenhaven now exchanging opinions on him clearly wanting to catch Marca by herself, he asked:

“I need to know if chocolates I’ve received contain potions that are harmful or helpful; do you know how to check it without eating them?”

“They are from your Teires?”

“She’s not my Teires, but a Teires, the Teires, yes”

“You could offer one to her, and it would impolite for her to decline”

“But she would have the correct antidote, and anyway, a love potion for her wouldn’t work on her, would it?”

“Oh, it would work; I have seen the result when someone accidentally takes a love potion for themselves - it is not exactly dangerous to them, but, well, let us just say that they will want to be alone until the effects wear off” said Marca, with one of her rare fleeting smiles.

Tom reflected on this for a moment.

“Well, I suppose that’s an option”, he said.

“Or you could just offer one to someone else and observe any effects it produces”

“Would you like a chocolate?”, asked Tom in an innocent tone.

“Temptive”, said Marca, guessing at a word ending and guessing incorrectly, “but definitely no, thank you”.

“No really, have one”, commanded Tom with a smile, producing and offering the box now. Marca’s hand reached out for one, and paused, as though confused. She withdrew her hand.

“You are good at that”, she said, “but I retain my position. I would rather not find myself declaring my love for a Mudblood Gryffindor girl”.

“Oh, fine”, said Tom, “I’ll find another victim”.

“Do that”, said Marca with a nod. “I’m going to go get my things for lessons now; you should do so also”

Tom watched her leave, thinking about who would be best to use as a test. Tiernan would probably eat anything he gave him even if he did suspect - as he had mentioned at breakfast - that the chocolates had a potion in. After all, Tiernan had never yet failed to obey a direct command from Tom, even when it had been potentially to his own detriment. Still, it’d be very tiresome having to put up with Tiernan if he became obsessed with a girl.

“Hey, who are they from, lover-boy?” asked Belinda, who was back from morning training, and now smirking at the sight of Tom stood lost in thought holding an open box of chocolates.

“Chocolates”, said Tom. “Have one”

“Alright”, said Belinda, immediately helping herself to the largest one.

Tom watched her as she ate it, observing for any reaction. She gave him a look that said “What?” before she came to some realization herself.

“Attercop’s omelette!”

“Excuse me?”

“Who are these from?”, asked Belinda, horrorstruck. “Did you just give me something with a Love Potion in it?”

“Why, how do you feel?” asked Tom in return. “And... What omelette?”

“Never mind that; please tell me these are at least from Marca or someone, and not Jana Teires”

“Alright, they’re from Marca or someone, and not Jana Teires. How do you feel?”

“Like a fool... kind of sick...”

“Wow, maybe you are in love”, said Tom, as he’d understood from others that such was what being in love was like. He’d not experienced it personally, and his ability to enter such minds was generally somewhat hampered, as he invariably found those sentiments sufficiently unpleasant to cause him to beat a swift retreat.

“You’ve poisoned me!” exclaimed Belinda, “I’m in love with... Who am I in love with? Tell me, tell me honestly”

“You tell me”, said Tom, feeling sure that she should know, if there was any manner of Love Potion in it.

“I’d rather be in love with Marca, if I have to, but I don’t want to, I was happy with Morgan and Octavian...”

“Morgan and Octavian?”

“Rosier and Nott, honestly you boys need to hang out more if you’re not on first-name terms yet, but anyway, me, you’ve given me... Marca!” - this last word was not a completion of her sentence but rather a greeting to Marca who had now re-emerged from the second-year girls’ dormitory, after collecting her things for the morning’s lessons.

“Belinda...” replied Marca, half-reaching for her wand upon seeing the new and interesting state Belinda was in - not angry, which was a well-known scenario now, but clearly panicked.

“I might be in love with you!” blurted Belinda.

"I seriously doubt it. I am not very lovely, and you have never expressed such intention, sentiment, feelings before"

"It's his fault; he gave me a chocolate!" said Belinda, pointing to Tom accusingly.

"Ah, I understand. Those chocolates are not from me."

"Who then?", asked Belinda, looking back and forth between Tom and Marca. "Do you know?", she demanded of Tiernan, who had been hanging back, waiting for Tom but trying to not provoke Belinda. He shrugged, and made a gesture indicating he had no idea.

"The chocolates are indeed from Jana Teires, but..." began Tom, before being interrupted:

"I knew it! You've destroyed me!"

"But I don't think that she..."

"I need to go and throw up!" proclaimed Belinda urgently, "Baneberry Potion... Baneberry..." she muttered, turning on her heel and heading to the dorm that would also lead to the girls' bathroom if the layout was the same on that side. "And someone... Emyln! Where is that boy when I need him... Emyln!"

"Yeah?" replied Emyln, arriving out from the boys' dormitory. "What?"

"Tell Professor Phillips I'm sick and I won't make it to class! And I think I need a shower", said Belinda, disappearing now through the door, leaving some fair assembled crowd behind her now.

"So...?", asked Marca expectantly, of Tom.

"Nothing in them, as far as I can tell", he replied.

Tiernan, meanwhile, was now grinning broadly.

"But of all the people to test them on... That was great, Tom. Terrible, yes, but great", he laughed.

The rest of Valentine's Day passed rather more smoothly, aside from some minor tensions in shared lessons later in the day, where Jana battled an internal conflict of trying to engage Tom and avoid him at the same time, which might have been at least a little bit easier if Belinda were not constantly looking over at her and then uncharacteristically looking away herself, when Jana caught her gaze. Belinda contented herself with muttering things to, at, or about Tom, and did not dare to actually try to do anything more severe in response, as she might have considered with other people - she had never quite forgotten Tom's entirely credible threat to snap her wand, last year.

For a while longer it was "business as usual" for Hogwarts in the gap between the second and third Potions Championship challenges, with the most groundbreaking event during this time being Hufflepuff shocking the school by beating Ravenclaw in their head-to-head in the Quidditch Cup, and not only that, but with Mellifer catching the Snitch barely ten minutes after the game, and all of one goal being scored, that by Hufflepuff Chaser Nicholas Mervyn. Ravenclaw, Ozzy Fame and all, had just had their hopes dashed by rank outsiders Hufflepuff, going back to their tower to reflect on their hundred-and-sixty-points-to-nothing defeat.

As March came around, Easter for the Eastern calendar was not at the same as for Britain, this year, and Antonin and Marca were staying at Hogwarts. So was Tiernan,

meaning there would be far more second-year Slytherins at school during the holiday than Tom would have expected. So much for time to himself in the castle, but still, it was not so bad.

“My parents will visit to Hogsmeade at Easter”, said Antonin, “We will probably drink tea or such together, but will you join me in the visit?”

“I’d be happy to accompany you at least into the village”, replied Tom. “I daresay your parents will be content to catch up with you without my intrusion”

“Perhaps, but they like you also, you know”, said Antonin.

When the time came, the walk into Hogsmeade was pleasant enough, as the weather was quite mild for being as it was still only the end of March. Tiernan hummed happily, and Tom offered to teach him to fly. Tiernan was receptive to this, until he realized Tom meant that they would simply throw him off the viaduct.

Upon entering the village, a brightly coloured crimson poster, ostensibly some campaign to do with the likelihood Grindelwald’s influence and activities continuing to spread, bore the words:

“Keep Calm and Carry a Wand”

A strange piece of advice; didn’t everyone carry a wand? Then again, perhaps people carelessly left their wands somewhere out of arm’s reach - after all, Tom himself had done this on occasion. Really, someone so careless probably deserved to die; a thought that angered Tom, since he himself had committed such an error, and he now resolved to never be so inattentive again.

“So, I will meet with my parents in Tarryfattle’s Teashop”, announced Antonin, “Which I think is this way”, he said, leading on.

It wasn’t that way at all, but fortunately Hogsmeade was not very large, and they weren’t too terribly late by the time they finally found the place, complete with Antonin’s parents inside, wondering if he had forgotten.

They were pleased to see their son, and Tom too, and made polite investigations into the backgrounds of Tiernan and Marca.

“And you are here with which of these young men?”, asked Sasho, of Marca.

“I am here with all of them”, said Marca, “But not in the way you perhaps think”, she clarified, upon the reaction the first part of her reply had met.

Conversation strayed through numerous topics, from academia to the Potions Championship to duelling to Quidditch, to Grindelwald, and even to the Muggle war. As the conversation grew tedious, Tom bade the others to continue enjoying the conversation, but that he needed to visit the nearby bookshop before it closed, for a research project. Naturally he was asked what project, but they were satisfied with his vague response about history and ancestry, and soon he achieved his freedom from the teashop.

His excuse was also his actual reason, or at least part of it, and soon he was perusing the appropriate section of *Tomes and Scrolls*.

“Hello”

Tom looked around; it was another student from school, a Ravenclaw from an older year - she was perhaps a third-year.

"Hello", he replied, wondering why she was talking to him. Then he remembered she had been amongst the Ravenclaws that had been in the wandlore discussion in the Great Hall on his birthday.

"It's a Bookworm, isn't it?", she asked, pointing to the thing as wriggled persistently at the spine of one of the books.

"It is", replied Tom, simply.

"I've not seen one before, but I've read about them. I see it wants you to read this Scealwiggins book, but they're all a bit fantastical really, they don't give good sources. If it's local history you're into, you'd be better off with anything by McPlinny"

"Should I trust you over the Bookworm?", asked Tom with a raised eyebrow. It was in the Bookworm's nature to give him ideal recommendations. What was in her nature? "Bookworms want you to read whatever you'll find most engaging, most stimulating", said the Ravenclaw, "But that doesn't always mean best; sometimes the most exciting reads aren't necessarily the most factual"

"Oh, but they should be", said Tom with a smirk.

"I know we've talked before", said the Ravenclaw, "But I'm afraid I forget your name, what is it?"

"Riddle. Tom Riddle. And yours?"

"Sofia Clarence, Ravenclaw"

"Sofia Clarence-Ravenclaw?", echoed Tom. "Are you related to..."

"No, I'm Sofia Clarence, and I'm a Ravenclaw"

"Ah, I see. Maybe I should start introducing myself as Tom Riddle-Slytherin", he mused.

"Hah, I bet any Slytherin would kill to be actually related to Slytherin"

"Perhaps, but I'm not sure that's how genealogy works", observed Tom wryly.

"Well, from what I understand it, the Slytherin line died out long ago, unless you believe the likes of Scealwiggins, anyway, so you might just have to settle for being a Riddle - hey, that works, too", she added, hitting on a play on words that was not new to Tom. "Sorry, I bet you've heard that once or twice before", she appended.

"Something like it", affirmed Tom.

Marca entered the shop at this moment, and greeted Tom, with a passing cordial nod to Clarence, acknowledging her presence before proceeding to ignore her.

"I have escaped from the teashop. Antonin's parents think that Antonin and I should court. Tiernan thinks it is funny, and Antonin is probably trying to Transfigure himself into a table ornament by now."

"I'll leave you to your social intrigues", said Clarence to Tom, turning to leave.

"Wait", commanded Tom. Clarence paused. "I'm going to buy this book recommended by the Bookworm despite what you say against the author, but the other writer you mentioned..."

"McPlinny"

"McPlinny, what would you recommend to look at from McPlinny?"

“Anything really would be better than Scealwiggins, but if you read only one book by McPlinny, or just want a starting point, then I’d say go for “Legacies of the Hogwarts Four”.

“Thank you”, said Tom. “You can go now”

Normally people just took Tom’s dismissals at face value; Clarence seemed a little amused by it, but departed all the same promptly enough, making good on her intention to leave the Slytherins to their social intrigue which did not, in fact, interest Tom very much; nor did Marca have much more to say on the topic beyond that she deferred any such decisions regards potential pairings for now.

They made their way back to Tarryfattle’s, books having been purchased by both of them (Tom was pleased that Marca did not ask how it came to be that he now had sufficient money to spend on such), their return carefully timed for the teashop’s closing.

As they headed back up to the castle thereafter, Tom and Marca were eager to spend time with their new acquisitions, Antonin had recovered from having to defend his non-relationship with Marca, and Tiernan was doing as Tiernan most often did, cheerily tagging along for the ride, not really seeming to have any personal plans, but keen to benefit from anything that was going on around him; a hanger-on, but a flexible one, ever ready to shift positions should the winds change.

Tom observed that if this was a group, he was the hub of it, but for now he didn’t resent that. They weren’t cumbersome, and in fact they added more to his life than they detracted. It was not a bad situation, he thought.

Chapter Eighteen

Fleshly Fears

As the final challenge of the Potions Championship would take place at midnight, and Tom did not want to bet on the quality of their lighting, nor rely on noctacles, he had researched the matter of the Cat-Eye Potion, with a view to brewing it. It'd be handy for this event, and definitely a good potion to know for the future in general - and that without even taking into consideration Tom's vague hope to find a way to modify it to make the effects longer lasting; permanent if possible.

He'd approached Selwyn first; her haughty and aloof manner in response to the enquiry reminded him of Dorea Black, who had now left school and gone on to work for the Department of Magical Law enforcement, though it was rumoured she might not stay there long, what with it surely only being a matter of time before she married her surprisingly stable boyfriend, and settled down to spawn new legions of the Black family, though come to think of it, they'd be taking on her boyfriend's name, so, Potter. That had rather less of a ring to it. Though by all accounts the Potter family was Pureblood, Tom could not help thinking that with a name like "Potter", they must surely have Muggle blood down the male line somewhere.

In any case, Selwyn told Tom her ex-boyfriend had made it - apparently their relationship was less stable than that between Black and Potter, and Tom had certainly heard of them being distinctly "on and off". Presently they were "off", but that didn't stop Tom speaking with the boy, Parkinson, to find out about it.

"I can't", he explained after some interrogation from Tom and giving very little information, "Look, don't tell Violet, but I just bought it and re-bottled it and said I made it"

It turned out that he had bought it from none other than Slughorn's Emporium, an Owl Order business that their own dear Professor ran on the side. As Slughorn had been warned off selling potions to Hogwarts students, they bought potions under their parents' names, and Slughorn astutely did not ask any questions about why some of the parents had such interesting - not to mention often juvenile - tastes in potions.

Tom had no parents, and his legal guardian when it came to matters of magical relevance was held to be Slughorn himself, what with the Statute of Secrecy and the fact his idiot hosts at Wool's were more or less ignorant of his magical abilities - and the Ministry of Magic was perversely keen to keep it that way. He could of course have ordered via someone else's parents; Tiernan's or Antonin's, for instance; but frankly, he'd rather learn to brew it himself, so he went ahead and directly asked Slughorn for the recipe. He recognized this was a bit cheeky, asking the Wizard for the recipe of something he sold, but then, he was first and foremost their Potions teacher.

Happily, Slughorn was content to acquiesce, so Tom didn't have to resort to his plan B, asking Jana. She'd doubtlessly be happy to help, but Tom rather preferred going to Slughorn, or else she'd probably just make it herself and gift it to him, which would be all very well and good, but he valued self-sufficiency and did actually want to know how to do it. After acquiring the recipe from Slughorn, however, he did at least go so far as to ask her if she had any input to add regards its brewing, as she so often did.

"I've never seen this potion before", she said, her eyes taking in the recipe hungrily.

"But I will say that it'll definitely be best brewed under low light conditions - might seem a bit silly to have to use your noctacles if you still have them, but they'd probably be helpful - and ideally brew it during the hours of natural darkness, on the night of a new moon would probably be perfect; when is the next new moon, do you know?"

He checked the date of the next new moon ("Ooh, shiny", said Jana, having not seen the watch previously) and thanked her for her input, as Slughorn waddled into the room and Tom turned back to his own workbench for the lesson they would now share.

"This is a lot better than noctacles, Riddle!", said Mulciber with some measure of enthusiasm. "We owe you one!"

"I'm glad you agree", replied Tom with a smile.

Tom and the Slytherins who had assembled near him in the stands now sported the dimly glowing feline eyes associated with the use of the Cat-Eye Potion. This went for Tom, Tiernan, Antonin, Marca, Belinda, Emlyn, and the third-years Nott, Rosier, and Mulciber. Tom detected notable envy from those outside their little group, as everyone else outside of these nine Slytherins had to make do with the silly noctacles. Within the group, he detected some envy of the Vantamantine cloaks sported by himself, Antonin, and Marca; their impenetrable blackness looked even more impressive with everything in such sharper contrast and better light.

The arena for this challenge, another purpose-built temporary addition to the Hogwarts grounds, took the form of a large circular theatre-like arrangement, with the central area divided into four equal quarters by low walls. The lighting, taking the form of a large lamp atop a column in the centre, cast flickering shadows over the centre-most aspect of the quadrants, each of which contained a narrow archway where no light penetrated. It could be that the quadrants were linked by these archways, or it could be that they led nowhere, or even some other place entirely.

In the outer parts of the quadrants stood a table in each one, and against the outer walls, cabinets with various glassware and ingredients. Larsen's voice, magnified as usual by the *Sonorus* Charm, resounded through the crowds, causing a hush amongst the spectators as he made his introduction and would presumably get around to explaining the challenge:

"Welcome back one and all, here we are again, now at midnight and now with a more refined pool of Champions!"

There was some fair applause; reasonable enough, as the previous challenge wiping half of the competitors out of the Championship was indeed quite impressive. Two hospitalizations, one resignation in shame after the Brazilian Champion failed to produce anything meaningful in the second challenge (and thus had surely no hope whatsoever now of winning), and a second resignation in fear, unless one was to believe the more diplomatic explanation of Flamme's withdrawal from the competition having to do with trouble back in France.

At the same time, the Champions themselves appeared in the arena - literally appeared, by Portkey again, landing into their respective quadrants. They looked around

uneasily. The Championship had got distinctly darker from the first challenge to the second, and for all they knew that was a trend that would continue tonight in more than just the literal sense of it being midnight rather than dusk. The applause grew quicker and louder upon their apparition.

Jana's eyes found Tom's in the crowd - not difficult, given the current state of them making him quite recognizable. Add the distinctive cloaks, and even with the worst vision ever she'd only have to be able to tell him and Antonin from each other, as she was hardly going to mistake Marca for him. She smiled at the sight of his Potion-modified eyes. Then she looked around to try to find her Gryffindor friends, and struggled rather more; her smile faltered. Of course they were there, but the difficulty in picking them out brought to her mind that perhaps she should have arranged Cat-Eye Potion for them herself, instead of just helping Tom with his brewing of it and then forgetting all about her other friends. She promised herself she'd make it up to them after the event. Assuming she got out in one piece. She tried to concentrate on her immediate surroundings, instead of fluttery ideas of friendship.

"Last round, our Champions enjoyed a slight time advantage in accordance with their performances in the first round. This round, I can all but assure you that having extra time in the arena would not help at all, but when making decisions at the end, the judges will be considering the Champions' performances from all three challenges, so efforts in the last round will of course not go to waste - and that's without counting that it became a knockout round! Not the way the competition was planned, but nobody can argue it wasn't exciting"

It amused Tom to hear Larsen talking so frivolously about the matter, but most of the audience seemed to be hanging on his words regardless.

"Tonight our remaining Champions will each be facing their worst fears in the arena; you guessed it, we've arranged a Boggart for each of them, but they won't know it's a Boggart until it does something to give itself away. Of course they don't have wands, so the usual Boggarty Charms are not going to help them here, they'll have to get creative. As to the explanation *they've* received, all they've been given is a one-word cryptic instruction: Win!"

As the final challenge began, Dragomirova's Boggart was the first to emerge from its shadows, a leering centaur that trotted out of the archway. Dearly missing her wand, she retreated around to the other side of her workbench, and her mind started reaching for solutions to the problem of an obviously impending centaur attack. She came to the idea of counterattacking with the glassware sooner than she came to any potion. The glassware in question shook and rattled behind her. The centaur smirked, and advanced upon her. It was clear she had little time to get doing whatever she was going to do.

Agustina Torres had approached her Boggart before it emerged; evidently she was curious about the dark corner of her quadrant. As she investigated the deepest darkness there, the shadows flitted and shifted, such that now there was visible a tall mirror, not unlike the one that Tom had encountered in the Lost and Found room, except that this was oval rather than rectangular. A mirror was indeed an interesting Boggart - there was a puerile joke in there somewhere, thought Tom - but sure enough, Torres stopped in her

tracks and recoiled in horror, her eyes transfixed by the mirror, or rather the image therein.

In the mirror, visible to the spectators on the wrong side of the arena (as Tom was) via the Telespectral Glass that once again hung over the four quadrants, the image was not of Torres as she was, but grown up a bit further, no, more than that, developing wrinkles and grey hairs, growing old before their eyes. Torres clutched at her hair and regarded her hands, before running them on her face, momentarily unsure which reality to believe, like a person who has just woken from a nightmare and fumbles to check that their teeth haven't really crumbled into chalky gravel.

It wasn't too long though before Torres realised that it at least might be a Boggart. She'd seen Boggarts before, and they did things like this. And unlike Dragomirova with the centaur, her Boggart was something less easily mistaken for the real thing. This distinction made the competition a touch unfair, thought Tom, but he wasn't complaining at the entertainment. By this time, Torres was resorting to what was apparently her go-to aging-Boggart funny image, and vividly imagining herself with bright blue hair. With the *Riddikulus* Charm, this would have transferred to the Boggart properly, but as it was, it managed only a flicker of blue for an instant. Her suspicion confirmed though, she smiled and gave a half-laugh, not nearly enough to cause a problem for the Boggart, but enough to steady her nerves a little and clear her mind enough to start thinking about the ingredients to a Laughing Mixture, in lieu of the ability to conjure a *Riddikulus* Charm.

Agustina Torres was, to this end, faring immeasurably better so far than Anastasia Dragomirova, who was now rapidly going through her ingredients inventory for anything sufficiently dangerous to constitute a weapon.

The third Boggart to attract attention to itself was that of Bobby Tutu, and it presented itself as a macabre not-quite-person-shaped mass of rotting flesh dressed in tattered rags, that alternately crept and glided slowly but inexorably towards him.

"Expecto... Oh dear" said the Jamaican Champion to himself.

"Looks like Bobby's got himself a Lethifold", commented Larsen cheerfully, "I wonder how long it's going to take him to realize it's not out for his soul, just his fear"

Meanwhile, In Jana's corner, out from the archway in her segment came perhaps the most surprising of Boggarts; a boy of about Tom's age. He looked like he'd been in war; perhaps he had, though he was wearing pyjamas, of all things. From the look of him, he may have been caught in a bomb-blast and survived with minor injuries; he had scarring to his face and head, and his hair was uneven where it wasn't growing out of scar tissue. His face made him look like it'd been hit with a brick and then allowed to heal in its new position, giving an ugly asymmetry to the face. Aside from that, it appeared to be an ordinary human boy in pyjamas.

Tom tried to read the boy's mind, but - perhaps as it was in fact a Boggart, and not an actual person - the effort to do so merely redirected his attention to Jana herself, and her own anxiety.

"Not real. Not real. It's not real. Can't be real" went her internal monologue. Nothing to immediately suggest who or what it was, though her heart was pounding and it was clear that this apparition was producing a fear response for some reason.

"But no, you really can't be real, since you're just my...", was Jana's thought, slightly calmer now than at first, "Boggart, you're my Boggart", she said, now out loud. "Alright, Boggart, Potions, Potions, Boggart" - she trailed off, clearly now thinking on how to deal with a Boggart with potions as opposed to a Charm. Her heart was still beating quickly, but she was now much more in control. "Ha!" she exclaimed, actually cracking a smile now. "I do... Yeah, I can do this".

Like Torres, she now took to producing Laughing Mixture. While the former had a slight edge on her in terms of time, having identified the Boggart as such more quickly, she was going about her work with a much cheerier demeanour, almost ignoring her Boggart.

She looked very much in her element as she ground up dried Flabberghasted Leeches in a big bowl, and measured Hibiscus Syrup in a comical flask.

Most of the attention from Tom, Larsen, and the audience at large alike remained on Dragomirova for the time being, though, who was faring by far the worst of the four. She had clearly not yet identified that her Boggart was anything other than a centaur, and in her evasion of it had not given over much time to actual Potion-brewing, but was definitely earning her keep in entertainment value.

The limelight was stolen once again by Tutu, however - or rather outright created, as a bright white flash flared in his quadrant. Unlike with Saito, however, this time it was an intentional flash, it seemed, as the Boggart was now enrobed in fiercely burning white flame, born of some concoction of Tutu's, shortly identified as a Sticking Starfire Potion.

Tutu watched his work with a smile, but the Boggart remained unharmed, and as the flames flickered and died, so did Tutu's smile.

Meanwhile, both Agustina Torres and Jana had produced and consumed their Laughing Mixtures, and Jana's Boggart was already beginning to sputter out of existence as she jovially offered it some potion too. The blue-haired elderly Agustina-Boggart, in the other quarter, lasted a little longer than Jana's, but only just, before it too was no more.

Both were invited by Championship Officials to exit the arena, rather than have to twiddle their thumbs until the time ran out for the other competitors. They joined Larsen up in the commentary box, to watch the rest of the event with some interest.

The other two competitors, having been obviously by some necessary Charm unable to hear the merry-making in their neighbours' quarters (it would rather have given the Boggarts away more quickly, as soon as the first Champion came to laughter), were now recognizing their own Boggarts to be at least potentially such. Tom observed this from their minds, before Larsen observed it from Dragomirova's Boggart, and wondered at it from Tutu's behaviour.

Dragomirova's test-run thoughts about a rich girl's pony with pink ribbons and bells, caused her centaur-Boggart to momentarily incorporate the pink ribbons and bells into its own appearance, enough to cause Dragomirova's mood to lighten notably, even though the Boggart angrily regained its more fearsome appearance almost immediately.

In Tutu's case, Tom observed from his mind flashes of some encounter with Lethifolds before, some person becoming victim to them. A woman, with just a few wrinkles, and flecks of grey in her hair. Perhaps Tutu's mother, or grandmother. Tom had no intuitive sense of how old mothers were supposed to be. The memory was causing

Tutu to pay less attention to the Boggart itself, until he realized with some alarm that he had been somewhat off-guard - then he wondered why the Lethifold had not completed its attack, and came to the conclusion that it might be a Boggart.

Tutu had no strong plan for dealing with Boggarts, no funny image; there was no way he had been able to think of to make a Lethifold funny, not with his memory as it was. He would get someone else to deal with a Boggart if he encountered one, perhaps like many people did with unpleasant but otherwise harmless household pests. That approach wasn't going to get him a lot of mileage here in the arena, but he was now facing his fear of the Lethifold in a calmer fashion again, as he had been when he thought it was a Lethifold being destroyed by the Starfire Potion - which, Larsen commented that he had been advised, probably would not have worked on a Lethifold either.

In neither of the cases of Dragomirova and Tutu did they have sufficient time to brew something useful, like a Laughing Mixture or similar - Euphoria Elixir perhaps, Jollity Juice maybe, and so on - even if they had the remaining resources. Both settled for biding their time, each with their own distinct kind of unease, but neither exactly scared out of their minds, nevertheless.

Once back in the Great Hall, three of the four finalists were now already stood near Larsen; after all, there wasn't much suspense at this stage - it was fairly obvious who they were, and one could even guess quite readily at their positions within those three places.

"Our fightiest of Russian Champions has declined to take part in the presentation ceremony, so we'll be moving straight on to our three finalists, and what a trio they are", said Larsen, without wasting further words on the now-absent Dragomirova.

"In third place, yep, I think you know" - Bobby Tutu was already grinning and had turned to Larsen in readiness - "Bobby Tutu, I can honestly say that was some impressive potion-making, just a pity it wasn't the potion for the real task at hand. How do you feel about it? You're looking pretty happy to finish in the top three"

"Happy it wasn't really a Lethifold", said Tutu, laughing. "Anyway, couldn't lose to two lovelier ladies", he said, gesturing to the girls. Tom raised an eyebrow, wondering as to Tutu's definition of "lovely" and "ladies".

"Well third place is hardly losing in this Championship", said Larsen, "But onto the lovely ladies in question, in second place we have Miss Agustina Torres of Argentina!"

Torres accepted her second-place position with far more grace than her last-place position in the first round.

"The blue hair really was something", said Larsen, "You recognised your Boggart the soonest, and went straight to a great solution, brewing it nearly as quickly as the winner - for the overall placement, I'm told it was only your performance in the first challenge that let you down, so this one was a close one"

Some hand-shaking and kissing of cheeks later, Larsen finally turned to Jana.

"So, in first place, it's the home team, or home team of one at least! You realize you're the only Champion to have produced a potion that was complete, effective, timely, and relevant, in each and every challenge?"

"I hadn't thought about it like that", said Jana, "I just kind of stumbled through"

“You did more than that”, said Larsen, “But the question everyone’s dying to ask... Who or what was that Boggart?”

Tom was indeed also interested for an answer, and as was his habitude, his mind penetrated hers in a quest to take the answer from her more promptly. He was surprised to be met with a barrage of profanity with a tone of panic; he would not have expected her internal thoughts to swear this much; nor would he expect her to be so panicked at the mere mention of her Boggart, without even its presence.

“Some...one... something... Well, from my past anyway, but I really would rather talk about literally anything else... Please”

Well, that was a non-answer; it wasn’t exactly going to be someone or something from her future. Oh well, Tom could extract the answer from her later. For now, Larsen accepted her answer graciously enough, and Jana’s thoughts were only on the image Tom - and everyone - had already seen.

Jana was presented with a trophy, of which she was soon relieved when she didn’t know where to put it. Clearly it would be going to the school Trophy Room, rather than staying with Jana. She didn’t seem too interested in the trophy, though, perhaps a little overwhelmed still, and before long she seemed even happy for Dumbledore to do his personal party trick of interfering, in this case making her excuses for her and walking her from the Great Hall. Notwithstanding a few puerile jokes exchanged between students about Dumbledore’s intentions, the remaining crowd seemed to be less sure what to do now that the star of the evening had been kidnapped, and the party wound up not long afterwards, with Larsen wishing everyone well and insincerely expressing his hope of seeing them again soon.

Chapter Nineteen

Prophet and Loss

With the Potions Championship now behind them, many students became more acutely aware of the looming end-of-year exams, and just how near they really were now. A lot of them even took up obscure and arcane practices, such as “actually studying”. Right now though, anything else was about to get at least briefly forgotten, as breakfast was interrupted by the morning post.

“It seems we are now at war”, declared Marca, who had no mail, but a copy of the Daily Prophet.

“Who’s we, and and what’s war?”

“Everyone, more or else, look”, she said, showing the front page, which sported in large letters:

Mass Muggle Murder Grindelwald Goes Too Far Ministry Declares Open War

It took Tom a moment to realise that these things were connected, and not in fact separate stories.

“We’ve gone to war over some dead Muggles?”, asked Tom, skeptically.

“Some tens of thousands of dead Muggles, yes”

“That is quite a lot”, agreed Tiernan, while Tom silently contemplated how satisfying it must have been.

“How did he do it?”, asked Tom, leaning around Marca to eagerly read through the article. “And this means they know about us, right? Muggles are dim-witted, but they can’t overlook this, can they?”

“Imperius Curse”, said Marca. A few more Slytherins had gathered around now, clustering around the newspaper; a glance revealed the same was happening at various other places around the Great Hall, where newspapers had been received.

“What, he got them to kill themselves? Oh, no... He got them to kill each other... Damn them to botheration”, complained Tom bitterly, “They’ll be able to blame this on the Muggle war, won’t they?”

“They are most dangerous in the state in which they are also most weak, in slavish obedience”, opined Marca.

“Muggles? Dangerous?” scoffed Tiernan. “Come, Marca, they’re harmless”

“They’re hazards to themselves”, weighed in Abraxas, “they flounder without us, or else tear each other apart”

“Well they do not do exceptionally better with Wizarding guidance, it seems”, said Marca, pointing back at the “mass murder” headline.

“It’s a sacrifice”, said Abraxas, “for the Greater Good, like Grindelwald says”.

“Well, it certainly wasn’t for the good of those particular Muggles”, said Tom with a cold laugh, “but the principle is sound, I’ll grant”.

Marca looked up at Tom, at these words.

“What does your Moral Compass have to say about it?”, she asked.

“To be honest, I don’t think it works very well, really”, said Tom.

“I could have told you that”, chuckled Tiernan.

“I think a benevolent dictatorship is what is needed”, said Marca thoughtfully, “If Muggles cannot govern themselves because they lack the ability to...”

“Dumbledore is passing by”, interrupted Tiernan.

“What?”

“Professor Dumbledore is passing by”, he repeated, clearly concerned for their conversation being overheard by a teacher who might disapprove of their anti-Muggle sentiments. He needn’t have worried; indeed, the auburn-haired grouchy eccentric was approaching, his lily-and-gold robes flowing behind him, and a grim steely look on his face, but he also appeared to be lost in thought, and not paying any attention to the students he was striding past on his way out of the Great Hall. Tom wished he could see into his mind, but wishing wasn’t getting him anywhere.

“I’ve heard he’s a big supporter of Muggle rights”, said Tiernan.

“I don’t know”, said Abraxas, “I heard he was involved in some Muggle-baiting or something, ages ago, before he was a teacher; think he Cursed some Muggles and got in trouble for it”.

“Where did you hear that?”, asked Tiernan.

“Not sure now... I think my father heard about it, he was talking with my Uncle Marius one Christmas”

“Our Uncle Marius?”

“Maybe”, replied Abraxas slowly, thinking about it. Tiernan and Abraxas now became distracted; they had the opposite problem to Tom when it came to genealogy; his ancestry was so unknown and unexplored; theirs was so well-known and so well-explored that it was easy to get lost in the thicket. Yes, thought Tom, that was it; they didn’t have family trees at all, they had thoroughly entangled family thickets.

Regardless, it didn’t seem there was any more information to be had about Dumbledore, as they now were seeking a third opinion from down the table about someone’s Aunt Cassy’s maiden name, which was probably but not necessarily Black. Of course, there were plenty of other things also to distract the students from distant goings-on such as mass murder and the outbreak of war:

“I can’t wait to finally go straight up against Teires”, enthused Belinda, “I’m going to thrash her, I’ll show her what a real Witch with real magical blood can do, not a Muggle-spawned freak of chance that some idiot let wield a wand”

“Because last year’s battle of the Witches between you went so well?”, smirked Tom, recalling the memorable duel between the two girls towards the end of last year, when things had been particularly heated in the run-up to the culmination of the House Cup.

“Hey, it wasn’t me bleeding from every orifice and stunning everyone in sight”

“I don’t think anyone was in sight for her; her eyes were full of blood”

“Exactly, and I’d say that means I won” said Belinda, grinning at the clearly cherished memory, and obviously ignoring the fact that she had only succeeded in Cursing Jana in a surprise attack *after* Jana had already won their duel in accordance with the rules. “And if Merrythought hadn’t gone and Stunned me...”

“...and put you in detention in a Doxy-infested dungeon, which Teires got to skip” offered Meredith, seemingly thinking a reminder to be necessary.

“Yeah, but I’m going to make the pathetic Mudblood pay, when all her stupid admirers and hangers-on realize she’s not worth it and she’s just been lucky before now”

Tom shook his head in amusement at her level of self-belief, but then, it was no bad thing perhaps, going into competition.

Over at the Quidditch pitch not long afterwards, Hufflepuff were in excellent spirits despite their House not having a vested interest in this game; no matter how this final between Gryffindor and Slytherin went, they were coming last regardless. They were just still in good cheer after their recent victory against reigning champions Ravenclaw, and now were cheering enthusiastically for both sides, and Tom wondered what potions they had been taking.

As for the other Houses: since Ravenclaw had this season been beaten by Gryffindor, but beaten Slytherin in turn, Ravenclaw sentiment was overall in favour of Gryffindor for this match, since a Gryffindor victory over Slytherin would help vindicate their own loss, if Gryffindor showed they were a seriously strong team this year, and would put Slytherin in... third place, would it be?, so plenty was riding on this for the egos of all three non-Hufflepuff Houses.

No pressure on Belinda, then. After the loss against Ravenclaw, if anything her personal fire and fury had redoubled, along with that of her team-mates. Milton Mulciber had been heard to joke that it had been nice knowing Lucretia and Walburga, and that he would send them chocolate frogs to their cells in Azkaban after the match. Seemed reasonable enough; vicious girls they could be, certainly living up to the standards of “Violent Violet”. So much for the fairer sex, thought Tom.

While Ravenclaw’s team had five boys and only two girls on it (Ozzy Fame and Tabitha Plaxy), Slytherin’s team had the opposite: five girls and only two boys on it (Douglas Darkwater and Owen Morton). It was sometimes suggested that the third Chaser, Rebecca Flint, should be an honorary boy, to even things out a bit; this suggestion had not been made in her earshot lately, though, not after what she did to the last person to suggest it to her directly. Tom didn’t see why it should be a tremendously big deal, but apparently some people thought differently.

Nevertheless, Gryffindor’s team had been undefeated this year with its near-even line-up of four boys and three girls, so maybe there was something in it. Or maybe nothing at all. After all, what did physical power matter up on a broom? And when it came to what was between one’s legs, surely the point of relevance was the broomstick in use, and not anything else. Perhaps some of the lighter and slimmer body shapes could get more speed, and they’d tend to be girls? Not that either Belinda or Jana were exactly beanpoles in shape; Belinda was rather taller, but both girls had curves that set them well aside from the boys or the likes of Marca, for that matter.

At present though, it seemed the game might even be decided by players other than the Seekers; if there was a weak link in the Gryffindor team, it was their Keeper, Hector Egmont, who was clearly not a patch on Selwyn. The Gryffindor Seekers might have been slightly better team players than their Slytherin counterparts, but the snakes were racking up points rather more rapidly than the lions, partly on account of the Keepers' skills, and partly on account of Beaters Walburga and Lucretia having a better time of it than their opposite numbers Gideon Keane and Fergus Laghlan, disrupting more goal efforts in the process.

When the Seekers did get some action, it was Belinda who saw the Snitch first, but lost it again - embarrassingly, down by the Ravenclaw stands. Soon giving up on an immediate re-acquisition, she regained height and renewed her search. Jana, for her part, hung motionless near the middle of the pitch, surveying the scene intently, until she was prompted back into motion by a Bludger. On this occasion the Bludger by chance ended up helping her, as in her flight she found the Snitch to be near her, and sped after it.

Naturally, Belinda was soon in hot pursuit immediately behind her, and a couple of turns later, the two girls moving almost as one item; Belinda's foot periodically pushing against Jana's broom, Jana pushing away one of Belinda's hands as it alternated between trying to reach for the Snitch, and trying to keep Jana from doing the same. Both could clearly have done with extra hands; there was only so much that one could do when one must control a broom, fight an enemy without accruing penalties (contact was allowed in Quidditch, but not grabbing hold of each other's brooms or bodies), and try to catch the Snitch, all at once. However, as they both wanted the Snitch, they were both trying to go in the same direction, and were - miraculously - still in hot pursuit of it.

They broke apart from each other again, but only for a moment, as upon another turn Belinda kicked Jana in the head, and Jana grasped Belinda's ankle to save herself, disrupting her trajectory for an instant and gaining a little on her, but letting go instantly as well, clearly afraid of getting a penalty that never came.

The two Seekers parted ways for the final time in the game when a Bludger hurtled at them both, for when they next made contact, fingers closed around the Snitch and ended the game. At the same time, they were in a descent already, and soon came to a skidding halt on the ground. After a moment's indiscernible scuffle, Belinda held the Snitch triumphantly aloft, and Jana nursed ostensibly broken fingers.

Professor Vassy, refereeing, ignored Slytherin House's deafening cheers, and insisted to perform a Snitch check, as she could not say for sure who had caught it first, based only on what she could see. The commentator, an older student from who-knew-what House, but who had seemed impartial during the match, explained for any new to the sport that the Snitch was Charmed to remember the first flesh with which it came into contact, and would re-open upon touching the same flesh a second time, by means of a powerful magic that could not be easily hoodwinked by tricks or Jinxes; any attempt to open the Snitch by force, or to fool its flesh-memory in any fashion, and it would stay shut forever.

Belinda now looked somewhat stoney-faced at the prospect of not getting the win, though from her mind Tom was led only to a memory of her fingers closing around Jana's and

onto the Snitch, not of any obvious deception. Jana, at the same time, was now coughing and choking on a potion she had been passed by Healer Tegner, and when she finished spluttering, she flexed her fingers, which were now good as new, but looked no happier than Belinda.

The Snitch was passed first to Belinda, who had claimed the victory. The entire school was silent, waiting, but the Snitch did not open. Some Gryffindors were the first to break the silence, but before they could get into full celebration mode, the Snitch was taken off Belinda, who now appeared to be in shock, and passed to Jana, to confirm the win. The Gryffindors quietened down again, and it was some moments before murmurs began, and some shouts about the Snitch being broken, because it wasn't opening for Jana either, and obviously one of them or the other had caught it first.

This had not happened before in the memory of anyone immediately around Tom, or the commentator for that matter, and it took some minutes while the proper solution was found, as even Vassy was unsure and did not want to commit to a decision that could be against the rules. Upon checking in a giant book that came flying into the arena, causing the players near Vassy to duck in surprise as it hastily obeyed her Summoning Charm with little regard for their personal space, it was found that in the case of a Snitch malfunctioning in the Snitch check, and opening for either both Seekers or neither, the win would be awarded to the team that had accrued the greatest tally of points - in this case, Slytherin. They wouldn't get the extra hundred and fifty points that they were due if Belinda had indeed caught the Snitch first, but at least they had won the match, meaning they had won the Quidditch Cup, something they not only wanted for its own sake, but also badly needed if they were to have any chance of pulling back the House Cup from Gryffindor, who had been doing well in duelling, but had also gained a lot of points from the performances in the Potions Championship.

Belinda was now doing acrobatic tricks in jubilation; Jana, meanwhile looked like she was trying not to cry; her thoughts were confusing and erratic, as Tom had often found people's thoughts to be when they were upset. The strongest idea Tom could latch onto in the tempestuous mess that was her active mind right now was the idea of a fake, a fraud, a charlatan. That seemed a little excessive to Tom; after all, regardless of whether she was thinking it about herself or Belinda. Either way, one of them had caught the Snitch first and the other had been pretty much equally skilled and got there at the same time; from Belinda's thoughts, as far as Tom could tell, Belinda had grabbed the Snitch with Jana's hand in the way, and from Jana's perspective... He had no idea, because he hadn't seen that moment in her mind and she wasn't focussing on it now; now she was busy thinking something accusatory regards her Potions-brewing. Maybe it was that she spent too much time brewing and not enough time training for Quidditch. He briefly thought that maybe she had been taking performance enhancing potions in some fashion, but then, she'd surely have caught the Snitch in clear first place. Whatever it may be, Tom had spent enough time in the mind of an irrational and inwardly ranting girl now, and joined his fellow Slytherins in making their way out of the Quidditch stands, and back up to the castle.

The cheer in Slytherin House lasted a good while, but was tempered in most of their denizens also with a need to do well in duelling and exams, for reasons of the House Cup

as much as for personal glory. Tom, for his part, was well ahead of the common throng in this regard, and by now was giving time over to more personal interests than mere schoolwork. While studying for his History of Magic exam, or rather, distractedly studying around it, since he was fairly sure he knew all he needed to know and had now given his allotted time over to the pursuit of more interesting related topics, Tom had found a new mystery to pursue that pertained to Hogwarts' castle - it had been called the "Chamber of Secrets", and whether it was myth or legend remained as yet to be seen. It was not mentioned in *Ab Schola Condita*, but the story in the appropriately albeit perhaps ironically titled *Lost Secrets of Hogwarts* book went that Salazar Slytherin had created a secret room in which he had put a terrible monster, such that he could unleash it on the castle when the time was right, to purge the place of those unworthy to study magic.

Of course, it was now nearly a thousand years later, and the monster remained conspicuous by its absence, so was quite possibly just a myth, but Tom had learned during his time at Hogwarts that myths tended to be at least rooted in fact, so perhaps there was a secret room left by Salazar Slytherin, and maybe the pyramid thing he had was the key to it. After all, the painting had let slip something about Parseltongue, and Slytherin had been a Parselmouth. With that and Tom's Christmas Eve dream, things were beginning to fit together, at least in some abstract and infuriatingly intangible way.

He wondered briefly if the Lost and Found room was the secret room in question, but dismissed this, as it was mostly full of junk, and that thing in the cage hardly qualified as a terrible monster, and besides, the painting would surely not have said the things it had, had it been in the room in question. Although there had been that thing, whatever it was, in the sarcophagus... Maybe he should go back and check it.

Upon returning to the room, however, he tried in vain to get the door to reappear; the stones of the corridor wall remained impassively unyielding - no spell or threat could gain him entrance. Maybe it had to be the right phase of the moon or something, he thought to himself, giving up for that evening. But no other evening found him better results, and he eventually set the plan aside for the time being, to concentrate on his actual exams.

Last year, Tom had done well in his end-of-year exams; this year, he did even better, scoring well even in his worst subject, Herbology. It turned out that his extra studies in Potions had given him a fair bit of additional knowledge of plant-lore, without him even particularly thinking about it along the way.

He was irked to get slightly lower marks than Marca in both Potions and Charms, but pleased to soundly outclass her in both Transfiguration and Defence Against the Dark Arts. He had been initially pleased with his very high score in Alchemy, but any feeling of accomplishment was somewhat lessened upon his discovery that almost everyone had done particularly well; either they were a year of genius Alchemists, or Professor Al-Muharik extended his generosity of points-giving in class to a generosity of mark-giving in exams. His Divination exam, he'd been ironically uncertain about how that went and the score he would receive, but it turned out to be that there was no cause for concern. It wasn't one of his best subjects, but he was above the year average, and that was good enough for him to feel content there. His other new subject, Glyphs and Tongues, he'd

been slightly compromised in his inability to use a Pervodol Glass in the exam as he might have done for homework or even sometimes in class, but well-advantaged insofar as his natural mental abilities gave him quite an edge over most when it came to understanding ideas conveyed by a speaker speaking a language he did not himself properly speak, and this made up for any shortcomings.

After the exams, there were a couple of duelling sessions left, with mostly Gryffindors and Slytherins present, fighting quite literally for the House Cup, which hung rather in the balance. Slytherins fought hard to make up for the advantage gifted to Gryffindor by Jana's performance in the Potions Championship (which had been a little larger than the benefit Slytherin had gained from their own Quidditch Cup success), and Gryffindors fought hard to maintain the buffer. Ravenclaw, having no points from the Potions Championship and also being somewhat diminished in score from the Quidditch Cup, having lost to both Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, seemed to have been discouraged from any unearthy effort in duelling, the only main recourse now remaining at this time of year, as they were quite soundly in third place, way behind the lions and snakes this year, but still coming ahead of Hufflepuff, who had no Potions Championship points, strong academic scores but outclassed by Ravenclaw, and little to show House Point-wise for their Quidditch performance; on the one hand their team in general and Seeker in particular was still bathing in the glory of beating Ravenclaw, but on the other hand, they hadn't beaten anyone else. To this end, it seemed the bottom two places of the House Cup were already decided, and only the top two places remained to be debated.

So, indeed, Gryffindor and Slytherin debated the top two places as Gryffindor and Slytherin knew best how, as violently as rules permitted (and sometimes a little more than that) in the Great Hall on Tuesday evenings, under the watchful gaze of Professor Merrythought and Healer Tegner, who did not seem to let their respective Gryffindor and Slytherin backgrounds get in the way of enforcing rules evenly, in the former case, and patching people up evenly, in the latter.

When all was said and done, by the end of the final duelling night of the year, Gryffindor stood credibly ahead of Slytherin in points, such that it really could only have been won back if another duelling night were ordained, and some duelling Captain for Slytherin got to pick who duelled for each House.

Alas, this did not come to pass, and short of a miracle, the standings were not now going to change between their current point, and the awarding of the House Cup in a few short days' time.

Chapter Twenty

Clashing of Worlds

The Great Hall was decorated in the colours of Gryffindor House, and Tom resisted the urge to set them on fire (the Gryffindors, or the decorations). Looking over at the House Cup Hourglasses, it was apparent that the victory had been very narrow indeed; doubtless Slytherin's victory in the Quidditch Cup - though itself also narrow - had helped notably there, just not quite enough to secure the top spot for Slytherin.

Most of Gryffindor House appeared to be already in the Hall, and, predictably, were in something of a party mood. At their table there was much chatter, chocolate and sweets already being eaten in advance of the feast to follow, and occasional bangs and flashes erupted from here and there. A moment later, an older student had cast a Patronus in the form of a lion, which began knocking plates and goblets out of place as it skidded down the table before losing corporeality and shifting to a glimmering misty haze before disappearing.

Nor was Jana idle in the partying activities; she had set her Snitch loose, and was mostly laughing at the vain attempts of those nearby to catch it. Even if they had had brooms, they'd probably not have stood much of a chance. Nobody seemed to think to try a Summoning Charm. Judging from the extra-heightened mirth of those around her, either Jana was considered exceptionally good company or she had been passing around Jollity Juice.

After the annoyingly raucous cheers in association with the completely unnecessary announcements regards the winners of the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup, there was something very nearly resembling solemnity when Dippet lectured them on the perils of the current international situation, dark days ahead, and all that. Apparently their had already been losses from "the Hogwarts family", but by that it turned out he just meant somebody's Muggle father biting the dirt in France. Tom's lip curled in disgust at the notion of a Muggle being considered part of "the Hogwarts family". Hogwarts was his home, a place of magic, and for all its faults, a glorious and relaxing refuge from the humdrum Muggles.

Back in House Slytherin, the mood was mixed in nature; they had won the Quidditch Cup but lost the House Cup; they were embarking on their holidays - a positive thing for most, if not for Tom - and they were saying their farewells to their friends.

Slughorn was making his traditional end-of-year announcements.

"Well done to Violet and her team on the Quidditch Cup victory, Jabez, we knew you had it in you"

There was applause, and a few cheers, not least of all from Belinda herself.

"Rest of you, such a near miss with the House Cup; the points Gryffindor got from the Potions Championship just swung it, and since both teams were so close in the Quidditch Cup, there was nothing in it there, you know. In terms of academia and duelling, all the Houses were close to equal this year, aside from maybe slight shortcoming of Gryffindor in academia and Hufflepuff in duelling, but nothing unusual there, eh?"

There were some polite acknowledgements of his joke, but by and large it was clear he hadn't been entirely forgiven for letting a Gryffindor get through into the Potions

Championship. On the one hand, she'd gone on to win it, but on the other hand, so might one of their Slytherin Potioneers, and then Slytherin would have the House Cup rather than Gryffindor. And Slughorn knew it. Still, he was a popular teacher regardless, and there were plenty of students who wanted to speak with him, and he was as usual surrounded by quite a throng.

Like last year, Slughorn also wanted a word alone with Tom, but this time it was more than just about administrative matters:

"The thing is, with the threat of Muggles dropping bombs on London, and you living in a Muggle area without Enchantments that will keep you safe, we need to either arrange to properly protect your current Muggle residence, or else give you accommodation in a magical place that already has adequate protections"

"Where am I going to stay, then?", asked Tom, feeling a surge of happiness; quite a rarity for him, not overly given over such emotions, and hardly daring to believe his good fortune.

"Well, at your current residence", said Slughorn, as though he had already said this and had just not been clear enough. "Obviously we don't have anything to give you, but don't worry, I can make sure you're safe where you are"

"But Sir, Hogwarts..."

"...is closed to students over summer, and that's all there is to it"

"So..." said Tom, crestfallen, "I have to go back to the orphanage?"

"I'm afraid so, but like I say, we'll make sure it's safe; in fact, I can guarantee it, as I shall be seeing to it myself"

The next morning, after breakfast but a full hour before everyone had to be on the Platform to catch the Hogwarts Express, Tom met with Slughorn as directed, in Hogsmeade, but not at the station; rather, in The Lonely Broomstick, of all places; it was one of the two pubs in the village (the other being the Hog's Head). Slughorn gave him a cheery wave from the bar, and got off his barstool to meet him. Apparently they weren't stopping for a drink together, however it was they were going to arrange these protections.

"Morning", said Slughorn happily, as they exited the bar. "I have the address here; Whitechapel, is that right?"

"Yes, Sir", said Tom.

"Hmm", said Slughorn, frowning. "I've never been to Whitechapel. I'll Apparate us to St. Paul's and we can walk from there"

"Oh... But Sir, what about my trunk and my owl? I didn't bring them with me as you said there'd be no need, but if we're leaving now..."

"Oh, don't you worry about that. I'll have a House Elf bring them over", said

Slughorn. "Well, if you're ready?", he said, extending an arm like a chicken's wing. Tom looked at it.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Just take hold of my arm, boy", said Slughorn cheerfully, "and I'll do the rest".

Tom took his arm as instructed, and a moment of twisting vortex later, found himself standing slightly uneasily on the flagstones outside St. Paul's. There were a few passers-

by, but none seemed to have noticed the Apparition. People looked at their feet, or at the distance, but not at other people, and certainly not at them. Tom wondered whether this itself was magic, or just Londoners being Londoners. Probably the latter, but then, he'd always appreciated being left alone. Right now, however, he was not alone.

"Right", said Slughorn, from whose arm Tom now disengaged his own. "Here we are, then. Lead on!"

Tom turned and walked the familiar streets back to Wool's. It was strange, walking them with Slughorn present; he was perhaps as un-Mugglelike as any Wizard, though at least he didn't have a purple suit on, like Dumbledore had when he had come to visit Wool's. Rather, he had a dark crocodile-green tweed suit that could just about be taken for Muggle attire, a chartreuse shirt that was perhaps a little bright and gay to go unnoticed, but with black robes that could surely pass for a traditional academic gown. Tom tried not to think about the magenta bow tie. It could have been worse.

"Slow down, Tom, there's a good boy", said Slughorn, ahead of whom Tom was now advancing by some paces. Tom slowed down a little.

"What are you going to tell the Muggles?", asked Tom.

"Oh, I'll just say I'm your teacher, and you've invited me to visit", said Slughorn, in an offhand fashion.

"I've never invited anyone to visit, ever", said Tom.

"First time for everything then, eh?", said Slughorn.

Tom wasn't sure that this was going to go as smoothly as Slughorn seemed to think it would, but wasn't too troubled. After all, there was surely a limit to how much disaster could ensue even from the cultural clash of low class Muggles and a Pureblood Wizard who was accustomed to spending time with the best Witches and Wizards of the age.

"Sir, I should warn you, the Muggles I have to live with... They're quite stupid and low class, even by Muggle standards", said Tom, contemptuously, wanting to be sure to distance himself from them.

"Well, we shalln't spend more time with them than necessary, then", said Slughorn, stoically. It was easy for him to say. He didn't have to spend the summer there.

Upon arrival to Wool's, they were greeted quite promptly by Mrs. Cole:

"Tom, what are you doing here?", she asked, without preamble, her eyes also flitting to and fro between him and Slughorn.

"During the summer, I live here", said Tom. Ask a silly question; get a silly answer.

"Well, yes, but I wasn't expecting you back so soon", said Mrs. Cole, needlessly. The unforeseen nature of Tom's return was already quite apparent. "And this is...?"

"Ah", said Slughorn, "You must be the Muggle responsible for this place then, are you?"

"The what?"

"The Matron", interjected Tom. Slughorn wasn't excelling at the task of being unsuspecting around Muggles.

“Yes, yes I am”, said Cole, “And whom is it I have the pleasure of meeting?”, she said, looking far from finding the encounter a pleasure, and also clearly over-reaching in terms of grandiloquence.

“Horace Slughorn”, replied Slughorn, extending a hand, which Mrs. Cole took and shook uncertainly. “I’m one of Tom’s teachers at Hogwarts School of.. Well, anyway, Tom has invited me to visit his summer residence, so I thought I’d stop by on this fine afternoon and see where one of my star pupils lays his head. So... lead on, Tom”

It was clear from her simple mind that Cole had assessed the situation and come to entirely the wrong conclusion about the nature of Slughorn’s visit. Tom scowled, not that this would discourage her vivid imagination.

“I’ll, err... Let Tom show you to his room, then”, she said, uncertainly, clearly fighting and losing a battle in her own mind.

As Tom and Slughorn took to the staircase, Tom initially began his usual spritely ascent, but observed that Slughorn was taking them at a more, well, sluggish pace. He doubled back and walked with his teacher, who was somewhat breathless by the time they reached the top, and had broken out into a slight sweat. Tom wondered how the man survived living at Hogwarts, with all the very many stairs in the castle. Come to think of it, while Slughorn logically must take many stairs a day, Tom wasn’t sure he’d ever actually seen him do it. Maybe he had some secret to it.

Upon arrival in Tom’s room, Slughorn looked around with a frown, as though he was reluctant to believe this was really a dwelling-place.

“Yes, it’s quite dismal, isn’t it?” said Tom, not needing to read his mind.

“Rather you than me, living here, I must admit”, said Slughorn slowly.

“You’re sure there’s no chance I could just stay at Hogwarts over summer, Sir?”

“My dear boy, I’m afraid if Headmaster Dippet let you stay over, he’d have to leave the school open for others too, and before you know it, the whole school would be full of partying children, no, that wouldn’t do at all. So, yes... Things, let’s get your things before we forget them, especially as it’ll be a lot more difficult to have them delivered straight here when we’ve done the protections”

Slughorn clicked his fingers, and a House Elf wearing a Hogwarts tea-towel appeared. It looked around at Tom’s room, and its ears drooped a little. While Tom was somewhat annoyed that even a House Elf found his residence disappointing, he also couldn’t exactly blame it, not that this stopped him from feeling the urge to incinerate it. He twirled his wand between his fingers, without taking his eyes off the Elf.

“Hello”, said Slughorn. “Young Master Riddle has left his trunk in his Dormitory; be a good Elf and bring it here”

“Yes Sir”, squeaked the Elf, and vanished again.

Slughorn stood for a moment awkwardly drumming his fingers, before the House Elf reappeared, standing on Tom’s trunk, alongside Brega, cage and all.

“Brega-hahaha...”

“Silence, irritating bird”, said Tom, before having a further thought on that matter, which he decided to take up with Slughorn, but it was the Professor who spoke first:

“Right, that’s that then, off you go”, said Slughorn, dismissing the Elf with a “shoo” gesture. The Elf smiled obsequiously and vanished as it bowed.

“Sir”, said Tom, “You said it’d be difficult to have things delivered once the Enchantments are in place... am I going to be able to receive mail here? I don’t really want to be cut off from the magical world over summer”

“Oh, your owl will have no problems so long as he’s not trying to Apparate in, or blast his way in, or something”

“I wouldn’t put it past him”, muttered Tom under his breath, but accepted Slughorn’s answer as given, and let him get on with the job he was here to do.

Slughorn, for his part, took out his wand. Pointing it up to the ceiling, began uttering incantations:

“Salvio hexia... Protego maxima... Protego duo.... Protego horribilis... Protego totalum... Inverto expulsis... Cave inimicum.... Repello inimicum... Invenio perfugium... Fianto duri...”

Slughorn incanted, and Tom listened, endeavouring to remember the various spells used.

“That was a lot of different spells, Sir”, said Tom when Slughorn was finished. “I recognised some of them, but most of them are new to me. What do they all do differently?”

“Oh, this and that”, said Slughorn with a grimace. “But you should be quite safe here now, from Muggle and magical miscreants alike. Some of the enchantments forcefully repel unfriendly spells, others create more subtle protections; for example if someone comes here wishing you harm, they might believe the entire place is gone, or replaced with something else, for instance. Or they might just struggle to find your room, like the Muggles do”, he chuckled.

Tom wasn’t sure that repelling unfriendly spells would be necessary; it didn’t seem likely that the Germans would be attacking that way; after all, it was only the Muggles who were at war properly, notwithstanding the declaration of war by the Ministry; in the magical world, Grindelwald’s Revolution was creeping this way, but had not yet involved Britain in any practical sense. He shared this thought, and enquired about the enchantments’ efficacy against the Muggles’ bombs.

“Oho, you needn’t worry about that”, laughed Slughorn. “The entire German military could rain all its bombs on this place, and it’d still be standing”

The thought was at once both reassuring and depressing.

The job being done, Slughorn understandably had no strong desire to linger in Tom’s abode, and they returned to the ground floor.

“Off again already?”, asked Mrs. Cole upon seeing them.

“*Obliviate*”, said Slughorn sternly, pointing his wand at her. Her eyes glazed out of focus and she had clearly stopped paying attention to what was going on. “Right, jolly good”, he continued in his more usual demeanour, “That’s that then. She’ll not remember me”

“Will she now remember picking me up from King’s Cross, instead?” asked Tom.

“Otherwise she’ll wonder how I got here”

“No, she’ll just have a bit of a fuzzy gap in her memory”, said Slughorn. “I’ve never been terribly keen on putting in false memories; I rather cherish the real ones, and I’d advise you to do the same. Don’t worry though, Muggles will usually make up their own versions of things they know nothing about”

“Yes, I’ve noticed”, replied Tom.

After watching Slughorn head a short way off into the street before vanishing into thin air, Tom was noticed again by Mrs. Cole:

“Really Tom, coming back here by yourself instead of waiting to be picked up... Don’t you know there’s a war on?”

Actually more than one, thought Tom, as he made his way back to his room. The petty, insignificant Muggle war seemed silly and somewhat unreal to him. Certainly the numbers involved might be larger, but it was just Muggles. What could they do, at the end of the day? The magical war, on the other hand, Grindelwald’s Revolution and the various national responses to it, was rather more meaningful indeed, and of great interest to him.

Grindelwald was clearly a great Wizard, but if only he could simply do better at it. He, Tom, would do it so much better, he thought to himself.

Alas, he didn’t have an army behind him, and at thirteen, was unlikely to get one any time soon, whatever his natural power. He wondered what it’d take to get one - perhaps getting in with the right people, like Slughorn seemed to do. But who were the right people? Tomorrow’s right people could be different than today’s, especially if the war went well. The magical loyalists, it seemed, were a good bet; those who weren’t on the other side, squawking about the importance of Muggles, and trying to make everyone and everything weaker. So, the old Pureblood families; well, no surprises there, and that worked well for him, since he already had good connections with several of them now. And they respected him, which was the important part. Sure, he might not be inspiring the land into uprising against the silly Muggle-loving bureaucrats as Grindelwald had, or even taking great actions against the Muggle-rights crowd, but he was well-placed for any such opportunities should they come along.

The only thing that bothered him about this general idea was what Antonin’s father had said, about Grindelwald’s reign surely being cut short; that power invites jealousy and jealousy begets assassination attempts, and the envious assassins need only get lucky once to end it all. Tom was not worried about Grindelwald; hopefully he’d continue to do well, but if he didn’t, well, it wasn’t his own neck, was it? But he, Tom, didn’t want to end up like his Boggart, defeated in ignominious death, lost and forgotten, or remembered with contempt and spite.

No, he needed a better guard against death than that he already had. His own natural talents were good. His ability to cure anything if he could just get to his unicorn blood, that was good too. But he needed better. He deserved better.

Tom resolved, once and for all, to do better. He’d learned a lot this year about the nature of life and death, ranging from his experience with the spider bite to the forays he’d made into Alchemy far beyond what Al-Muharik was teaching in class. He still didn’t know what Dippet was doing to live so long, maybe he should simply ask him? Or Slughorn, Slughorn would surely be the person to ask. Potions Masters must know about these sorts

of things, and Slughorn was more approachable than Dippet. He just needed to figure out how to bring up the matter in a way that wouldn't invite being dismissed as a young student who should not worry about things that wouldn't be in his exams and didn't have immediate obvious applications at school, like some of the extra-curricular potions than Slughorn had encouraged.

Speaking of school, maybe this fabled Chamber of Secrets would hold some clue. Perhaps all the talk of a monster was just to keep people from trying to find it. Wanting to purge impurities, as the rumours about the Chamber's story went, that was all very well and good as a Slytherin trait, but wasn't death the greatest impurity of all? Maybe Slytherin found some great secret and hid it there? He, Tom, should put more effort into locating and opening the Chamber of Secrets. How hard could it be? The castle was only so big, and he was a resourceful Slytherin. Maybe he could make use of some of the others he had to hand, without clueing them in necessarily to all he was doing. Or maybe he'd go it entirely alone; he'd have to think on it.

In the meantime, Tom was only just away from school, and already looking forward to his return. All the same, he'd not waste this summer. He had research to do, and while he didn't have Hogwarts library during this time, he had books as yet unread, and of those read, he had in mind to write to some of the authors, to discuss some of the finer points.

He'd need to use a different name of course, and definitely not this address, but Brega was a clever owl - for all his faults - and there was no reason that he couldn't soon start getting involved with the wider world of research into the Darker aspects of Alchemy and related Arts, provided he presented himself in a manner they would respect, with a name they wouldn't lightly dismiss. Of course, to do this he'd need to first further build up his own knowledge and power, but that was a work in progress with which he was making some headway.