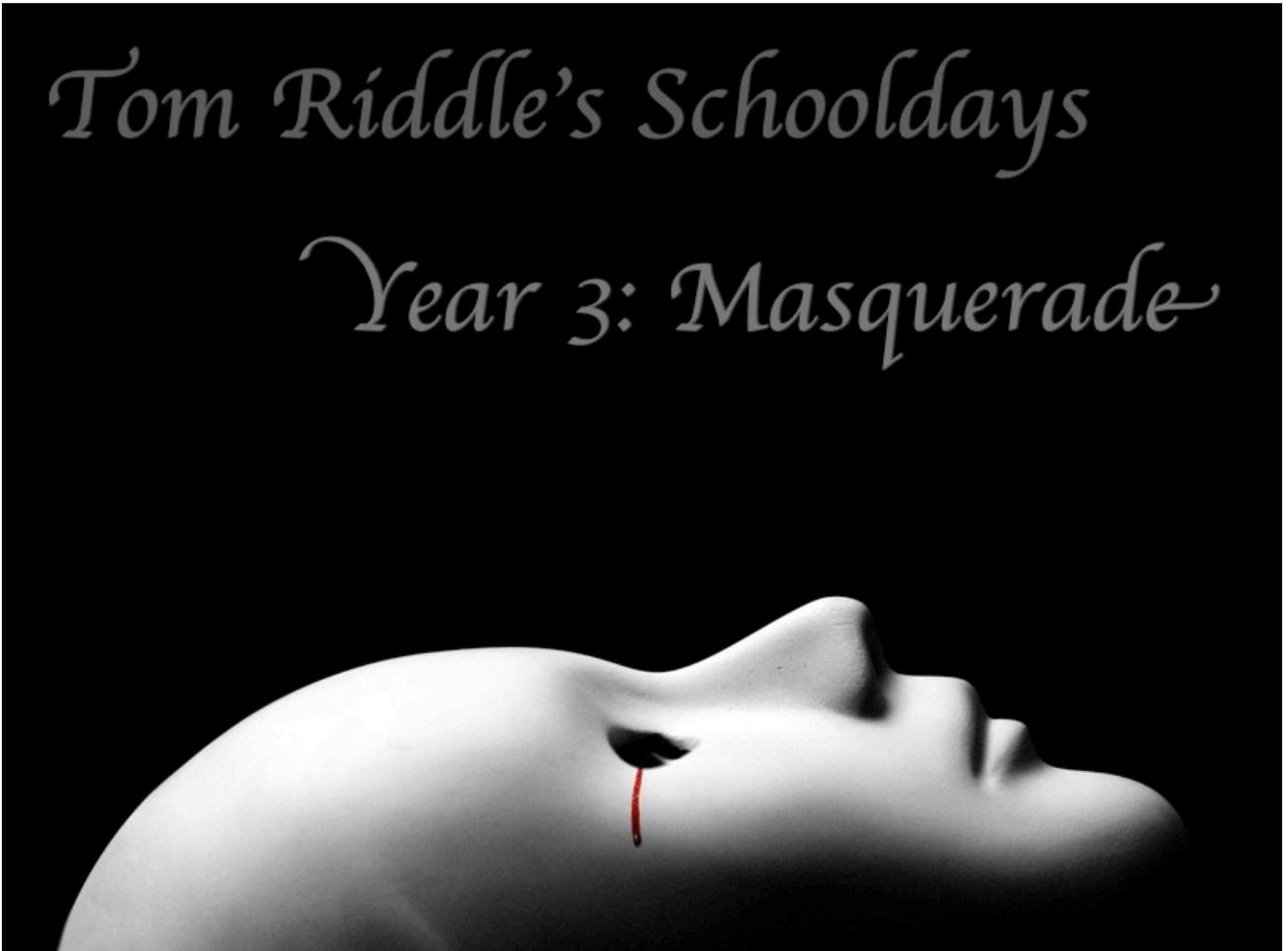


# Tom Riddle's Schooldays

Year Three: Masquerade

*by David Styles*

*Tom Riddle's Schooldays*  
*Year 3: Masquerade*



## Chapter One

### *Exodus*

The wrought iron bars of the cage did not offer shelter from the elements, but they did offer a view of the impressively turbulent sea below where it hung, itself motionless despite the weather; wind was hardly likely to shift its bulk, even if it weren't held in place by magic.

Behind the cage, Azkaban Prison loomed like a gargantuan black monolith, an obsidian monstrosity rising out of the deep. Any attempt to scale its wave-washed walls would be doomed to failure as its unnaturally uniform surface would not offer even the meanest purchase.

Tom's fingers, all but numb with the cold, clasped the bars as he sought a way to get free. He should be able to get out of this situation in any number of ways, but the place was sapping his magical strength from him, and now he was reduced to tugging ineffectually on the bars, feeling quite small and weak. If only he had been more careful, he would not be in this predicament now. He swore to himself that if he made it out of this, he'd be more cautious in future.

A large bird of some unknown kind swooped through the rain and perched atop the cage, taking a moment to rearrange itself before paying Tom any notice.

"Begone, bird", commanded Tom; the last thing he needed right now was bird droppings. "No, wait", he said, realizing that the bird could be his ticket out of here, if it could be commanded as an agent in some useful fashion. But how? What could it do?

It looked down at him, and suddenly pecked at his head through the bars. Tom flinched away, but not before he'd received a painful nip to the crown of his head, which was not going to improve his mood. The bird fluttered down and clung to the bars in front of Tom's face; Tom was not at liberty to move away or to attack it, the tight shackles on his wrists preventing him from raising his hands that high up.

Tom gave a cry of pain as the bird jabbed at one of his eyes, and he had no greater shield than his eyelids against the flurry of pecks that followed.

"Brega-hahaha-hoo!"

"Shut up, Brega... Wait... Brega?"

Tom awoke, and swatted away the owl that had been delivering the morning's mail a bit enthusiastically. He checked his head and eyes with his hands, which came back without blood on them. A light rain was drizzling in through the window that hung open into his room. Tom's neck was a bit stiff, perhaps on account of the draught. He massaged it with his hands.

"I don't need you to wake me up, unless it's actually urgent", grumbled Tom sleepily. He looked, bleary-eyed, at Brega's delivery. It had a Hogwarts crest on it. He'd barely been away from school a week, and they were missing him already, it seemed. He tried to work out if he'd done something he shouldn't, but it was a bit early, and dreams and reality were still somewhat blended.

He opened the envelope, which contained two folded pages. Tom opened the first, and read:

*Here are your Hogsmeade permission slips for the coming year.*

*Please have them signed by a parent or guardian and return them before you lose them. No signed permission slip; no Hogsmeade weekends, and no exceptions.*

*Have a good summer, boys and girls.*

*H. E. Slughorn*

The other page was, as promised, a permission slip. It pertained to the chance for third-years and above to roam the village of Hogsmeade on given weekends, instead of remaining at the castle. Tom had already visited Hogsmeade some months ago, but that was during the Easter holiday, when his whereabouts were nobody's business but his own. During term time, he'd been required to stay within the grounds at Hogwarts, not that he had ever considered this a chore. He enjoyed being at school, and what with much yet to explore, a gargantuan library, and far more in the way of luxuries and amenities than he had here at the orphanage, it was all in all a good place to be.

However, options were good, and so was Hogsmeade. Last time a permission slip of some kind had been mentioned to Tom, it had been at Gringott's bank, and they had held Slughorn to be his legal guardian. Slughorn, however, seemed to be expecting someone else to sign this thing. From the wording of it, he had written this out once and then multiplied it by the number of Slytherin students in the third year and above, so it could be that he didn't actually need to do it, but then, it did say "no exceptions", so perhaps it'd be best if he got Mrs. Cole to sign it.

Mrs. Cole, who didn't know anything about the nature of his school, that it was a school of magic. Tom re-read the permission slip for things about which Muggles ought not know. It was all just fine, apart from the two places where it said "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry".

He reflected on the inconvenience of the orphanage staff not knowing he was a Wizard who went to a school of magic. Mudbloods got to let their parents know, or at least so it seemed from Jana's tale of her stupid Muggle parents being unable to cope with what she is. Mind you, at least he got to do magic in his room where Muggles couldn't enter, while Mudbloods generally had to languish in the non-magical world over summer.

As for this permission slip, he could always just sign it on Mrs. Cole's behalf, but there might be a Charm to check for that. No, probably best he just get her to sign it. After all, by asking him to get her to sign it, hadn't they sort of given him permission to show it to her? And if she asked questions about it, well, he wouldn't have to pretend anymore.

But then again, what if she got over-excited and he had to Curse her? He'd already been warned about Cursing Muggles, and he didn't want to lose his magic-in-his-Muggleproof-room privileges. Tom looked at Brega thoughtfully, as though he might find an answer there.

"Ha-hoo?" said the owl.

“No, I don’t need you right now”, said Tom. What he needed was a solution. Hmm, was there such a potion as a Stupidity Solution, to make her stupider than usual, and likely to just sign the thing without reading it? He could brew a Befuddlement Draught, come to think of it, that’d do the trick. Then he’d just need to get her to drink it. It wouldn’t take much, he’d just need to put some in one of her Muggle drinks, and then incite her to drink that, such that he could ask her to sign the slip while it was still in effect, and she’d sign it without noticing that it was addressed to a School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The topic of addresses reminded Tom of something for which he did plan to enlist Brega’s help.

“Brega, I’m going to be writing to some people, but I don’t want them to know this actual address. So for postal purposes, for some of my new correspondence I’m going to be renaming this place Eternity House, got it?”

“Hahaha-hoo!” replied Brega mirthfully, looking suspiciously like he was laughing at the choice of name.

“Yes, I know the name doesn’t really fit this Muggle dungheap, but that’s the idea; they don’t have to know about the ignominy of our living situation. I’m also going to be using a different name, to keep things separate; for the moment I’ll go by Volodymyr Belovol - I might change it again later, but for now, watch out for post at the London Owl Office addressed to that name, alright?”

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!” said Brega, puffing out his chest, and looking proud to be trusted with such subterfuge.

Tom had chosen his pen-name after some good while of poring through various books, and eventually chose those two names for their combination of meaning and, as far as he understood it, the Mathemagical auspiciousness of the values of the names.

At the very least, the renaming would provide enough of a smokescreen to allow him to correspond with a handful of authors of books that he had been reading, without them dismissing him as a poor orphaned schoolboy. He wanted to learn more about certain aspects of Alchemy - most specifically that relating to the Elixir of Life, but a number of other avenues also - and (which required the mask of a non-de-plume rather more), areas of magic generally considered to be Dark Arts, pertaining to transformations of the self and the associated physical form.

He was additionally very much pleased to note that the author of one of his books, *On Necromancy and Other Arts*, had an address in central London, and offered amongst his other services a thorough explanation of one’s family history, courtesy of a Seer retained at his premises. Of course, if he went for that option, it may be necessary to be honest about his identity, but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t test the waters with his more presentable name and address first.

Others at Wool’s had rather more childish things to distract them, in light of the Muggle war. There was a great excitement and enthusiasm amongst the orphans regards the notion of evacuation to the countryside; as they saw it, they were going to go and live with actual families in actual mansions in actual pretty places.

Tom, for his part, could readily sympathize with the desire to get away from the place, though did not share their ostensibly unfounded optimism - whether they turned out to be right or not about their prospective lodgings, the expectation itself seemed to be without any special cause - after all, it was perhaps most likely that the majority of them would end up with disgruntled farmers who would at best tolerate their presence and put them to work in the fields.

However, not everyone could be evacuated at once, and the exodus of children from London was larger and slower than Tom now learned it had been previously while he was still at Hogwarts. Despite the orphans' hopes, none had been taken during the previous smaller evacuation efforts, but now it was looking increasingly probable that they'd get their wish - for better or worse.

Mrs. Cole and the staff were fraught with worry, and dithered at great length regards the order of evacuation. Should the youngest be evacuated first? The girls? Eventually after much hand-wringing, and no small amount of arguing, it was decided to pack children off in strict order of age, youngest to oldest, but with the option for children to volunteer to go in a later batch; an option which boys were strongly encouraged to take in order to "do the gentlemanly thing" and let the girls go first, which some measure of shame placed on those who did not.

Tom required no exhortation to get him to stay - he hated Wool's, but he could do magic in his room, could visit Antonin who would also be remaining in London under the protection of similar defensive Charms, and seemed quite likely to get to go stay at the Lestrangle family residence, Fengrey Hall, for at least a while later in summer.

Nor was the Lestrangle household the only getaway on offer, as Tom learned in his latest post from Jana, containing quite a surprising proposition:

*Dear Tom,*

*They're saying London's being evacuated, do you know where you're going? We're in a reception area here, which means people are moving in who were moved out. Can you put your name down to come up here?*

*Aunt Marte hasn't registered to receive children, because she's already looking after me and this cottage isn't huge, but we could sort out something for you and I'm sure I could talk her into letting you stay. The friendly neighbours have put in an air raid shelter - it's kind of like a little shed thing dug into the ground with a roof - so we'll be safe even if they do bomb this far out from the city.*

*It'd be great to have a proper friend here and we'd have lots of fun. Let me know as soon as you can,*

*Love,*

*Jana*

Tom lay back on his bed to consider this. Staying with a Witch was definitely a much better offer than staying with random Muggles, but then would also mean staying at a Squib's residence where he wouldn't be allowed to do magic, on pain of the threat of expulsion from Hogwarts - because the Ministry would have its attention immediately drawn to any magic going on there, as didn't have any grown-up Wizards to register to the place, in the manner that it did with other Wizarding family households, and Diagon Alley for that matter.

At a Squib's house, he'd be able to do the things they could do, like reading, preparing potions, and even flying on a broom, but would not be able to do all the things he'd be able to continue to do here, or at other actual Wizarding households.

Given the further consideration that it was obvious Jana had not in fact cleared this suggestion with her great-aunt yet, it didn't seem like the benefits outweighed the trouble. After all, he'd get to do more magic down here on his own, and visiting other Wizards, than up there with a Witch who was all but disallowed from touching her wand over the course of summer.

In essence, he had to decide between more pleasant company - a Witch - and actually being able to do magic - here. Ultimately, he could not find any third-side alternative, and so opted for the latter, choosing integrity of living up to his own nature. He would not trade his freedom to use magic, for a lack of freedom even if in better company.

He took up a quill, and sent a reply:

*Dear Jana,*

*Thank you for the invitation. The Muggle evacuation programme would assign me a place at random, so that's no good to me as a resource. Naturally I'd enjoy your company more than this place where Brega is my only link to the magical world, but practicalities and whatnot considered, it seems I'm fated to make do with visits to friends rather than outright moving, as both Hogwarts and the Ministry of Magic currently expect me to be here. For a couple of reasons relating to those, I regret that it's necessary that I live up to those expectations at this time.*

*Incidentally, if Dumbledore cared about his House's students' safety half as much as Slughorn cares about ours, he'd have arranged better protection for you than relying on your Muggle neighbours to dig a hole in the ground for you to hide in like frightened animals. If you value your safety, not to mention your dignity, I recommend arranging for some protective Enchantments to be cast.*

*Meanwhile, the same invitation as last year stands regards meeting up in London if you are down this way; just tell me when you'll be down and I'll almost certainly be happy to see you in Diagon Alley.*

*Eternally,*

*Tom*

Tom had taken up the affectation of signing his missives “eternally”; it had the double purpose of passing for a common letter-closing element while additionally being a personal commentary on his ambitions in the category of taking on that most important of god-like aspects to which surely any magical person should aspire (and which, it seemed, many nevertheless did not), immortality.

He did not wish to settle for merely lengthened years, like Dippet, though that would be a perfectly acceptable as a starting place. His Biblical “three score years and ten” would be at best a free pass, a springboard from which to acquire for himself a lifespan of hundreds of years, as Dippet clearly had, and that in turn would be sufficient time to find new and more certain ways to secure his permanence.

Of course, if he found more steadfast methods sooner, he’d not delay in using them, so long as he could be at least relatively certain of what he was doing. He didn’t want to end up like so many Witches and Wizards who had also tried to live forever and not only failed, but actually shortened their lives in the attempt.

For now however, Tom was not making so much as the planned Befuddlement Draught, let alone anything more exotic, as he realised he was out of a couple of his basic Potions ingredients, which would hamper any brewing efforts on his part until such a time as he either went shopping at the overpriced Apothecary in Diagon Alley, or else made a deal with Jana for her to provide him with a cut of the discounted Potions supplies that her great-aunt purchased in bulk, as she, Jana, had arranged for him last year.

He could not, of course, wait that long to get Mrs. Cole to sign his permission slip, however, since last year Jana had not got his Potions supplies to him until they were at school - if that was going to be the schedule this year too, then Tom was going to have to simply take a chance with Mrs. Cole, potion or no potion. This didn’t mean he had to rush it, though; he could still ask her at a time when she seemed befuddled enough already.

If Mrs. Cole was due a break by virtue of orphans leaving her care to go to the countryside, it wasn’t happening just yet, and if anything she seemed more harried than ever, trying to juggle her usual duties alongside implementing changes encouraged by the government, extending not merely to the evacuation programme, but also such things as making sure that the gas masks for everyone - which had been distributed while Tom had been at Hogwarts - were now carried by everyone at all times, without being lost, exchanged, broken, and so on.

It did not help matters when children took to playing with theirs and sometimes scaring other children, especially what with any such miscreants looking alike due to having had their masks on, and thus escaping punishment if they were anything close to sufficiently hasty in their departure from the scene of any given incident.

For Tom’s part, he was not overly fond of the gas masks. They smelled musty and limited his vision, not to mention being of course utterly useless, as Tom knew Professor Slughorn had arranged protective Enchantments around the place such that any Muggle attack and many forms of magical attack would be doomed to ineffectuality. The Muggles,

however, did not know this, and for the most-part continued to treat their gas masks as though they were actually important.

“Mrs. Cole, I just need you to quickly sign this”

“What is it?”

“School permission slip. I don’t need anything else from you, just your signature so that I can go with everyone else to the village near my school. It doesn’t cost anything and it means I’ll be out of your way”

“Right”, said Mrs. Cole, now patting her pockets in sequence in a hurried search for her pen, which was in fact behind her ear. Tom took it with his mind, then remembered he shouldn’t do that, and let it drop to the floor. He hoped it wasn’t “Spell-like” enough that the Ministry would notice. “Blasted pen, been losing it all day”, muttered Mrs. Cole, half to herself, as she picked it back up.

She turned around on the spot, putting the paper against the wall of the corridor, and signed the thing without reading it any more than was sufficient to see where her signature was required - easy enough, as Tom had folded it to that point - and handed it back to Tom, pen and all.

“Wait, that’s my pen”, she said, taking it back and putting it in her hair this time. “Anyway, I’m in a rush, so if that’s all you need... you take that to your room and don’t lose it”, she instructed unnecessarily, before hastening off to whatever task she had been about to address when Tom had accosted her.

Back in his room, Tom noted that Brega had arrived back from his regular morning visit to the Owl Office, and not empty-handed - or rather, not empty-footed. A single envelope had been brought back, and it bore the words:

*Mr Volodymyr Belovol*  
*Eternity House*  
*London*

## Chapter Two

### *St. Mary Axe*

It was the first reply from the various letters he had sent out, and was from the office of the author of *On Necromancy and Other Arts*. It warmly assured Tom, or rather Mr. Belovol, that interested parties with exciting personal mysteries to explore were quite welcome to drop in with or without an appointment to the office, which pleased Tom as it meant he could go as himself - in this case, since there was nothing seen as wrong with a little digging around in one's family history; he'd only used his pseudonym to improve the likelihood of getting a response in the first place. He didn't think many reputable Wizards would write back to someone writing from a Muggle Orphanage.

After smartening himself up as well as possible, going for a look that would not draw attention from Muggles as being too Wizard-like, nor from Wizards as being too Muggle-like, Tom was soon on the doorstep of number seventy, St. Mary Axe, in what amounted to his school clothes, minus the tie and outer robes.

"D'afternoon", said the impish Wizard in a top hat as he half-swung around the doorway. "It seems that you find yourself in need of a Seer, I daresay?"

"That's why I'm here", affirmed Tom.

"Well, do come in, do come in... Whatever you do though, don't touch the Tragical Tetrapods!"

"I'll resist the urge", replied Tom, wondering what these might be. He didn't have to wonder for long though, as he followed the old Sorcerer inside the dimly lit place that could easily have been an old eccentric's cluttered living-room and saw some long-legged things grazing in a large tray; they had the bearing of over-sized insects, albeit with only four legs and no obvious heads. Despite not having heads as far as he could see, and certainly no faces, they did indeed look very much tragical, as they despondently slouched around their little pen just a little more slowly and jerkily than one might expect of a creature that looked like it might have been made for running and jumping.

"So, what can I do you for?"

"I require information", said Tom.

"Doesn't everyone?" smiled the Wizard toothily. "World's most valuable resource, information. But not to worry, information is also my speciality, so you've come to the right place"

"Are you the Seer?", asked Tom, trying not to sneeze on account of the thick incense hanging heavily in the air.

"If you'll cross my palms with silver, specifically seventeen pieces thereof, I most certainly am"

"In your book *On Necromancy and Other Arts*", said Tom, "You said you have a prophet who does this for you; I was rather hoping to speak with your much advertised infallible prophet"

"Ah, that'd be me", said the Wizard. "My father's book, that, not mine. It was me that he wrote about"

“Oh”, replied Tom upon receiving this new information. “You still work for him, though?”

“Nope; he’s gone now. It matters not where”

Tom raised an eyebrow. He wouldn’t have been especially interested ordinarily, but the man’s tone suggested that there was some manner of story to it, that may be of some relevance. Whatever it was, it shouldn’t be anything he couldn’t see coming, that was for sure. So if he offered any tale of surprise, Tom considered he would rethink engaging his services.

“There was an incident...”, began Mr. Wells, “Involving a Love Potion, and a village well, and very dangerous stuff it is, and he had quantities of it all ready in stacks”

“Sounds disastrous”, said Tom. “What does it have to do with me?”

Mr. Wells gave him a piercing look.

“Nothing, I think... No, I suspect your troubles have... nothing to do with love at all, in fact, quite singularly so... But yes, let us discuss our terms of business, shall we?”

“You require silver”, said Tom. “Seventeen Sickles, so, a Galleon, in fact”

“Well, you wouldn’t want old Wellie Well. Wells to starve, would you?”

“That remains to be seen”, Tom heard himself say. “Or rather I mean, what exactly do you offer for that price?”

“Everything” said Wells, pronouncing every syllable slowly. “Or rather anything. Or rather something. The thing. One thing. But the singular thing, that one shining beautiful glorious thing; that which you require, that which you most need, whether you know it or not at this stage of your journey”

“Really?”, asked Tom, a touch skeptically. “And what might that be?”

The old man steepled his fingers, and seemed momentarily absorbed in examining the pattern in the carpet, which Tom noted was gradually shifting its design. Tom looked away from it lest he become unsteady on his feet. Wells looked back at Tom.

“You need to know about your past, present, and future. But oh yes, that’s all one thing. But it’s all tied to one thing. One that is many, yes”

“That sounds a little vague for my money”, said Tom.

“I’m quite sure you’ll find you’ll get your money’s worth when all’s said and done, Mr. Belovol”

The unexpected use of this name brought Tom’s attention to Wells’ astuteness, and also to the fact that he, Tom, had been so distracted by the theatrics and the eye-catching surroundings as to not pay any heed to the Wizard’s mind itself, logically a good gate to circumventing his irksome avarice, by taking the information from his thoughts when it arrived there, and then naturally declining to pay him for what could be taken for free.

“I don’t recall mentioning any name to you”, said Tom, gazing into the man’s mind and finding it quite elsewhere - specifically, holidaying on a beach.

“No, but you will”, said Wells, assuredly.

“What do you know about me?”, asked Tom, hoping the Wizard’s mind would return to a more useful place.

"I know that what I can know about you is more important, and that you yourself know too little". Tom's mind went with his, to Hogwarts, to the corridors deep underground near Slytherin House. "But first, the sordid topic of the coin"

"Excuse me?"

"This is the part of the conversation where you open your purse and show me my fee, and then we continue"

Wells' mind was only on the money at this moment, and so Tom did indeed open his coin pouch, and caused silver Sickles to rise one by one from it, counting them into the air. Partly done so out of a will to inspire awe, knowing well by now the reaction this tended to cause, and also partly out of convenience; the cluttered shop didn't have much in the way of clear surfaces.

"Seventeen Sickles", said Tom, gathering the coins up and descending them into a stack on the table behind him where some other coins lay haphazardly. The stack promptly fell over.

"You've a lot of frustration in you", observed Wells.

"Perhaps it's because you've yet to get to the point, Mr. Wells"

"Aha! But that is the point; it's all about unrealized potential in you"

"Tell me more", said Tom, picking up the fallen coins one by one and replacing them on the stack.

"Let's try a little open honesty, shall we?" said Wells. "My name is Wellington Wellington Wells; I'm a dealer in knowledge and knells" - he held out his hand for Tom to shake. Tom looked at it a moment, and took it.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle. Wizard in search of answers"

"Jolly good", said Wells. "And in your search for answers so far, have you come upon, perchance... questions?"

"Yes", said Tom. "What happened to my father? Is he dead or alive? What is my blood status, my lineage? Why am I so much better than everyone?"

"Ha!", said Wells. "I'll be honest with you, I don't hear that latter question very often. Have you any other questions, before we proceed?"

"Don't you ever get sea-sick from this carpet?"

"No, never. Well, hardly ever. But on the foregoing topic - seventeen Sickles is a little light to be summing up your history in any great detail, but I do feel we can clear up this mystery between us all the same"

"Good", said Tom, "Please do"

"You're a Hogwarts student; your House is Slytherin, I think", said Wells.

"These things I know already", said Tom, unimpressed with the divination that a boy of his age would be a Hogwarts student, and that someone placing such stock on the background may be a Slytherin, not to mention his obvious shrewdness and general brilliance.

"Yes, yes, merely establishing the antecedents"

"My ancestors, you mean?"

"No, the antecedents, the first things that came before the problem we're now considering"

“So, my ancestors then. What problem?”

“Question. Questions are problems; you, Master Riddle, are a walking problem”

“Thanks”, said Tom, curtly. It was usually only Muggles who considered him to be such.

“Oh, it’s no bad thing. It’s good to have something to examine to keep one on one’s toes”

“Ravenclaw, then?”, asked Tom.

“Yes, very good, I should hire you as my apprentice - I could rather do with one actually, after what happened to the last one”

“Dare I ask?” prompted Tom.

“Let’s just say you’ll do better than he did if you can follow the instruction to not touch the ink of the poison-pen quill on the shelf there”, said Wells, gesturing. Tom followed the gesture to where a dark-plumed quill-pen indeed lay on an ebony shelf. There was dust around it; it had not been used recently.

“For now”, said Tom, turning back to him with what he hoped was a pleasant smile, “My story, not his”

“Right you are”, said Wells. “Your wand hand, if I may?”

“I can use either hand”, said Tom, “But tend to use my right hand simply because my wand pocket is the left inside pocket”

“Right right right”, said Wells, “That’ll do nicely”. He examined Tom’s hand; first the back of it and then the palm, studying with some interest. He then rotated his hand to be facing him, palm forwards and fingers upwards, his face inches from the hand. Tom resisted the urge to do any magic, tempting as it was to at least magically shove his face aside.

“What are you looking for?”, asked Tom.

“Your life line’s really far out, you know”, replied Wells, enigmatically.

“What does that mean?”

“Oh, this and that; it’s more to do with how you will reach out in life than anything else” said Wells, before sucking air through his teeth thoughtfully. Tom put his hand down before he really did something regrettable to the Wizard’s face.

“Look, if can’t direct your attention to my family history, I will take my silver and leave”, said Tom.

“Slytherin”, said Wells, suddenly.

“Yes, we established that already”, rejoined Tom pointedly.

“No, I was just thinking out loud. I detect... A kind of greatness in you, Master Riddle”

“You’re not the only one, and I’m not paying you to compliment me”

“No, of course not. You’ve far more than that. I can give you your answers, or rather set you on a straight path to them. You will - categorically will - find your lineage at Hogwarts. It’s said the Slytherin line itself died out centuries ago, but it’s there you must start, for it’s in the old families that you’ll find your answers. An orphan you may be, but you’ve more parentage than most with whom you darken the doorways of the dungeon dorms.

"I am really an orphan, then?", asked Tom.

"Often", said Wells, "There's only room in the world for so much of a certain kind; perhaps the Fates deemed that there wouldn't be enough of your blood to go around"

"I'm special; I get it", said Tom impatiently, "You still haven't really given me much to go off. I mean really, telling me to look amongst the old families to find my lineage isn't really much guidance, you know"

"I can tell you this much: your answers will lie not in the scrolls and tomes of Hogwarts, but in its very foundations and stones"

"What's that supposed to mean?", asked Tom, perhaps a little more bluntly than he had intended.

Wells paused before replying, and Tom got the impression it wasn't merely for dramatic effect; he was searching for the answer. Eventually he rejoined with simply the words:

"You'll know when you see it"

Nor did Wells' mind give him a lot more, as it ranged over the familiar corridors and dungeons of the nether levels of Hogwarts, and did not appear to find anything of unusual interest in its own forays.

"I'm rather getting the impression that you don't know anything much about me at all", challenged Tom. "So much for unveiling secrets; your trade is all vagueness and guesswork. You're a charlatan, scarcely better than a Muggle fortune-teller"

"I will not stand for such accusations, boy", said Wells, his tone changing. "I suggest you pay your bill and leave"

"I'm not paying you a Knut", said Tom flatly. "You haven't told me anything useful".

"Don't you be thinking you can make a fool of me", said the Wizard, "I know this game, and I know just who to call in the department of Magical Law Enforcement to sort out the likes of you, who think you can come here and rob me of my knowledge without paying for it"

Tom paced, trying not to look at the carpet, and found himself looking at the poison-pen quill that they had discussed all so recently.

"I'm not paying for services I haven't received, but we could still do business - is this for sale?", asked Tom, holding the quill aloft.

"I don't think that's a good trinket to leave in such young hands", said Wells sternly. "In fact I would strongly suggest that you put it back immediately, before you get any ink on you and die"

"It's a contact poison?", asked Tom.

"Yes - but more than that, it's Cursed; you'd be dead before you fell, and you'd fall more than quickly enough, so stop messing around and put it down".

"Is it this red stuff on the nib?" asked Tom, examining it closely, holding it up before his face, the better to see it. "It looks like blood"

"Yes", said Wells, approaching it and gesturing as though for Tom to hand it over, at the same time looking to see how much of the Cursed ink there was on the nib.

“Oops”, said Tom, upon giving the pen a flick, causing flecks of red ink to spatter onto Wells’ all-too-near face. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to do that”, he added, in case Wells did not in fact die.

Wells did not reply, and merely dropped to the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Tom took a step back, to avoid this slumping figure.

Tom dropped the quill pen next to Wells’, taking care not to spatter any of the ink onto himself, and drew his wand to examine the body and ensure that he was not pretending.

“Do you need any help there, Mr. Wells?” asked Tom, maintaining the charade that the ink-flicking had been an accident. Wells did not reply, and certainly his mind was nowhere to be found. Tom gently poked one of the fallen Wizard’s eyeballs, which did not produce so much as a blink when prodded. Well, that - coupled with the ostensible lack of breath - settled that.

Tom quickly scouted out the rest of the place which only consisted of one small adjoining room and one cupboard with a Boggart in it that he rapidly shut back in. Having double-checked that nobody else was present, he considered his options. In an ideal world, he’d take everything of value from the place, and it seemed a shame to leave anything of worth behind. However, the world was not ideal, and he’d just murdered a person. All in all, he’d do well to scarp.

The sound of a rasping breath caused Tom to whirl around, but nobody was about, and Wells’ body remained on the floor where he had left it. Was the body coming back to life, or some semblance of such? Of course Necromancy was a family business here, after all. Tom approached cautiously, wand at the ready.

Staying out of reach of the hands, in case this was about to become any manner of reanimated corpse (they had learned about several forms, in Defence Against the Dark Arts classes), Tom gingerly kicked Wells in the back of the head, just enough to prompt a response if any were to be forthcoming. There was no movement, beyond that caused directly by Tom’s foot.

Keeping the body within his field of vision, Tom glanced again around the room, in case of some other living thing besides himself and the Tragical Tetrapods. Nothing seemed apparent.

Tom decided that the ugly-sounding breath had probably been a thing he had heard tell of before, but not as yet encountered, simply gases escaping from a dead body. He wondered if he should put his gas mask on - he had it with him, of course; he’d attract unwanted attention if he went about without it when everyone else had theirs.

Just then, another sudden sound caused Tom’s heart to pound, but this time it definitely was gasses escaping from the body, or possibly more judging from the smell. Tom backed away slowly, before realising the stupidity of walking backwards when there were potentially dangerous things around.

Gathering up a few gold Galleons (leaving some there, to avoid making it look like a robbery occurred, which would prompt more investigation than an accident in which someone was killed by their own Dark Artefact) and leaving the Tragical Tetrapods to silently mourn their late owner, Tom made his way out of the shop and back into the

distinctly Muggle street, where nobody paid any attention to him, and he walked only a little quicker than usual, and in a more indirect route, to return to Wool's with a slight profit and a hope of not being associated with what had just happened.

When Tom next saw Brega, he informed the bird to forget his previous instructions, and instead to ignore anything with the name Volodymyr Belovol now, and certainly not bring it to him. It was regrettable that he should have to ditch that correspondence and begin anew after a suitable time had elapsed, but he wanted to distance himself from that particular identity as completely as possible, after what had gone on at seventy St. Mary Axe.

So, during the coming weeks, the only post that Brega brought was that addressed to Mr. Tom Riddle. Various visits were made to the Dolohov family's London flat, but what Tom looked forward to more came at the end of summer; Tiernan had arranged for Tom to come and stay the final week of the holiday over at his family home in Dartmoor.

Mrs. Cole was only too happy to have Tom depart early, and even arranged for a cab to take him and his school things to the spot at Charing Cross Road where Tom explained he'd be picked up. Of course, once the cab departed, Tom had to make his own way with the trunk and owl cage, traversing all of a couple of yards to make his entrance to the Leaky Cauldron.

Tiernan and what Tom presumed to be his father were sitting at the bar; upon seeing Tom's entrance, Tiernan raised a hand in greeting, and part-turned towards him, unsure as to whether he should now get up to greet him. He opted for staying put, but somewhat awkwardly poised on the brink of rising from his seat.

His father, meanwhile, merely regarded Tom with a look of polite anticipation. He - the father - was tall; this much was apparent even while he was seated - and slim. Shortish brown hair topped his head in a style similar to Tiernan's somewhat thicker and darker hair; he wore robes of tweed, and boots that looked somewhat like riding boots - surely a choice for the aesthetic, as one would hardly need them to ride a broom.

"Dad, Tom; Tom, my father", offered Tiernan by way of introduction.

"Lothair" said the senior Lestrangle, building upon that introduction, to actually include his name.

"Pleasure to meet you", said Tom, extending a hand, which Lothair Lestrangle took and shook.

"Likewise, good to finally meet you; of course I've heard all about you from Tiernan"

"Oh heck", said Tom, "There goes my element of surprise"

"Well, I shalln't be challenging you to a duel, after what I've heard", smiled Lothair. Tom's mind raced to try to figure out what he'd done that he shouldn't have, but settled a moment later on this merely being a compliment.

"I'm nice really", said Tom, for lack of any better rejoinder.

"I'm sure" said Lothair. "Quick one for the road, shall we?" he added, gesturing to the bar. Tom the barman appeared attentive at these words, like a House Elf that had been summoned.

“Another *Ogden’s Old* for me”, continued Lothair, now addressing the barman directly, “and a small cherry brandy each for the boys, I think” he added, with an affirmatory glance back to them, in case of any objection (none was forthcoming).

“Anatolian?”, asked Tom the barman, brandishing a bottle.

“Yes, that’ll do nicely”, confirmed Lothair.

Conversation over drinks extended only to a few pleasantries about school and their summer so far - Tom neglected to mention how pleased he was to be in the Leaky Cauldron and not Azkaban Prison, preferring instead to simply report on a mostly quiet summer with some visits to see Antonin here and there.

“You’ve travelled by Apparition before, I presume?” asked Lothair, when the drinks were finished and it was time to move on. It was actually quite a bit of a presumption on his part, but as chances had it, Tom was able to honestly reply in the affirmative.

“Yes, or at least, as a passenger, if you get my meaning. Professor Slughorn took me on a trip at the end of term, so that he could visit my... lodgings, and place appropriate protective Enchantments there”

“Jolly good”, said Lothair. “Take hold of my arms, boys, and hold onto your stomach-contents!”, he directed, with a chipper tone that belied the extreme possibility of the latter instruction not being successfully followed.

The boys took an arm each, and Tom steadied himself as well as possible. There was a momentary lurching twisting vortex, and Diagon Alley was ripped away, to be replaced by a very different environment.

## Chapter Three

### *Fengrey Hall*

The house stood perhaps a couple of hundred yards away, and was built of the same kind of stone that appeared in outcrops all over the moors that surrounded it. It was large, perhaps comparable in size to a small manor house or a large hunting lodge. It looked like it had been built a good while ago, and with far more of semblance of order than for example the shambolic constructions in Diagon Alley. Not that even this building could be mistaken for a common Muggle residence; the house was somewhat top-heavy, and the external walls leaned outwards slightly, giving it a distinct looming appearance.

“Home sweet home”, said Tiernan with a smile.

“Welcome to Fengrey Hall”, said Lothair. “Let’s get inside before it rains, shall we?”, he added.

They took the wide gritstone path that led up to the front door. Looking behind them, Tom saw that the path led nowhere in the other direction. The front door opened while they were still ascending the steps to it, and Tom caught sight of a House Elf peeping out before it quickly vanished, as they were now greeted instead by Mrs. Lestrangle. Dressed in a blush-red and scarlet gown, and wearing a necklace of what looked like garnets and rubies set in gold, she cut an impressive figure in the doorway. She greeted her husband and son with kisses on the cheek, before turning to Tom.

“And everybody’s forgotten their good manners, and failed to introduce us, but you must be Tom, I presume?”

“I am”, affirmed Tom, stepping forwards and offering his hand, realising an instant too late that she probably had intended to go for an overly familiar - or was it just cordial? - cheek-kiss with him as well. She took his hand and shook it though, with only a slight expression of surprise, partially masked by her welcoming smile.

“Well, it’s lovely to meet you, Tom; Tiernan’s told us all about you” said Mrs. Lestrangle, echoing Lothair’s earlier words.

“Good grief, don’t believe him; it’s all lies”, said Tom, amiably.

Mrs. Lestrangle gave a polite laugh, and the House Elf now relieved the arrivals of their travelling cloaks. A disappearance and reappearance later, the Elf also spirited Tom’s luggage away to some unspecified place - probably wherever he would be sleeping.

“Now, I’m sure you boys will be hungry, so how about some appetizers while we wait for dinner to be ready? And perhaps some tea to refresh you?”, she suggested, gesturing to the newly reappeared House Elf to make itself busy with that.

“Mable”, interjected Lothair before the House Elf could vanish yet again, “Floc, I think”.

Whatever this meant, the House Elf nodded and disappeared.

“Let’s to the Edelizecker Room, shall we?”, suggested Mrs. Lestrangle. It was due to a quirk of the social climes of Slytherin House that Tom knew Tiernan’s mother’s maiden name - Rosier - but hadn’t as yet caught her first name from anyone, and despite her drawing attention to the lack of introduction, she had not actually introduced herself, either through oversight or presumptuousness.

Nevertheless, the way was lead to the Edelzwicker Room, which turned out to be a large sitting room with several long sofas and some armchairs, a fire-place big enough to walk into (and in fact, remembering the existence of the Floo Network, perhaps built to such size for exactly that purpose), and an assortment of pouffes, coffee tables, and the like. A quick tally returned that there was sufficient comfortable seating here for at least fifteen people, probably more. A suit of armour in the corner of the room was quite content to stand, though it did straighten up its posture when they walked into the room.

“Do be seated”, invited Mrs. Lestrange, gesturing to the array of furniture. Tom smiled and nodded, and ignored this instruction in favour of taking a moment to look at a bookcase, of which there were several in the room. It was clear upon even a first glance that he’d need his Perevodol Glass in order to read even the titles of many of these books, but such was in his coffer, which in turn was who-knew-where. Well, Mable knew where, but that didn’t help right now.

“You’ve an interest in hunting, have you?” asked Lothair, noting Tom’s gaze and assuming him to have more knowledge than in fact he had regards the books’ contents.

“I’ve never been hunting”, replied Tom, side-stepping the question in a manner he hoped would be taken as unoffensive at worst.

“Really? Well, we’ll have to remedy that” suggested Lothair brightly. “Of course it’s not really game season for another few days, but you know what the Ministry are like; I don’t think anybody will really mind - I’ve been out already anyway”, he added with a laugh.

“Don’t listen to him, boys”, said Mrs. Lestrange, “You keep yourselves out of trouble”

Lothair silently mouthed the words “We’ll go hunting” to the boys, out of sight of his wife, and signed the message with a wink.

Tom imagined how wizards must go hunting, perhaps on brooms; this thought brought him to realize that he had in fact already been hunting, when he had hunted his unicorn in the Forbidden Forest. Lax as Lothair Lestrange appeared to be regards rules and the breaking of them, Tom wasn’t about to mention his former quarry.

Mable the House Elf returned with two trays; one bore a teapot and four cups; the other, a bottle of rose red liquid, labelled “Floc de Gascogne”, and four wineglasses. Condensation on the bottle indicated a chill.

“Tea, Tom?” asked Mrs. Lestrange with a smile.

“Can we have some Floc too?”, interjected Tiernan hopefully.

“Of course”, replied Lothair, before his wife could respond. “Me too, Mable” he added, as the House Elf began pouring their drinks. “Victoria?”

“I’ll stick with the tea for the moment, Lothair” came the reply from the finally identified-by-forename Victoria Lestrange. Her tone suggested she thought that they would have done well to do likewise, but she did not challenge the decision.

The Floc turned out to be a collection of paradoxes; it was sweet but citrusy, iced but warming in its aftereffect, pleasing to drink but abhorrent insofar as touching the glass got moisture on his skin unevenly.

“You like it?”

“Delightful, thank you”

Tom finally took a seat when all others were seated; he was generally averse to permitting others to stand while he sat; he didn't like being on a lower level than those around him. Mable soon returned with two more trays, this time bearing the "appetizers" that had been mentioned. Tom wondered whether they had appetite-giving properties, which would be hardly needed at this time, as he was already hungry. To this end it wasn't clear whether eating them would be a good idea or bad, if they would only make him hungrier, but he opted to chance it, as if the worst came to the worst, it had been said that dinner would be following them, in any case. The House Elf spoke for the first time:

"Honey-glazed Merry Lepton calf sweetbreads seasoned with sage", it said of one tray, "And these are salty dragon-ball croquettes", it squeaked of the other.

The "sweetbreads" didn't appear to be made of bread, but Tom dismissed that incongruity in favour of pursuing a more pressing curiosity.

"I must ask", said Tom, indicating the croquettes, "when you say *salty dragon-balls*, does that mean..."

"No, Tom", interrupted Lothair with a half-laugh, "No dragons were harmed in the making of these snacks. It's... What exactly is in them, Mable?"

"These croquettes was made with Fancy Rompteller salpicons, Sir" replied the House Elf, nodding in agreement with itself.

"Fancy Rompteller, eh?" replied Lothair, "Thought we'd had the last of that. Well, there we are then. Anybody want anything else?"

Nobody made any more immediate demands of Mable, who accordingly curtsied and vanished; in all likelihood back to the kitchen where dinner required its attention.

The explanation hadn't really told Tom anything meaningful, as he did not know what salpicons were, what a Rompteller was, fancy or otherwise, or even, for that matter, what croquettes were, aside from that they were small edible things that looked like they might have been fried, but he did not press the issue.

Tiernan was first to serve himself, and Tom followed suit in taking one of each and a small plate upon which to place them. The sweetbreads were impaled on small sticks, and were revealed to be entirely fleshly things, rich and succulent. The Merry Lepton calf might be merry no more, but it had died for a good cause, thought Tom.

"Quite the surprising turn of events with the Potions Championship last year, wasn't it?", noted Lothair, conversationally.

"Surprising?"

"Yes, the ah... Muggleborn girl, the Gryffindor, coming through as Champion. Dippet trying to make a political statement, more likely than not"

"I don't know that it was Dippet's idea, actually", offered Tom. "I would strongly suspect Dumbledore's interference. Professor Slughorn seemed a little put out; I don't think she was his first choice".

"There were better choices even just in our class", said Tiernan, chipping in. "You, Marca..."

"Marca, isn't that the girl you were writing to, Zelyanoyova?"

"Yes, mother, but no, it's not like that, and also it's Zelyonaya", sighed Tiernan wearily. It seemed they'd had this conversation before.

“It’d be no bad thing, Tiernan; it’s good that you have options of decent magical stock who aren’t already cousins”

“Tom, tell her what it’s like”

Tom wasn’t entirely sure what Tiernan meant, and a flash from Tiernan’s mind showed Tiernan’s mind to only be on Marca’s existence in their Glyphs and Tongues classroom, and a glimpse of a letter, upon whose contents he could not focus sufficiently to read them.

“Madam Lestrangle, I’d be very surprised if Tiernan and Marca had a secret romance without it coming to my attention”

“You can call me Victoria; no need to stand on ceremony; we’re all friends here” replied the Witch with a smile, in perhaps an effort to draw attention away from her matchmaking designs being apparently thwarted. “Do tell me about the girls in your class though; it’d be interesting to hear another perspective”

“Well, Slytherin girls in our year”, began Tom, “There’s Marca, as it seems you know about; she’s Pureblood, talented, clever, not sure what else you’d want to know. Belinda, again Pureblood, but that goes for most Slytherins, doesn’t it? She’s a skilled Quidditch player, a keen duellist. There’s Julia, Pureblood by the book, though I don’t know how far back that goes (this was a lie; Tom knew her to have a Muggle grandfather); she has her ambitions, and I know she has a thing for Tiernan”

“Tom!” objected Tiernan; “That was ages ago”

“No, I’m quite sure she still likes you”, replied Tom, perhaps unhelpfully. “And then there’s Meredith, again Pureblood, again I’m not sure how far back; she’s friends with Julia, though she’s certainly the more studious of the two, but still wastes a lot of time in frivolities. She’d do well to speak up more in class; she could get us a lot more House Points if she did”

“Oh, we don’t need to worry about little things like that”, laughed Victoria.

“Well, anyway, there’s also Iolanthe, Pureblood lineage as good as any, but to be honest, I don’t interact with her much”

“What’s her family name?”

“Oannes”

“Hmm”, said Lothair, approvingly, with a look to Tiernan.

“No”, replied Tiernan, “Not a chance. And I don’t like how this conversation is all about me; why don’t you try to set Tom up with somebody?”

“Alright, let’s give the lad a break, shall we?” suggested Lothair with a smile. “How are the croquettes, Tom?”

Soon, the appetizers were in fact gone. They had not given Tom more appetite, as the name might have implied, but nor had they especially diminished it, and it was with great gladness that he responded to the suggestion to relocate to the Balinghem Room for the meal itself.

The Balinghem Room was a sizeable dining hall with a long banqueting table in the centre of it. The table tapered somewhat, being narrower at the ends than towards the middle, and it was clear that if all the places were filled - so, sixteen, or eighteen if chairs

were placed at the ends of the table as well - everyone would still just about be able to see each other. As with the parlour in which they had had Flocc and appetizers, this room again gave a strong impression that the house was somewhat lacking in people, and had been intended to be inhabited by many more than its current three residents, or two, when Tiernan was at school.

There were four place settings, at the opposite end of the great table. As Tom and the Lestranges approached, Mable the House Elf came bounding in to pull out chairs for them. Tiernan's parents took the very end places, leaving Tom and Tiernan to take the other two.

Mable, who was too short to reach the centre of the table, used magic to pour the drinks, which appeared to be some kind of tonic water with bubbles in, into crystal tumblers. Lothair took a sip, frowned, and put his glass back down. Mable looked suitably panicked, and asked:

"Would Sir like some sloe gin with his tonic?"

"Yes, that'd be an improvement", replied Lothair.

The House Elf gave a quick glance at the others, not wishing to miss an order from somebody else should such be forthcoming, and vanished when it was not, reappearing only a few seconds later with a short fat bottle containing what could easily have been blood, from the look of it.

Lothair took the bottle, and then clearly faced the problem that his glass had unwanted water in it. Rather than conjure a new glass, though, he threw the contents of the existing glass at Mable, before casually pouring himself some of the sloe gin, and conjuring a couple of ice cubes into it.

"Mable, have I not told you that if you serve me water one more time without my explicit request, you will flog yourself at dawn?"

"Yes Sir; sorry Sir", replied Mable, water dripping onto what looked like a bit of faded curtain being worn as a tunic. "Mable will be glad to do it first thing. Will Sirs and Madam be wanting your soup now?"

"Yes, and bring some bread rolls too", said Victoria.

"Honestly, I don't know what's got into that Elf", said Lothair, as Mable vanished.

"Probably just trying to look after your health, dear", said Victoria. Tom caught from her that she had in fact been the one to tell Mable to try to ply Lothair with water between alcoholic drinks. Tom wondered what would happen if a House Elf's masters gave it completely conflicting instructions. At least in this case, Mable could continue to follow all orders; it just meant a flogging in the morning, and perhaps every morning, if Victoria's order wasn't rescinded and Mable kept bringing water despite it incurring Lothair's displeasure.

The ill-favoured House Elf returned swiftly enough bearing a cauldron of soup before it, hovered along rather than carried manually, and a basket of bread balanced on its head.

The soup being set down, bowls and spoons appeared on the table, and with a click of Mable's fingers, the soup began serving itself into the bowls, by surely redundant use of

a self-spooning ladle. Mable ran around to the four places with the bread basket, offering little loaves, before setting that also onto the table.

“What is this soup?” asked Tiernan.

“It’s a matelote of orrazta”, squeaked Mable, “the eels was flamed in Sapient Pear Brandy, but cooked in Muscadet with butter, thyme, a bay leaf that Mable picked carefully on the second night of a new moon, and a touch of assiduous garlic, a little pepper, and...”

“What are these tiny little bauble things?”

“The garnish is glazed pearl onions, Master Tiernan Sir”

It wasn’t long before conversation turned - as Tom had expected it to sooner than this - to Tom’s own parentage.

“So, we understand from Tiernan that you’ve grown up an orphan; do you know nothing about your parents at all?”

“I know that some misfortune befell my mother, resulting in her having me at a disgusting Muggle orphanage - sorry to mention such things while we’re eating - which rather implies she knew she was dying, and for some reason couldn’t make it anywhere better. Assuming she was a Witch - which I can’t assume, but can hope - she mustn’t have had her wand on her. I don’t even know her name, because the idiot Muggle that runs the place never quite caught it, and then never got a chance to ask afterwards, because she was dead”

“And your father?” asked Lothair, with a furrowed brow.

“Presumed dead. I was named Tom Riddle after him, but as I’ve yet to find any reference to that name, I must accept it might have been a pseudonym, or even possible that they simply got it wrong at the orphanage. I hate them all; their incompetence - sorry to put a downer on the tone”

“Don’t worry about it”, said Victoria, “You’ve reason to be angry at them, messing up your birthright like that, having to figure out your own heritage”

“Your middle name”, said Tiernan, “Doesn’t that come from...”

“My grandfather, on my mother’s side. But from what I know of him, it doesn’t seem likely that’s a useful avenue for investigation”, surmised Tom, who didn’t want to bring up the near-certainty that his grandfather, if not his mother, must surely have been a Muggle.

“Well, you’re a right old mystery then, aren’t you?”, quipped Lothair, more cheerily than the preceding conversation. “You could be a distant relative of ours, or... well, no connection at all”, he concluded, shying away from pointing out the outside chance that Tom was in fact a Mudblood.

“When the Sorting Hat Sorted me”, said Tom, “It said it hadn’t seen such lineage in a long time, but it wasn’t any more specific than that. I could do with having words with it again, really. I just hope it doesn’t sing at me if I do”

“Ha, yes, it still does its rhymes, does it?”

“Afraid so. Less rhyme-laden but only a little more usefully was the advice of a Seer in London who has assured me that the secret to my illustrious past lies within the stones of Hogwarts, but frankly, Hogwarts is a big place and has a lot of books, school records, and the likes”

“And ghosts”, suggested Tiernan. “Most of us old Pureblood families have an ancestral ghost or three floating around the place, not to mention the portraits”.

“That could be quite a dismal survey to conduct, what with the number of ghosts and portraits at Hogwarts”, said Lothair, “But might just turn up something; it’s a good idea”

“If you ask Horace Slughorn, he could get a House Elf to do the worst of the brute labour for you, narrow it down a bit at least”, suggested Victoria. “And don’t forget they go places that you don’t; the other Common Rooms, the staff room, staff lodgings, and so on”

Here at Fengrey Hall, however, the resident House Elf’s mandates were rather more direct:

“Mable, go fetch a bottle of the Morey-Chaussier”

The Elf reappeared some moments later, presenting a wine bottle. Tom had got as far as wondering the meaning of the various things on the label (Morey-Chaussier, Appellation Contrôlée, Pinot Noir, Côte de Nuits), when Mable adjusted the position of the bottle in order to tap its cork; the cork now followed the Elf’s finger to be teased out of the bottle with a very slight popping sound.

“Will Sirs and Madam all be having the Morey-Chaussier?”

“Yes, I think so”, said Lothair to Mable, “Unless you want something else?” he added, to his wife. She shook her head, and wine was served first to Lothair - which he tested, and nodded approvingly - and then to all, though Tom noted the wine was not served especially plentifully, the Elf leaving a lot of room in each glass. This was fine by him, though, as he had no intentions of becoming drunk, and was quite content with his water that had refilled itself.

“Cheers”, proclaimed Victoria with a smile, prompting a brief interlude of glass-clinking and repetitions of the word. Upon tilting the glass to drink the wine, Tom found his nose assaulted by what Lothair would go on to describe as a “complex barnyard bouquet”, which made Tom’s head feel fuzzy before the liquid had even made its way as far as his lips. Upon getting as far as tasting it, however, Tom was relieved to note at least that this was a far cry from sandpapery Communion wine that he had had the misfortune of tasting at church, before his Hogwarts days. While this wine at Fengrey Hall wasn’t something he’d drink for fun, it was at least quite drinkable. While Lothair waxed lyrical about its fleshiness and notes of cherry and raspberry, Tom sat confused as he had understood it to be made from grapes.

“Of course this is just a little older than you are, Tiernan”, observed Lothair, “We got the case of it when your mother was carrying you. But unlike you, I think it probably only has a few more years left to be enjoyed in its prime”, he added with a smile. “Still, brings a tear to the eye to think what they did with the noble grape down in Africa”

“What’s that?”, asked Tiernan.

“By foul craft, the Boers crossed Pinot Noir with Cinsault grapes. They’ve been bottling cases of it in the caverns of South Africa. Cases that are then moved in sunlight over great distances at speed, with no care for light sensitivity or disrupting the sediment.”

Tiernan and his mother exchanged glances, and Tom didn’t need to read anybody’s mind to observe that they were wondering if Lothair was drunk, joking, actually felt like this about the wine, or a combination of those things.

“However”, said Lothair, picking up on this and not wanting to have his drinking disrupted by concerns of drunkenness, “Let’s put thoughts of that unhappy vinegar from our minds, and instead enjoy this much more felicitous libation. Also the food. Mable?”

“Mable will get it now, Sir”, said the Elf, who vanished and then returned carrying - or rather, hovering - a fantastically large fire-breathing peacock. Upon closer examination, the bird itself was not so huge, but its resplendent tail-feathers most certainly were, and while the creature was well-beyond the potential auspices of even the most skilled Healer, it nevertheless was spitting flame and smoke from its mouth, doubtless by means of some Charm.

“Ah, and here we are”, said Victoria, unnecessarily announcing its arrival. “The peacock is from Malfoy Manor, by the way; we must remember to send them something nice to thank them”

“Peacock à la Sainte-Alliance”, proclaimed Mable. Setting it on the table where the cauldron had been, and producing a carving knife from seemingly (and perhaps, actually) nowhere, the Elf continued: “Would Sirs and Madam like Mable to carve the bird now?”

“No”, replied Lothair. “There’s a tradition, the most eminent guest should do it, and as we only have one guest, we won’t be offending anyone to say that’s you, Tom”

“Very well then”, said Tom, who had absolutely no idea how to carve a bird, but hoped to be able to manage it by a combination of intelligent guesswork and mind-reading. He stood up, and Mable offered him the knife, handle first, which he took.

“Hold on, Tom”, said Lothair, drawing his wand. “*Vogimeno velos*”, he muttered, directing the Charm to the blade of the knife. “There, that should be a lot sharper now...”

“...so do be careful with it”, added Victoria.

“I’m sure he’ll cope, mum”, said Tiernan.

“The feathers should just lift off in one piece”, advised Victoria. Tom gave the feathers a little wiggle, and found that indeed the tail-feathers and the rest of the feathers covering the rest of the creature were indeed all attached, still in the skin. For simplicity’s sake, he lifted the entire lot off with his mind.

“Was that wandless...” began Victoria, interrupted by her son:

“Yes, he does that”

“It was a surprise to me actually when I learned that most Witches and Wizards can’t do it”, said Tom, not taking his eyes off the levitating feathery mass; after all, it’d be somewhat embarrassing to drop it now. “But it has its uses. What shall I do with this now?”

“Mable has a tray for it, Sir”, said Mable, who had either been palming a very large tray, or just now conjured it. Tom put the feathered skin down on the tray, and regarded the bird from underneath, which looked much smaller without its extravagant covering. The beak being over with the part that Tom had lifted, it had stopped spitting fire, and now merely had a narrow trail of thick black smoke rising from it. Tom rested the tip of the knife on the spine of the bird, sure at least that this was how to begin, when Lothair spoke:

“Oh, before you do that, I should warn you: there’s another part to the tradition; when the guest has carved the bird, they must then vow to accomplish some exceptional feat, so you might want to think about that while you’re doing it”

Tom gave a nod of acknowledgement and frowned for a moment in thought. All things being equal, he'd rather not have an ambitious quest foisted upon him, but then again, he *had* great ambitions, so he could surely just voice one of those, would that cause any insurmountable problems?

His stream of thought was interrupted by applause; he'd sliced into the meat while pondering this issue, for which act it was now apparent they had been waiting patiently. He continued to cut, and divided the bird in two along its spine, stabilizing the carcass with his mind. He was almost certain that there ought to be forks or something there to hold it in place, but there was no such aid - perhaps because Mable had been expecting to do it - but in any case he was managing just fine like this. Having accomplished dividing it in two, however, it was clear that more was expected, and he wasn't sure where to cut now.

"It's usual to start with the legs", offered Victoria. "It's fine that you've started with a cut down the middle, but now that you've done that, if you just slice here, and here..." - she directed him fairly closely through the remainder of the principle cuts, until the beast was divided into quite a lot of parts. By the time he'd finished the job, he'd worked out at least a moderate idea of what he was going to say, and managed to make his vow without too much hesitation:

"I will return the Wizarding world to its former glory, or rather bring it forwards to a golden age as yet unseen, mastering the mysteries of life itself, forging a new paradise of magical might and spotless purity, untainted by the unworthy and unfettered by those unwilling to accept our rightful place as Lords and Masters of this Earth"

There was a moment's silence before the other three applauded, and Tom retook his seat.

"Where did that all come from, Tom?", asked Tiernan.

"Just some... inspiration", replied Tom, dismissively.

"So, conquering the world then, eh?" joked Lothair.

"Watch me", smiled Tom, though really to him, the wiping out of filthy Muggles, as per his vision in that mirror in the Lost and Found room, was entirely secondary to the more pressing concern of - as he had put it in his little speech - mastering the mysteries of life, or more specifically, proofing such against the decided inconvenience of death, something that would put a real dampener on any other projects he might have.

"You might need to get in line", said Victoria, "What with Gellert Grindelwald and all"

"Well, somebody has to make a start while I'm busy at school, don't they?" replied Tom, himself not even sure the extent to which he was joking or serious.

"Speaking of making a start", said Lothair, "Shall we?" he prompted, indicating to the food.

"I see the bacon and presume those are orange slices, what's the rest of all this?", wondered Tiernan aloud, peering at the impressive dish.

"Indeed Sir", said Mable, "Sirs and Madam are seeing slices of bitter Seville oranges layered with bacon, supporting the bed of fatted toasts in turn topped with pâté of woodcocks and black truffle. The bird was basted in its juices with freshly cut sage, and this most basal bed is dressed barb de capucin", it concluded proudly.

The Elf was dismissed before it could go on to discuss the various side-dishes that it had brought while the humans were otherwise engaged; Tom could identify some of them himself in any case, such as the large bowl of thick-cut chips, and many of the vegetables he'd had before at Hogwarts in one form or another, even if he wasn't actually sure what all of them were called.

After more courses than expected, and culminating in barely having room for more than a nibble of the selection of cheeses presented at the end, and his head somewhat foggy from the wine, Tom was shown to his room by Tiernan.

"So, just touch this wall here and it'll move aside like the Common Room main door does from the inside", said Tiernan, demonstrating. Another room, very similar but with the bed against the opposite wall, lay behind it. Tiernan walked through. "This is my room, so if you need me for anything, do just come and get me. In the morning, there will be..." - here Tiernan was cut off by the wall replacing itself abruptly between them. Both boys moved to reopen it, and their hands were almost touching when it opened once more.

"You were saying?" prompted Tom.

"Sorry, I moved too far away. So yes, as I was saying, in the morning there will be breakfast at eight in the Mirabel Room; shall I come and get you for that?"

"By all means", replied Tom.

"Jolly good", said Tiernan. "And if you do need extra food or drink or such during the night, I've instructed Mable to take any orders from you. I'm sure she would anyway; she knows you're a guest, but I made sure just in case"

"How does one summon a House Elf?", asked Tom with a frown. "I've... obviously never had one"

"Oh, just call her", said Tiernan, "She'll come. Big ears", he added by way of explanation, imitating with his hands the big floppy ears of a House Elf.

"Right", said Tom uncertainly.

"If you want anything from me specifically though, I don't have big ears, so you'll have to come and poke me in bed, if you'll pardon the expression".

"I'll pardon it", said Tom, doing his best to ignore Tiernan's mental image associated with that thought.

"Well then, erm... Goodnight" said Tiernan with a smile and a gesture halfway between a wave and a salute, hesitating only a moment before turning and allowing the doorway to close behind him.

The bed was notably larger than even those at Hogwarts, being three pillows wide. Tom contemplated the various possible reasons for this: a three-headed guest, three very cosy guests who enjoyed each other's company very much, or perhaps two guests who had been expected to get on better than they did, and so had been put in the same room, but who secretly wanted to sleep some distance from each other with a space in between.

For Tom's part, he was somewhat bothered by there not being a wall at either of the sides of the bed, meaning that he wasn't sure which way to face to be sure of facing any oncoming attacker, what with the door to the corridor to one side of the bed and the

balcony door to the other. In the end, he settled for keeping to the middle of the bed, wand in hand - but pointing away from him, just in case. Tom was prone to violent dreams.

“Well, Brega, do wake me up if you see someone entering the room, alright?”

“Hahoo”

## Chapter Four

### *The Blasted Heath*

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!” came the sound of Tom’s morning wake-up call from his overly cheerful owl. Tom was fully under the covers, and cast his mind forth to determine if there was an intruder. Tiernan stood in the doorway between the two rooms, unsure as to how to best go about waking Tom, who now saved him the trouble by emerging from the sheets.

“Morning, Tiernan”

“Morning”, returned Tiernan with a smile.

“Well, give me a few minutes, and I’ll come join you in your room”, said Tom, with a shooing gesture. He was still stiff from waking up, and a slight draught from the balcony had given him a crick in the neck, which he now flexed. Brega hooted.

“Yes, well done, Brega. Now go to sleep if you want”

Tom went through his usual morning routine of face-washing, hair-combing, and dressing, and went to find Tiernan as promised.

“Ready for breakfast?” asked Tiernan, still in pyjamas but now sporting a rich dressing gown.

“Definitely”, replied Tom with a smile. “And... you’re not getting dressed?”

“Ah, it can wait. My hunger can’t”

“Fair enough. Shall we?” said Tom, gesturing not to the door that would back to his bedroom, but rather to the door that would lead to the corridor.

“Yes, let’s”, said Tiernan, offering Tom to go first, which he did.

Breakfast was in the Mirabel Room, which Tom had not seen yesterday, and revealed itself to be a surprisingly sunlit room with a view over the moors. Looking out of the windows, and seeing the sky to be decked with a glaring flat sheet of white cloud, he realised that it wasn’t really all that sunny, he’d just been in relative darkness since early yesterday evening.

The food already laid out was extensive, and even if somewhat lighter than the general fare at Hogwarts, it was certainly immeasurably better than the boring shredded wheat cereal, watery grey porridge, and tasteless cold toast most commonly on offer back at Wool’s. Even the popular recent introduction there, a kind of crispy dried flakes thing questionably branded “Force” Flakes, was really quite depressing.

Here, on the other hand, golden croissants and sweet brioche abounded, alongside stay-warm soft-boiled eggs, pains aux raisins, flat sweet vanilla-buttered spiral-coiled bread-pastry-things which did not stay put as they tried to slide off like snails, and pains au chocolat, which did not stay put simply because they were really rather good. With the selection of juices available ranging from orange to pomegranate, and whole fresh fruits ranging from apples to ferocious-looking dragon fruits, and newly imported “ackees” that Tom felt distinctly were watching him, Tom almost did not notice Mable arriving with a tea-tray and a slight limp.

“Good morning Sirs”, squeaked Mable. “Mable has brought Master Tiernan’s Earl Grey, and what would Sir like?” added the Elf, addressing Tom.

“The same will be fine”, replied Tom. The House Elf served the fragrant black tea into cups; slices of lemon filled a small bowl.

“Would Sir like sugar or... not?” asked Mable - Tom gleaned from the creature’s mind that it was about to ask “or milk”, but thought better of it, perhaps based on some previous admonishment.

“No”, answered Tom, who did not see the point in trying a new thing - as this tea was to him - and changing its taste before one has sampled it in the first place.

It was still somewhat foggy by late morning when Tiernan’s father showed up; he must have taken some potion, as he didn’t seem nearly as hung over as he ought to be.

“Not much of a day for hunting out there, is it?” he mused, “We’ll have to put that one off a bit, I think”

“Dad”, said Tiernan, “Can we do the lightning thing you said we could do? This weather would be perfect for that, wouldn’t it? Bit of cloud cover to keep the Muggles from seeing?”

“Well, they’ll still see the flashes, but better than doing it on a clear day... Sure, we could do that. Do you have a broom with you?” he added, to Tom.

“No, in fact, I don’t have a broom at all”, said Tom, “So far I’ve just borrowed school brooms. I daresay I’ll get my own at some point, but for now, let’s just say I have fairly limited monetary resources, so I must put every Knut where it counts most”

“Ah, a terrible thing for a lad of your age to be without a broom”, answered Lothair. “We’ll have to see what we can do; at the very least we’ve a couple of spares knocking around, so I’m sure Tiernan will be able to kit you out”

“Yes, definitely”, affirmed Tiernan. “C’mon, I’ll show you what we’ve got”.

Tom followed Tiernan up a short staircase and out into a corridor, where a suit of armour straightened itself up, just as the one in the Balinghem Room had done the previous evening. Portrait after portrait bade them good morning as the boys strode past.

“They’re not normally this chatty”, said Tiernan, “I expect they’re just nosy to find out who you are - alright, just up here, and we have the Broom Landing”

The Broom Landing was revealed to be an octagonal room with no furniture, but a large rectangular hole in the roof, distant sunlight dimly visible through the sheet of cloud bedecking the sky up above them.

“Why so many brooms?” asked Tom, looking at the collection of broomsticks on the walls of the room.

“Most of them are a bit duff”, said Tiernan, “But here, try this one...”

A couple of brooms later, they found one that would both stay in the air and respond properly to Tom’s directions.

“So, where are we going?” asked Tom. “I gather that we’re going to be playing with the weather, but are we going somewhere else to do that?”

“I don’t know, nowhere too far; probably out Hexworthy way somewhere”, said Tiernan. “We’ve a lot of space around us, so we don’t need to worry about Muggles too much”

As it turned out when Lothair finally took the two boys out across the moors, Muggles were indeed not high on the list of priorities when it came to things to watch out for.

“Oh, and try not to fly too near to crossroads, if you can help it”, said Lothair, calling across to Tom, who was flying on the other side of Tiernan, “or else the Hairy Hands might get you”

“Hairy Hands?” queried Tom - “What are they, besides the obvious?”

“There’s Hag who has a lair around here somewhere”, explained Lothair, “and she’s arranged a Hairy Hands Curse; it’s a bit primitive, but you know what Hags are like... so anyway, if you fly too near to a crossroads, it’s entirely possible that a pair of... well, hairy hands... will appear out of nowhere, grab your broom, and try to crash you”

“Lovely”, said Tom. “Is it just one Hag?”

“We think so, but the Curse is all over the place”

“Why doesn’t someone just hunt it down and kill it?”, Tom asked.

“Hah!”, said Lothair. “Yes, that’d be good, but unfortunately, we can’t, not with the new legislation from the idiots at the Ministry who don’t have to put up with this silliness”

“So every now and again”, said Tiernan, “a Muggle gets dragged off and throttled and eaten, because the Ministry would rather we don’t interfere”

“Well, every cloud, eh?” rejoined Tom.

“Sorry, come again?”

“Every cloud has a silver lining”, said Tom. “It’s a saying”

“Really? But... No hang on, I’m confused, and I don’t even take Alchemy; how do the clouds have silver linings?”, asked Tiernan. “I thought it was just water in them; is the silver what keeps the water in?”

“No, they don’t really have silver in them”, said Tom, “Or at least, I don’t think they do, although come to think of it, that would explain it”

“Explain what?”

“Well, since quicksilver is the First Matter of Transmutation, it’d make sense that it’s used to form the rainwater that becomes so many other things after it’s fallen on the ground - I don’t know how the Transmutation occurs though, if that is what happens. In fact no, it can’t be that, because water is a manifestation of the First Element, not of First Matter”

“Boys”, said Lothair, “Much as I hate to interrupt such a scholarly discussion, we want to veer down next to this copse now”

Down on solid ground, Tom’s explanation of why Elemental Transmutation wasn’t just called Transfiguration got adjourned until later, as they now followed Lothair’s directions in placing the brooms in a small depression in the low sloping mound the top of which bore a small and scraggly copse of trees in a broad horseshoe shape around where the trio now stood.

“So, as promised”, said Lothair, “Let’s do some Lightning Conjunction”

The boys took out their wands, and Lothair shook his head, continuing:

“Steady on, now; listen first. When you do Conjure lightning, you need to have the target already clearly in mind, or else it’ll behave just like ordinary lightning, and hit whatever’s nearest, which will usually be you, unless you’re actually touching the target

with your wand - in which case, it'll be scarcely better for you when your wand explodes in your hand".

Tom was beginning to wonder whether this was really such a good idea, and while he certainly did want to learn it, he would rather prefer to practice with someone else's wand first.

"Now, we also don't want to hit each other, so it's important to not think about each other while we're doing this, got it?"

"How are we supposed to not think about each other while trying to avoid each other?" asked Tiernan.

"By focussing on the actual target", suggested Tom.

"Good, bright lad, yes: by focussing on the actual target", agreed Lothair.

"What is the actual target?" asked Tom, thinking to himself that this part would be a lot easier in an actual duel, as in an actual duel it's very easy to have one's mind on one's opponent.

"Well, in the absence of the Hag obliging us by showing up", said Lothair, "I recommend to use that rocky outcrop there", he said, gesturing. Now, the incantation is as follows, and watch my wand movement: *Fulgor aerāmine!*"

Lothair raised his wand aloft with the first word, and directed it sharply at the rock with the second. There was a bright flash of lightning accompanied by a loud BANG, and a sapling about twenty feet from the rock exploded into flames as the lightning hit it.

"Nusku's crumpets!", exclaimed Lothair, extinguishing what was left of it. "Well, you get the idea; as I say, it's not the most easily controlled of Spells"

"So, you were focussing on the rock?" asked Tom, who had been paying attention to the wand, the misty air, and the rock, and not Lothair's mind.

"Yes, though evidently not well enough", replied Lothair. "Good thing is though, it'll now be much easier to hit what's left of that tree, so let's do that instead"

"Why will it be easier now?", asked Tiernan.

"Well, your mind now knows exactly what lightning striking that tree looks like, knows what to expect, and so is ready to create it for you once more at your bidding"

"Shall we go ahead and try now?" said Tom, whose concerns for the safety of his wand were now long-forgotten back on the other side of the recent lightning strike.

"Yes... One at a time though, who wants to go first?"

"I will", said Tom, taking a step forwards as Tiernan took a step backwards.

"Very well", said Lothair, "As I say, focus on that tree, and nothing but that tree, while you cast the Spell"

*"Fulgor aerāmine!"*

There was a mighty flash and a crack, and the charred tree-stump was struck a second time by lightning; the grasses near it burned away in one searing instant, leaving a smouldering patch surrounding a few broken lumps of charcoal that smoked profusely with just a slight glow, and no visible flame.

"Not an awful lot left for me to hit, is there?" noted Tiernan.

By the time half the copse had been reduced to smoking ruins, Lothair suggested that they move on before Muggles arrived and caused complications that would mean a visit from Ministry of Magic officials.

They did get to go out hunting later in the week, and came back with a cluster of skarvies between them; it had been quite satisfying to snare them out of the air with Incarcerus Curses, but now they'd been given to Mable to hang, and since Lothair wanted to have a photograph taken of them with their day's haul, they went down to do so in the basement, to avoid incurring Victoria's displeasure by bringing bloody skarvies upstairs in the house.

"Good, good, now take those and develop them", Lothair instructed Mable, who curtseyed and vanished. "While we're down here, let's see if that broomstick maintenance kit is here, so we can stop that Comet from pulling to the left. If it's down here, it'll be... Argh!" - Lothair jumped back in surprise, as a small adder hissed angrily at him from between two coffers on the floor, one of which he'd just opened.

"What are you doing in here and how did you get in?" wondered Lothair out loud. The snake shifted in its coils, ready to defend itself.

*"Answer him, or we'll Curse you into oblivion"*, said Tom. The snake turned its attention to him now. So did Lothair and Tiernan, but they did not speak.

*"Answer the question, answer what answer, what question?"*, returned the snake.

*"What are you doing here, and how did you get in?"* asked Tom, repeating Lothair's enquiry.

"Tom..." began Tiernan, but Tom held up a hand to shush him.

*"Seeking a warm place, a shelter place, it's all I seek"* came the hissing reply.

*"And your means of entrance?"* prompted Tom.

*"A small subterranean slither, sinking underneath the stopping Spells of the surface that stop at the soil"* replied the snake, its tongue flickering as it spoke.

*"It says... Pardon, I mean, it says"*, Tom corrected himself, as he had begun once more in Parseltongue, "that it was just looking for shelter, and it came in underground, beneath your protective Enchantments"

"Are you, er... are you done with the snake?" asked Lothair.

"Yes", answered Tom simply.

"Avada kedowwww!" - Lothair's Curse was interrupted by the snake striking his hand at a great speed, no doubt responding more to the sudden hand movement than the Spell that it could probably not recognise. Tom restrained the snake with his mind, and then completed the act with the full Killing Curse that Lothair had been unable to get out. The snake fell down like it had merely been some Charmed object, now Disenchanted, dropping, so devoid of life that one could scarcely believe it had ever been alive.

"Are you alright?" asked Tiernan, stupidly, of his father. It was Tom who spoke next, however:

"Well you don't appear to be dying, so do you know how to fix that? The hand, I mean" asked Tom, a little more usefully.

“Just a stupid viper bite, I need... Mable!”, he said, and the House Elf appeared at their side, expectantly. “Mable, go get me a large whisky and... er... anti-venom I suppose, the one for vipers”

“Yes Sir”, said Mable, vanishing again, leaving Lothair clutching his hand.

“They’re not lethal, then?” asked Tom, of the dead animal. “I’ve met loads, and they seem to think they’re capable of killing”

“No; it jolly well hurts though”, said Lothair. “Anyway, what’s this, you talking to snakes?”

“Yes”, said Tom, with a smile. “When I find them, or they find me, whichever. I can’t say they’re the best conversationalists ever, but better than stupid whiny Muggles, aren’t they?”

“It’s rather rare though, I mean...”

“Here Sir”, said Mable, reappearing with a large tumbler of whisky, and a small jar of a clear liquid with what looked like a bloated leech in it.

“Good”, said Lothair, taking the whisky and downing some. “What the fuzzy taravattle is that?”

“It is the anti-venom that Sir requested”

“I can see that, but the Spleech!”

“It is, as Sir rightly says, a Spleech”

“What is it doing there, don’t we have any metayoking sponges left?”

“No Sir, they was used up last time after the incident with the Hellhound pack but the Spleech will put the anti-venom into Sir’s blood; it will be nearly painless, and if Sir has been bitten then Sir must have anti-venom”

“If you continue to patronize me I swear to Merlin I will cast you out of here and get a new House Elf, and then where will you be, you stupid slinking incompetent creature?!”

“Mable is very sorry Sir, and wants only to treat her Master’s wound, Sir”, pleaded the Elf.

Infuriated, but nevertheless in clear need of medical attention, Lothair consented to let the Elf use the Spleech, which appeared to slowly reduce in size somewhat upon latching on to his hand, as Lothair winced but maintained a stony silence for a moment. When the Spleech stopped shrinking, the House Elf took it back and replaced it in the jar. Tom wondered what it actually subsisted on, if its life was restricted to performing the function of a syringe.

“This is going to need a Deflating Draught or something now”, said Lothair.

A Deflating Draught and Immunogoblin Juice later, Lothair recuperated in the Édenkert Room, while Tom and Tiernan discussed the snake, in the Delacy Ash Reading Room.

“Do you get a lot of creatures coming in here?”

“Not really”, said Tiernan. “We have various manners of defensive Charms and the like, so for example vampires cannot enter the property without being invited; beasts as a whole shouldn’t be able to get in apart from owls, but as you’ve seen, there’s often a chink in any armour”

“Seems of a liability, when it’s vipers that come in, and you can’t control them”

“We see them around sometimes, but none of us have been bitten before. Good thing it seems it just hurts, and doesn’t do all sorts of nasties like that Boomslang at school last year”.

“Yes, it did seem like it hurt rather, from his exclamation. What’s a tarryvattle, anyway; is it related to Tarryfattle’s in Hogsmeade?”

“Taravattle, no, it’s more like...” Tiernan trailed off, making a hand gesture, “...rubbing something against something, maybe”

“Well I can see the connection to Tarryfattle’s then; enough people getting a bit close to each other in there from time to time”

“Yeah, the name could be... Well, it’s very old”, concluded Tiernan.

“I’m not going to ask why your father’s is fuzzy, then”

“Why wouldn’t... You know what, never mind”

“Whose are all these books?”, asked Tom, changing the topic.

“In here, in the strictest sense they’re Dad’s, but really they’re the family’s books, come down the generations. Mum keeps most of hers in the Ptolemy Room or in her bedside bookcase.

“And those were all your books that were in your room, then?”, asked Tom.

“Yes, though I need to sort out an Extension Charm, or get a new bookcase”, said Tiernan. “I had just enough bookcase room for the books I had, then I won the auction on a collection of Bickford Redmeer books - at Marca’s instigation, I might add; she said they’d really help me get ahead in Glyphs and Tongues. Not that it was a bad recommendation; it’s really changed how I think about the subject - but yeah, I have some books living on the floor now”.

“Alas, I’ve not yet had that problem myself”, noted Tom; “I have more books than ever, and they still fit in my Hogwarts trunk without an Extension Charm yet”

“Well, no need to lug them all around, is there?” said Tiernan, “Though I must say I’ll probably miss access to the Redmeer collection when we’re back at school”

By the end of the week, Tom had a few more books of his own after they all made the requisite trip to Diagon Alley to buy the new school year’s listed books and other assorted needful things, but Tom was rather more familiar with the reference materials available at Fengrey Hall; while he spent a lot of time with Tiernan, and often Tiernan’s parents, there was also plenty of time over for making the most of their books while he was there.

Of the tomes on the bookcase in his bedchamber, one in particular caught Tom’s eye, headed “The Immortals”. Alas, he found that it was not in fact so very useful as might have been expected from the title. It turned out that “The Immortals” were a regiment of soldiers of a long-dead king - and not, in fact, immortal. They got their name not by being proofed against death on any personal level, but rather from how the regiment numbers were maintained at ten thousand-strong, no more nor less, such that every soldier was expendable, but would always be replaced, one out one in, meaning that no matter how strong their enemies, no matter how many of them were cut down, the regiment would never so much as lessen by a single individual; it’d just keep on inexorably fighting; a massive, formless monster that no force of arms could destroy. That was all very well for

an army; but what of the individual? He could hardly lose parts of himself and keep on going at full strength... Could he?

He saw various perhaps fanciful illustrations of these soldiers in the book, with artists impressions of soldiers with their faces Charmed (or Cursed?) blank, or else wearing veils, or masks, so as to enhance the vast blank impassiveness of the fighting force; it had become something impersonal, inhuman. A true war machine.

Tom remembered back to his vision in that mirror in the Lost and Found room at Hogwarts, and how it had foretold him having his own personal army, amongst many other inspiring life developments, and reflected now on how he would go about bringing out the best in his soldiers, making them, too, inhuman and powerful. Not so powerful as himself, of course, but a clear cut above the rest, and yet depersonalized and obedient, ready to respond to his wishes without their personal whims getting in the way. He'd want an army that was pure and faceless, like that of the old king in the book. Only his realm would be far, far, greater.

## Chapter Five

### *Old and New*

The journey to platform nine and three-quarters of King's Cross station was much more pleasant with the Lestranges than with the Muggles with whose company he had been saddled on previous occasions, not to mention the arduous motorcar ride that such entailed.

Instead, they travelled by Apparition, which now being Tom's third trip by such means, had stopped giving any kind of sickening feeling, and now had settled into a merely odd sensation.

They Apparated not to platform nine and three-quarters itself, which as Victoria explained had an Anti-Apparition Jinx upon it, maintained by the Ministry of Magic, for safety reasons - it would not do to have people Apparating onto the busy platform, potentially into other people already there, or more likely (since an Apparating person would tend to instinctively avoid that) arrive by accident onto the train-track where there would naturally not be people (but could be an oncoming train).

Nor did they Apparate to King's Cross in some other part, which Victoria had expected would be packed with Muggles as usual. Instead, they Apparated to the nearby Guildhall Art Gallery.

Regaining his bearings upon arrival, Tom found himself in a small dead-end section of corridor, with no notable features.

"Well, this way then, boys", said Victoria, indicating the only way out. They proceeded forth, and soon entered a larger room, with four benches in it, and still no other noteworthy contents.

"What happened to all the paintings?" asked Tiernan. Tom gleaned from his mind an images of this room normally decked with frame paintings, of which now only the nails remained - and now that Tom looked properly, slight outlines on the walls from where they had been.

"Blaenau Ffestiniog", said a voice that was not any of theirs. Turning, they saw a ghost, semi-dressed in a loin-cloth with a wide belt; a large helmet obscured his face, and his right arm was heavily armoured; aside from that, the only other clothing he wore were shin-guards of a sort. He carried a short wide sword and tall rectangular shield.

"Im sorry, what?" asked Victoria.

"Blaenau Ffestiniog, they say. It's in Venedotia, I think. Wales, in any case"

"What, did the Welshmen come and steal them?", asked Tom.

"No, the English sent them away, away to be safe"

"Ah, from the Muggle bombings", reasoned Tom, out loud.

"Yes, they're a timorous lot, those who live today"

"Muggles have a reason to be fearful, at least", argued Tom.

"I never feared death", said the ghost.

"You must have", said Tiernan, "Or you wouldn't be here, right? Or was it unfinished business for you?"

"I only wanted to stay with the glorious combat", said the ghost, "and look where that got me. Arena gone, and now almost everything else has gone too"

"Well we'd love stop and chat, but these boys are going to miss their train if we don't hurry up", advised Victoria.

"I hear you", said the ghost. "You go on, hurry, rush, race through your tiny lives. See where it gets you when you arrive to the other side"

"Bye Bruno", said Tiernan, laughing, as they made their departure from the room.

"Bruno?" asked Tom.

"Yes, that's his name, the ghost. He's been here when we've passed through before; he's always around"

"What's his story? Was he a Muggle? I didn't know Muggles could become ghosts"

"They can", answered Victoria, "But it's less common for them because they don't know they can"

"Then of course they learn they can after they did it accidentally", added Tiernan, "And then they find out about us, if they didn't know previously, since we can see them and Muggles can't. Bruno knew already of course; he died long before the Statute of Secrecy"

"Is that why he haunts a Muggle building?" asked Tom, as they came now to the exit of the building; of course it was locked, as the gallery was currently out of use by the Muggles.

"No, he just haunts this place because he died here and was quite attached to the place", said Victoria, unlocking and opening the heavy-looking double doors with her wand, and then closing and locking them again. "Don't want Muggle tramps moving in to our Apparition spot", she said with a smile.

"It was a good landing point even even when the gallery was open", said Tiernan, "because usually nobody's in that bit, and even if a Muggle did see us arrive, they'd never admit to it without other witnesses to back them up".

"So how old is that ghost, do you know?", asked Tom, as they headed along the main street now. Being a Sunday morning, there weren't too many Muggles around, and in all likelihood no Londoner would pay much attention to their conversation even if they overheard it.

"Twice as old as Hogwarts"

"Gosh, that is old", said Tom. "I never really thought much about magical stuff that's older than Hogwarts, even though it does come up from time to time obviously"

"There have been magical people in these islands for at least a couple of thousand years, probably much longer", said Victoria, "but most of our records only go back to the Founding of Hogwarts - we don't even know much about our own family before that point!" she added, as though such thoughts were scarcely believable. Tom, on the other hand, didn't know much about his own family before, well, himself, so the notion of knowing about one's family only as far as a thousand years back was perhaps quite different for him than it was for her.

Owing to it being not only a Sunday but also a Sunday in a semi-evacuated city in the middle of a war, King's Cross was not nearly so packed with Muggles as usual.

“You first”, said Victoria to the boys, who obliged and headed straight through the barrier after making only the most cursory of checks that there were no Muggles watching.

“Are they first years? They can’t be first years... I’m sure we weren’t that small when we were first-years”, said Tiernan, looking at the clusters of mostly parents with nervous-looking children keeping near them, caught between the desire to avoid being embarrassed by their parents, and a will to nevertheless not wander off, as such would mean either standing by themselves not knowing what to do or where to look, or else striking up a conversation with complete strangers - which was not a traditional British pastime, accept possibly for Scousers.

“Fresh meat for the Sorting Hat”, said Tom. “Remember a quarter of them are ours”

“Well, Lucretia’s brother will be starting this year, so we’ll probably get him, not that they seem to be here yet...” - Tiernan trailed off, his attention drawn to something behind Tom. Turning, Tom saw that the newest arrival through the barrier was indeed quite eye-catching, and had not escaped the notice of many in the immediate vicinity of the portal.

A hulking figure had made its way through; he must have been at least seven feet tall, and towered over everyone, including the parents, but was wearing Hogwarts school robes.

“Sorry, sorry”, came a child’s voice from the oversized arrival.

“What...” began Tiernan, but made it no further into the sentence than that, before again resuming wordlessness.

“Rubeus, watch out”, chided the small man next to him, as the former rolled his luggage-trolley into that of a young Hufflepuff student with pigtails, who gazed open-mouthed at him.

“Sorry”, repeated the giant child, now taking in the platform around him. “You going to Hogwarts as well, are yer?”, he asked, of the astonished Hufflepuff. She nodded.

“See, I told yer”, said the small man next to him, “Nobody else has got their school robes on already”

“Oh well, never hurts t’ be prepared, eh, Dad?”

“Just as well I went through yer things this mornin’, or else you’d have forgotten half yer stuff; honestly Rubeus, you’d lose your head if it weren’t screwed on. Now, have yer got everything t’ hand that yer might need on the train?”

“Got me magic wand”, the son replied, brandishing it with enthusiasm - and it was apparently unintentionally that with this action he magically swatted a cluster of three students off the platform’s edge and onto the the train-tracks. Two of the three landed straight onto the rails; the third was now howling in pain after catching the stone edging of the platform with his knee on the way down, having scrambled forwards in what had been a fruitless effort to avoid falling all the way off. “Oh!” exclaimed the giant child, clearly too shocked to add yet another “sorry” immediately.

“Rubeus!” shouted his father, hurrying forwards. “Put that thing away before yer demolish the station”

“Sorry” said Rubeus, catching up now, “Are you alrigh’ down there?” he added; there were now a couple of other older students who had jumped down to help, and one of the parents, who was ushering the well-meaning newcomers back. A stepladder was

conjured, and the two uninjured students climbed back up, one pushing the other from behind as though the Hogwarts Express might come and mow them down at any moment.

“Excuse me, I’m a Healer; I can help”, advised a Witch who had now hopped down to join the grimacing casualty and the parent.

By the time this had all been dealt with, and the Hogwarts Express pulled safely in to the platform, there was a greater-than-usual clamouring of students as some fought in a crowd to board the same carriage as the towering newcomer, and others did their best to go in the opposite direction, to avoid such, not to mention to have better chances of finding a quiet compartment to call their own.

Tom, Tiernan, Marca, and Antonin fell into this latter category, but it wasn’t long before the door to their compartment slid open, and Milton Mulciber greeted them:

“Lestranger, Riddle, Slughorn wants to see you. And hello, by the way”

“Now?” asked Tom.

“Pretty much”, said Mulciber. “Front carriage; he has an extended compartment there”

“What have we done?” asked Tiernan, with a tone of apprehension.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be for Slug Club inductions”

“Slug Club?”, asked Tom.

“Oh, right-oh”, said Tiernan with a smile, but not very helpfully. “What do you mean though, inductions?”

“It’s a lot like *introductions* but without the *tro*”, explained Mulciber, competing in the category of unhelpfulness. Looking into his mind gave an image of what looked like a small dinner party however, so it couldn’t be all bad.

“Alright then”, said Tom. “Do we need anything with us?”

“Just yourselves”, said Mulciber, shaking his head. “And you”, he said, turning to Marca, “You’re Marca Zelyonaya, right?”

“Yes”

“You too then”, he said. “Not you”, he added, with a nod to Antonin. “Anyone know where Abraxas Malfoy is?”

“He is on the train”

“Thanks, folks, I don’t know where I’d be without you”

“Probably in another compartment”, offered Marca.

Once they arrived at Slughorn’s compartment, having left Antonin to contemplate his exclusion by himself, they found that “extended compartment” meant quite a spacious area indeed, not to mention it being noticeably wider than the train itself.

“Ah, good to see you, good to see you” enthused Slughorn upon their entry. “Do help yourselves to some refreshments; we’re just waiting on a few more people”, he said, directing them to tables laden with fancy foods and less fancy drinks. Tom and Marca ignored the food, while Tiernan helped himself to what appeared to be a miniature cross between a Scotch egg and a pork pie. Tom went to arrange himself a cup of tea, and was momentarily surprised at the teapot pre-empting his desire as soon as he picked up a

teacup. The teapot winked at him, and Tom gave it a withering look, before turning back towards the others with a ready smile on his face and a cup of tea now in hand.

At the door, Jana and fellow Gryffindor Brandon Gorri were each trying to usher the other one through the doorway first, hanging back themselves. Tom caught Jana's eye at the same time as Gorri gave up on gentlemanliness and made to enter, resulting in them now both trying to get through the door at once.

"No rush, boys and girls" chided Slughorn with a smile, "plenty of room for everyone. Ah, Abraxas my lad, good to see you", he added, as Abraxas indeed emerged behind the Gryffindors. "Do help yourself to some food and drink; I always have some brought on specially, it's a lot better than what they serve on the train otherwise", he chuckled.

No sooner was Abraxas approaching than more arrivals were appearing; a trio of Ravenclaws arrived together; Elvira Highcastle, Raymond Pierce, and Millicent Bagnold. Tom was struggling to work out what they all had in common.

"And that's everybody", said Slughorn happily - apparently no Hufflepuffs were expected, nor anyone from years other than their own.

Slughorn urged the latest newcomers in the direction of the snacks and drinks, and finally got around to explaining what they were all actually doing here:

"So, as some of you will know, it's my habitude to try to get to know a bit better a select few of my students - it'd be an injustice to my best and brightest to only divide my attentions equally, you know!", he said with a chuckle.

Tom smiled and looked around the room. He wasn't quite sure how some of these people constituted "the best and the brightest", but perhaps Slughorn had a different understanding of "best". Bagnold, for instance - and Abraxas and Tiernan for that matter - were clearly of mediocre talent, and Tom wouldn't necessarily have counted Jana or Tiernan amongst the "brightest", at least in general terms. Of course Jana was a dab hand at Potions (perhaps a cause for bias on Slughorn's part?), and Tiernan seemed to have taken some degree of a scholarly turn over summer, but Slughorn had more likely counted him amongst the "best" simply for his family background, surely.

At the very least the presence of himself, Marca, and Elvira Highcastle could be more reasonably defended.

"It's my hope", continued Slughorn, "that I'm right in thinking that you boys and girls will be good fits to what some have come to call the Slug Club, a select few students that I invite to... Well, to things like this really" he said, gesturing widely to the compartment around him - "Though we usually have a few more, older students you know, but I thought it might be nice to have a little get-together so that we can all know each other a bit better first"

More than half of those in the room looked more than a touch uneasy at these words. Tom brightened his smile a little, while behind it he worked on figuring out what was likely to be going on next. Was he going to ask them personal questions? Would they have to introduce themselves to the others? They all knew who each other were, at least; what more ought they to know about each other?

“Don’t worry”, Slughorn reassured them, “Nobody’s going to be interrogated; the most important thing is that everyone has a good time”

Slughorn’s thoughts were already ranging as he said these words, and his thoughts belied his claim somewhat; they ranged over Fengrey Hall, what might have been some government offices, probably the Ministry of Magic, a... conference of some kind? The Daily Prophet, and some other thoughts that were too small or fleeting to catch properly.

The teacher started telling an anecdote about an older student who had now departed Hogwarts; a member of the Malfoy family, and as he did so, and Tom paid attention to the thoughts and words that streamed forth. They were sometimes in complete accord with each other; sometimes, not so much. It was quite evident that Slughorn hoped to use them as pawns, to manipulate their families, their parents who had money, prestige, and power. Which did lead him to wonder what he and Jana were doing there; him with no parents and her with disgusting Muggles who couldn’t even live up to the most basic standards of parenthood, that is to say, helping and strengthening their child, rather than shunning her as they had, despite her being immeasurably greater than them.

For her own part, Jana’s thoughts flitted quickly through what must be her parents, a house; probably theirs - it was certainly not her great-aunt’s cottage - and some other people that Tom did not know. She visited her great-aunt’s cottage with a suitcase, only something was strange about this memory. Before Tom could pinpoint what exactly this was, however, Slughorn’s anecdote was over as some of those gathered made polite laughter in response; the Professor’s attention now turned back to them.

“Are you alright there, Teires? Looking a bit peaky; not travel-sick, I hope?”

“I’m fine”, said Jana, as credibly as possible. “How’re you, Sir?” she added, perhaps a touch lamely.

“Oh, I’m in good enough sorts”, smiled Slughorn, “though I do always carry anti-nausea lozenges just in case”

“How do you make the anti-nausea potion fit in the lozenges?” asked Jana, curious.

“Ah, that’s the secret”, he replied, “It contains a syrup of the original potion, with dehydrated reduplication mixture, and then by means of the Phoenician water process, the potion re-makes itself inside the stomach”, he explained proudly. “Of course, some of us have more room for that than others”, he said with a chuckle, patting his own ample biological factory.

“Huh” replied Jana, simply, thinking it through.

“But the stomach is full of acid”, objected Marca; “Why do you not die when the water is taken out of it by the potion, its reconstruction, re...making?”

“Aha, a good question, my girl. It’s true there is a side-effect of a slight release of chlorine gas, but, er... nothing to worry about”, he assured them, glancing to the window, which was open just a crack. “Anyway, even that can be avoided by drinking enough water with it, or as I prefer, a nice elderflower cordial”

“That makes good sense, Sir”, said Tom, opening with a claim that he was now going to contradict, but thought he might at least begin on a positive note, before continuing “But if you’re going to drink a large quantity of water with the lozenge, how did it do you any convenience? Why not just take the actual potion in the first place?”

This time it was Bagnold who answered:

“Well, have you tasted an anti-nausea potion?”, she asked; it was apparent from her tone that she had.

“That is a fair point”, conceded Tom.

“Haha, and you would know about that, wouldn’t you, Miss Bagnold?” joked Slughorn. “I’ve heard all about your shenanigans; very creative, I must say”

“My shenanigans?”

“Yes, I hear you’re quite the party organizer up in Ravenclaw Tower; I’ve had more than one student plead sickness as an excuse for not having done their homework, after what I understand from Professor Vassy has been one of your illicit parties”

While some present were now trying to wrap their heads around the idea of Ravenclaws not doing homework, Bagnold’s mind now raced to address the fact she might be in trouble.

“There are parties sometimes in Ravenclaw Tower”, she replied carefully, “And my policy has always been one of limiting damage”

“Well, if it gets you brewing potions, I can’t complain too much, eh?” suggested Slughorn, with continued levity. “Though I’m not sure Professor Vassy always feels the same way; didn’t she ban all such activities for a while, before trying to - what was it - contain them at least to the weekends?”

“When I’m Minister for Magic, I shall make sure to secure the inalienable right to party”, said Bagnold, prompting a lively debate regards which House had the best parties, as each strove to present themselves as best while also not admitting too much in the presence of a teacher.

Slughorn, on the other hand, was rather more keen to focus on the other part of her statement and whether it pertained to a serious ambition; he knew quite a few people at the Ministry, mostly in influential positions, usually knowing them from their shared school days. Now, it seemed, he was looking to maintain or grow that web of influence, by means of his own students, of whom at least some would surely go on to similar positions, if he had anything at all resembling an eye for potential.

## Chapter Six

### *Terror Tactics*

“Black, Orion” surprised absolutely nobody by being Sorted into Slytherin. When it came to Pureblood families with a history at Hogwarts, Tom wondered how much the Sorting Hat even looked at their qualities, and how much it simply assumed that they would live up to what was expected of them.

It was not long before the Sorting got as far as the most conspicuous of first years, and it would be fair to say that most had quite an interest regards which House would become his home:

“Hagrid, Rubeus!”

The giant first-year made his way nervously to the front. Dumbledore took out his wand and increased the size of the stool. Without such an action, the result would have been comical at best. What did still raise a bit of a titter amongst the onlookers was the contrast of the Sorting Hat on his head; naturally it didn't fall over his eyes like with most, but instead, was perched atop his head, rather too small for it; Godric Gryffindor (whose hat that Sorting Hat had originally been) hadn't had such a big head as this blundering buffoon.

*Brave and friendly, not too clever*, thought Hagrid, as though the hat could possibly need help with this aspect. Surely he would be Sorted into Hufflepuff or Gryffindor; Ravenclaw was unthinkable, and Tom certainly didn't want to think about him being Sorted into Slytherin. He'd hate to be in any way responsible for trying to keep this idiot out of trouble.

The hat was clearly not finding his placement obvious, as it took a while with this one.

*Not Slytherin, not Slytherin*, thought Tom.

“Gryffindor!” called out the Sorting Hat at last. This announcement got louder cheers than anyone else so far; the Gryffindors were thrilled to have him, the Slytherins and Ravenclaws were thrilled to not have him, and the Hufflepuffs were Hufflepuffs.

Hagrid got up, and the hat fell off; he tried to catch it as it fell, but missed, and Dumbledore Summoned it back from the floor with a good-natured smile.

Tom, for his part, smiled to himself; if one thing was for sure, those two deserved each other.

Dumbledore restored the stool to its previous size ready for “Hornby, Olive”, who was pleased to be Sorted, albeit after quite a good while, to Ravenclaw.

“Shafiq, Aftab” was Sorted to Hufflepuff when his turn came; of some surprise to many of those who knew the family name as one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight families listed as the most prestigious in the *Pureblood Directory*, though with this latter work being anonymous, many suspected it to have been penned by a member of one of those twenty-eight families who wanted to make sure their family was included in the list. So, probably not an indisputable family like the Lestranges, the Blacks, or the Malfoys, but perhaps one from the lower end of the list, such as the Yaxleys, the Burkes, or the Parkinsons.

When the very last first-year had been Sorted, an over-excited Ravenclaw by the name of "Warren, Myrtle", Dippet gave some start-of-term announcements, and the welcoming feast began.

"So, anyone know what the story is with the giant?", asked Emlyn.

"It is not a giant", Marca informed him, "Professor Slughorn said, that he knew of the father, who made in previous years an assortment of medicinal potions. They were not good, but anyway the relevant part is that the father is obviously a Wizard and not a giant"

"And he's so big because of...?"

"I do not know. Perhaps some Potion or Charm that had a permanent effect; it seems most likely. Then again... It does seem, that he is quite stupid"

"Marca", said Tiernan, "I realize that you're wonderfully clever, and, well..." he trailed off, gesturing with his hands to indicate her diminutive physical frame - "not huge, but are you suggesting there's a relationship between size and intelligence?"

"No, not necessarily", said Marca, "For example we can see that Tom is both cleverer and taller than Emlyn"

"Thanks", said Emlyn.

"However", continued Marca, "It may be that there is something at the level of species. Consider the cleverness of goblins, and the stupidity of giants. Of course still this might not be important, as gnomes and pixies are stupid, and centaurs are clever. However the point remains that giants are large and stupid, this newcomer is large and stupid, so it could be that he is adopted, or a changeling child, or even - I do not know if it is possible - a halfbreed"

"They would permit halfbreeds to study at Hogwarts?" asked Antonin.

"Well they let halfbloods in, don't they?" suggested Emlyn. "Does anyone know about his mother?" he asked, looking chiefly to Marca for the answer. Marca in turn looked to Tom, which struck Tom as odd since he didn't know about his own mother, let alone Hagrid's; why would she expect him to be any more likely to know?

It seemed destined to remain a mystery for at least the moment, though it could hardly stay so for long. Conversation soon turned to other newly Sorted first-years, and soon to the likely chances of various Houses in the House Cup and Quidditch Cup this year, as the top end of the school had now moved on, including various high-fliers from each House, replaced by those from below.

Upon it being declared time for the students to head to their respective Houses, the freshly Sorted Slytherin first-years were gathered up by Violet Selwyn, and Tom did as the elder students had done when he had first arrived two years ago, and hurried ahead of the sea of lost little ones, rather than get stuck behind them and perhaps end up having to do something regrettable out of frustration.

Monday morning came soon enough, what with the first of September having been a Sunday, meaning that classes recommenced immediately for all but the newly arrived first-years, who would of course get the morning off as they had various things explained to

them - even though this process, as Tom had learned in his first year, did not take all morning.

“What’ve we got first?” asked Tiernan, looking for his timetable, which he had lost already in between receiving it at breakfast, and now being back in the Common Room.

“Well I don’t know about you”, said Tom, “But I have Alchemy first, which you didn’t take, so you’ve either Beasts, or a free period, as obviously you can’t have a class with me in it”

“Great”, said Tiernan, “I’ll head up to Beasts, hoping the meeting point’s still in the same place, and if I’m not supposed to be there, then nothing lost. See you later, at... wait, what’ve we got after this?”

“Potions”, laughed Tom, “I trust you can find your way to that?”

“That, I think I can manage”, replied Tiernan. “Alright, I’d best dash, or I’ll be late if I do have Beasts”

“Someone’s keen”, observed Belinda, catching sight of the tail end of Tiernan as she arrived into the Common Room from the girls’ dorm.

“Yes, he’s off to... Get some exercise, by the looks of it; you have Alchemy with me, so he can’t have Beasts with you at the same time. No matter, he’ll find out soon enough”

“Actually, girls and boys have some separate lessons for Beasts this year”, said Belinda, as they made their own exit from the Common Room now, setting off on the long ascent from the Dungeons to the Alchemy Tower.

“Why?” asked Tom. “That makes no sense”

“I dunno”, said Belinda. “But it might be for if we’re doing unicorns, though. From what Phillips said, for the last couple of years, the unicorns in the Forbidden Forest have been terrified of boys. I mean, with girls they’re not great; still their normal shy and flighty selves, but when they see a boy, they just panic and bolt in terror now”

“How strange”, said Tom.

Up in the Alchemy Tower, today there was a strange construction built upon the classroom’s large central cauldron, a cylindrical sheath of red bricks rose from the lip of the cauldron, such that any fumes rising would stay within the chimney-like erection; atop this, another smaller cauldron-like device, this one shiny like a mirror, was inverted. This upside-down cauldron had a pipe leading from its lowermost part, near its lip, that led down into a third cauldron, this merely sitting on a desk nearby and looking distinctly the least interesting of the three, however much it may gain interest depending on what the output of the set-up turned out to be.

“Who can tell me what it looks like we’re doing today?”, asked Professor Al-Muharik, his usual enthusiasm showing itself in his bright smile. “Yes, Ezra?”

“We’re doing a distillery, Sir; are we making Firewhisky?” proffered Ezra Dunston, hopefully.

“Haha, yes, but no - it is a distillery of sorts; a point for Hufflepuff there, but we’re doing something a lot more exciting than Firewhisky. Anyone else? Yes, Tom?”

“Cinnabar, Sir?” suggested Tom, having seen a diagram of such in this year’s textbook, and surmising that the blood red crystals in Al-Muharik’s mind were more likely

that than something else, given the textbook use of this apparatus, “for making quicksilver?”

“Good, excellent Tom, two points for Slytherin”

The class had of course used quicksilver from time to time over the course of the past year, as it was a common base metal from which to make other metals, starting with the easiest transmutation - turning it to gold, which was only one place away on the Alchemical Chart. Tom had excelled in shifting it yet again from that point, turning it to silvery platine, though he was aware that true silver lay much, much, further away in the Alchemical Chart.

Of the transitory metals of the kind that took up most of their Alchemy classes, true silver was quite prized, on account of being a prime transitory metal, the Forty-Seventh Element. Prime transitory metals, they had learned, were the best used for creating new elements without muddling up too many factors.

Quicksilver, meanwhile, the Eightieth Element and tied in its power to the planet of Mercury, was not a prime transitory metal, but nevertheless stood out from the crowd by being one of the most mutable of metals, a characteristic reflected in its strange property of fluidity even in the absence of the kinds of temperatures that would be required to melt any other metal. When he had first seen it, he had for a moment thought it was unicorn blood, as it looked very much the same, but Al-Muharik’s mind had shown him otherwise - and closer examination revealed it to be much heavier than unicorn blood, taking Tom rather by surprise when first handling it.

This morning, however, they didn’t seem to be getting their hands on the stuff just yet, as Al-Muharik took the time to animatedly explain the apparatus, quite redundantly for any of the class who had actually read their textbook.

The raw cinnabar, in the form of the blood-red vermilion crystals, would be added to the bottom cauldron and heated to a very high temperature, while being hovered centrally and spinning anti-clockwise rapidly enough to create a sinking vortex. The heating of the vermilion would cause brimstone to be formed, whose own crystalline deposits would be collected from the bottom cauldron later. Silvery mercuric fumes, meanwhile, would rise like ghosts from a tomb, and turn to quicksilver when they cooled upon reaching the top cauldron, as this had a Freezing Charm cast upon it, to counteract the Hellish fire from below. The quicksilver would then run down the pipe and into the final cauldron, to be collected and used to make, well, pretty much anything else. It might not be a prime metal, but - by competent Alchemists, in any case - it was quickly and easily converted into the prime metals that one might need.

“Any questions before we proceed?” asked Al-Muharik. “Yes, Emily?”

“Will it not explode if we heat it all up and there’s only that narrow pipe to let steam out?” asked Emily Stone.

“Good question; I’ve put Unbreakable Charms on the apparatus so that no, it will not explode; the pressure will instead contribute to the transmutation occurring within. Of course it does mean the quicksilver will come out at quite a pace, but who can tell me how we shall deal with that? Yes, Jana?”

“The Momentum-arresting Charm”, said Jana, “though we’ll have to be quick enough to cast it when it comes out otherwise the quicksilver will already be shooting out everywhere”.

“Good, a point for Gryffindor. Are you volunteering for that task then, with your legendarily speedy reactions?”

“Umm... I can do” replied Jana, uncertainly.

“Spoken like a true Gryffindor”, said Al-Muharik, “But in this instance unnecessary, as the receptacle cauldron already has the Charm imbued in it. Any other questions? Enid?”

“How do we hover and spin things inside the bottom cauldron, if it’s all sealed apart from the final outlet? Do we have to shoot Hover Charms down the pipe?”

“No, no”, laughed Al-Muharik. “We’ll open the bottom cauldron to put the vermilion inside, and set everything going before we work up the heat. Here, like this: *rasavatam*”

With this word and a gesture of Al-Muharik’s wand, a hole opened in the side of the cauldron, first tiny and then larger, through which window the vermilion could be passed.

While they only had one central set of apparatus, not like the rows of cauldrons in Slughorn’s Potions classroom, Al-Muharik nevertheless liked to make everyone feel involved, and the class take turns to put some of the vermilion through the hole that he had created, to join the central spinning mass that would soon be heated.

The heating itself was also a joint effort, whether or not it would really take all of them at once to raise the heat to the very high level that would be needed to enable the vermilion to begin its transformation. Tom did doubt the necessity of so many wands directed at the thing - one good lightning bolt would probably have sufficed. However, it was nevertheless quite a sight, to see so many tendrils of fiery energy blazing into the central inferno, the light flickering upon their faces, as Al-Muharik himself maintained the position and spin of the vermilion, and shouted animated exhortations at them as they approached the required stage.

By the end of the lesson, they’d not only succeeded in producing quicksilver, but also in producing brimstone, and Al-Muharik gave each student a portion of both, to add to their personal kits. Tom smiled at the small bottle of quicksilver; if people grew accustomed to seeing little bottles of quicksilver about, he could move his secret stock of unicorn blood back into Slytherin House where it would be more accessible - assuming he could access that Lost and Found room again in the first place, to get it back. Still, no need to rush; he could comfortably allow himself at least a little while without taking crazy risks.

As they all settled into their lessons, it soon became as though they’d never been away at all, and it wasn’t long before the usual dramas of Quidditch trials and so forth, with scant attention being paid to the goings-on of the outside world; it was common knowledge that Grindelwald was expanding his influence to the North, East, and South, but not really to the West so far, and this made any possibility of him taking over Britain a far-off fancy for the time being.

On the other front, from what Tom understood from a combination of Jana and the Muggle Affairs section of the Daily Prophet, a German invasion of Britain was looking less

and less likely. The British Muggles, for all their faults, simply refused to be intimidated by the frequent dropping of bombs on their cities - a strategy that had been intended to sow terror and discord amongst the populace, ruin morale, and make an invasion easy.

Instead, city-dwellers spoke of the bombings as though they were part of the weather, and if they became angry, it was at the Germans who dropped the bombs, not the Britons who failed to defend them adequately. To be sure, each time the bombs rained upon them they hid in their holes like birds in a storm, but they came back out afterwards twittering nonetheless.

Some things, it seemed, just could not be easily eradicated. Tom aspired to one day wipe out the inane twitterings of the British and German Muggles both, but right now he would content himself with getting rid of things on a much smaller scale indeed, in the Charms class that Slytherin House shared with the Ravenclaws.

“Now”, said Professor Vassy, “It’s my usual practice to teach you how to undo Charms before we get busy doing them, such that mistakes can be corrected as we go, but in this case, with Vanishing Charms, no Counter-Charm exists”

She paused to smile brightly.

“Anyone care to tell me why no such Counter-Charm exists? Yes, Hubert?”

“Because if it did, it wouldn’t be called a Vanishing Charm, it’d be called Temporary Displacement Charm or something” offered Ravenclaw Hubert Whitman.

“That, Hubert, is a consequence. I’m asking for the reason. Tom?”

“There’s nothing to Charm”, said Tom, simply. “Can’t un-Vanish something that’s not there to be un-Vanished”

“A succinct answer. Five points for Slytherin. However, what we can do - and will do - is cast Anti-Vanishing Charms, to make objects resistant to being Vanished in the first place. Some things are naturally already resistant to being Vanished, such as living organisms, and the Anti-Vanishing Charm makes use of the same principles; learning from nature is, as usual, a good starting point with this endeavour”

Tom was glad to learn he was resistant to being Vanished. That could otherwise be quite a liability. The notion was not lost upon him, however, that if he was resistant to Vanishing in the sense of Vanishing Charms, there may be away to extend that protection to other forms of vanishing, such as death, which must after all be the vanishing of the soul, or the mind, or something. He wished they taught these things in his classes, but so far, anything remotely interesting in this category turned out to be considered Dark Arts, and thus limited his education a touch.

The lesson went on, and before long, Tom had learned to make a feather resistant to Vanishing, by invoking the same essence that had kept the bird to which it had belonged also resistant to Vanishing. They had begun work on making pebbles resistant to Vanishing, but progress here was slow and tedious as very many pebbles needed to be replaced, each time they got Vanished due to inadequate Anti-Vanishing Charms.

Of course, there were also instances of false hopes, such as Emlyn thinking he had been amongst the first to get it, when it then transpired that his pebble owed its continued existence not to the success of his Anti-Vanishing Charm, but rather to the failure of his Vanishing Charm, since Professor Vassy Vanished his pebble with no difficulty.

“But can’t you Vanish Vanishing-resistant things anyway, if your Vanishing Charm’s powerful enough?”, he asked.

“Yes Emlyn, but only with a Charm tailored for the object in question, not the standard Charm we’re using here”

“Oh”, he concluded, somewhat deflated.

That evening, however, there was good entertainment to be had down in the Slytherin Common Room, as Octavian Nott regaled Belinda with tales of the antics all so recently perpetrated by himself, Morgan Rosier, and Milton Mulciber.

“See, Morgan had seen this drawer in Slughorn’s personal store labelled “N.T.W. Incubation - Do Not Open”

“So naturally he opened it?”, asked Belinda.

“No, but he mentioned it to Milton, who realised what it must be”, said Octavian, “Night Terror Weaver; you know the thing, right? One bite and you’ll have nightmares for weeks”

“I know it”, said Belinda, with a grin. From her mind, Tom caught a glimpse of a spider-like creature, but with tiny legs for the size of its dark grey teardrop-shaped body; it could otherwise be taken for a malformed tic, but for how it ran around and strung itself along on invisible threads. “So you stole it?”

“No, but Morgan did, while I kept Slughorn busy talking about the homework”

“Can I see?”, asked Belinda, enthused.

“Nope; they’re all used up”, said Octavian, with a slight laugh now.

“They? All? Used up? Come on, tell”

“It wasn’t just one Weaver egg; it was a whole egg sack - so we did what anyone would do, and planted it for our first Quidditch Cup opponents’ Seeker to find”

“Haha, great!”, enthused Belinda. “No wait, that’s Hufflepuff, isn’t it? Aww come on, you could have saved it for Teires or Fame” she expressed, with a slight tone of disappointment, but still clearly impressed with how the story was going.

“Really, Belinda, did you want to sit on it until November?”

“You raise a valid point”, conceded Belinda. “Anyway, go on, where did you put it; you couldn’t have got access to his kit, could you?”

“We put it in the Snitch”, said Octavian.

“You what?”

“In the Snitch - because then when it’s caught, it opens...”

“I know how a Snitch works, but since when does Mellifer catch it anyway, and that could have got me!”

“Pssht, he catches it sometimes, and obviously he’s nearly always going to catch it in training, which is exactly what he did”

“And?” asked Belinda, avidly.

“Pretty much what you’d expect - we’d gone to watch in the stands. They didn’t like us watching of course, but it’s not like they could kick us out, the stands are free for all even when the pitch is booked”

“You should have told me!” protested Belinda.

“Nooo”, said Octavian; “It couldn’t look like it had anything to do with our Quidditch team. I mean they can suspect us, complain all they like, but there’s nothing they can do - if they suspected you though, it’d be much more serious and would have got much more investigation”

“Eh, I guess”, said Belinda. “So what happened? Did he get bitten?”

“And then some - he practically jumped off his broom - no serious injuries from the fall, but brilliant to watch”

“Wish I’d been there”

“And then Valentine was the first down to help him, so she got bitten as well”

“Brilliant”

“Then Mervyn came down and put a Freezing Charm on them”

“They Freeze-Charmed them?” asked Belinda, with a frown - “Why?”

“Well, to stop them running around and biting anyone else, obviously”

“Would they have done that?”, asked Belinda, confused, before “Oh, wait, you mean the Weavers, not Mellifer and Valentine, right, got it”

“Yes, so the Weavers were out of action, then we narrowly avoided a fight; the Hufflepuffs were furious and thought we’d done it of course - we talked them down, explained that we’d just wanted to watch them train - even offered to go get Murtlap Essence for the bites, as a show of good will”

“Would that cure them?”, asked Belinda.

“No, of course not, but it’s the thought that counts, isn’t it?” laughed Octavian.

“Did they go for it? Did they believe you?”

“Nah, I don’t think so, but it’s not like they could prove anything, so they settled for calling it an early end to their training session”

The mirth was somewhat diminished the next day, however, as news of the events reached Slughorn’s ears; he assembled the House as a whole and told them in no uncertain terms that he hoped no Slytherin ever be caught engaged in such activities; that they were the face of Slytherin House, and that as such, they must absolutely keep out of any association with trouble.

After the tacit implications of wrongdoing on their part - despite them not in fact having been involved at all - the Slytherin Quidditch team were of course only yet more determined to get the season off to a flying start right from their first match, to prove a point, if nothing else.

When the day came, Hufflepuff (fielding a new Seeker, a boy named Seth Halbert taking Ben Mellifer’s place, as the latter was still in no fit state to fly) took an early lead in the game, with their Chasers especially distinguishing themselves, being better suited to teamwork than their Slytherin counterparts who each vied to score the most goals personally, sometimes resulting in slightly optimistic long-shots from the Snakes.

In contrast, the Hufflepuff pass-pass-score method seemed to be doing well for them in this game. Nevertheless, all good things must come to an end, and Slytherin Beaters Walburga and Lucretia were particularly keen on ending them.

As Hufflepuff Chaser Felicity Valentine narrowly avoided being ended by Walburga, and the other Bludger was dispatched rocketing towards Nicholas Mervyn, now in possession of the Quaffle for the Badgers, Belinda was seen to be taking a daring dive under the action, in hot pursuit of what had not yet been seen by the others, the Golden Snitch.

While her counterpart Seth Halbert also now closed in on it, there was no chance of him reaching it first, especially as Slytherin Chaser Owen Morton “accidentally” caught him in the face while passing. Hufflepuff would be awarded ten points for that, but it was a fair price to pay, as Belinda made it to the Snitch without serious competition.

## Chapter Seven

### *Foundations*

In Hogsmeade Village, the shopkeeper of Tomes and Scrolls had left Tom waiting at the counter, while she went to get a copy of the newly-arrived biography of Gellert Grindelwald, available here but not yet at Hogwarts Library.

The shop itself accessed by a small set of stone steps leading up from the main road running through Hogsmeade, and presently Tom looked down on a tense meeting of students in the street below.

“Hey, you there, Rosier, isn’t it?” asked the hulking Hufflepuff, looking quite ready for a fight. Morgan drew his wand as casually as possible.

“And you are?”, he replied.

“Going to make you wish that Night Terror Weavers were the only reason to have nightmares, by the time I am finished with you, if you ever come near any of our lot again”

“Excuse me?” asked Morgan, not sounding quite as brave as he had perhaps hoped.

“You heard me, kiddo”

“Really, I don’t like your attitude” said Morgan, who had now assessed that he had the better chances against the Hufflepuff who didn’t have a wand in his hand - of course a physical assault wasn’t entirely impossible, but in the main street of Hogsmeade, it wasn’t like anything too drastic could happen, could it?

“We don’t like yours”, said Hufflepuff girl, whom Tom saw did have her wand drawn. Morgan clearly saw the same, because he now took a step back, raising his own.

“Looks like trouble out there; are they your friends?” asked the shopkeeper, who had now returned with the book.

“It’s nothing to do with me”, said Tom. “I think I’ll hang back here a minute”

“I don’t blame you”, said the Witch. “I’ll need to relieve you of two Galleons, though, I’m afraid, for the book”

“Of course”, said Tom, missing the opening foray of Spells outside while looking in his coin pouch. Turning his attention to the duel, he saw that the Hufflepuff girl was now the only one standing, as the Hufflepuff boy got back up off the floor, and Morgan struggled on the cobblestones, being attacked by thorny vines that grew around him, ostensibly directed by the girl.

“Good gracious”, said the shopkeeper. “I wonder if we should do something”

“Yes”, said Tom, “Probably should” - he was about to step outside and take the Hufflepuffs by surprise, becoming hero of the hour in the process, when the girl got knocked down by an unseen attacker, and then Disarmed as she regained her footing.

“Two against one, is it?” shouted Octavian, arriving on the scene, and not quite having time to disengage the thorny vines from Morgan, before having to defend himself from the Hufflepuff boy.

“Somebody’s got to teach you little...” began the the latter, before being Stunned by Morgan, who had managed to get the vines off himself, and now able to use his wand arm more freely.

“Peter!” shouted the girl as her companion fell, “You’re gonna pay for...” she started to threaten the Slytherins, before realising she wasn’t in a position to make threats as Milton, having joined the Slytherins, casually inspected her wand that he had picked up off the floor.

“You were saying?” he prompted. The girl looked at him, and at the other two, and down at her friend, this Peter. She backed off a little and crouched down by the latter, perhaps checking on him, without taking her eyes off the Slytherins.

“*Expelliarmus!*” she cried, wielding Peter’s wand, which had lain forgotten next to him. Milton swore, as the girl’s wand departed from his grasp and returned to her hand; he fumbled to draw his own wand, but by the time he’d done so, the girl had revived Peter, who groggily accepted his wand back from her, while she watched the three of them for any further attack, and indeed successfully blocked a tentative Stunning Spell from Octavian.

“Come on now”, said Morgan, “Your boyfriend picked a fight with me for no reason. I’m covered in scratches and look at the state of my robes. You’re already both in trouble if we report this. I suggest you call it a day”

“You’re slime”, said the girl. “You know that, don’t you?”

“We’re not the ones who attack random people minding their own business in public”, said Morgan.

“No, you’re the ones who play vile tricks, hurt my sister, and reduce our Seeker to a quivering wreck who can’t so much as think about a Snitch without starting to panic”

Octavian laughed, and swiftly had to block a Curse sent by the irate Hufflepuff, whom Tom now inferred to be Valentine’s sister - her elder sister, by the looks of it.

“Easy now”, Octavian said to her.

“We had nothing to do with that”, said Morgan, “We just happened to be on hand. I even offered to go and get help, and look at the thanks I get, stalked and attacked by you lot”

“Just slink back to your slime-hole”, said Peter.

“You show your ugly faces around any of our Housemates again, and you’ll get a lot worse”, said the girl.

“Er... We do have lessons with you lot, you know”, Milton reminded her.

“Just go”, said Peter.

Slowly, uneasily, and without letting their guard down, the Slytherins departed, muttering amongst themselves. The Hufflepuffs also exchanged words that Tom didn’t catch, and an entry to their minds was distracted by the shopkeeper speaking again:

“Well, I’m glad that’s over”

“Yes”, agreed Tom, waiting for the Hufflepuffs to depart, before making his way out of the shop and down the stone steps into the street, to head back to the castle himself.

Down in the Slytherin Dungeons, Tom sat in the Common Room, alone on a sofa by a low table that had a number of as yet unread books upon it, thinking through whether to go ahead with his idea of getting his fellow Slytherins a little more organized. On the one hand, it would be a serious step towards his future greatness that he had seen in the

mirror in the Lost and Found room, and on the other hand, if mistakes were made, it could lead to his expulsion, at the very least.

When it came down to it, however, there was no point in being here if he wasn't going to try to be the best that he could be.

"Tiernan, bring me your face; I want to use it for a moment"

"Excuse me?" asked Tiernan, with a laugh.

"Your face; I require it. Come here."

Tiernan seemed about to object, but after a glance around, acquiesced. He moved to sit nervously next to Tom on the sofa, and turned to face him.

"Tom, is this really..." he began, but Tom cut him off.

"Ssh. Don't talk. And don't worry, this will probably not hurt at all", said Tom, pointing his wand directly at Tiernan's face. "Don't look so surprised", he added, "In other words, put your eyebrows back down; they look silly up there". Tiernan struggled to adopt a more neutral expression, and ended up smiling just a little instead. "The smile's fine" said Tom, "In fact, *petrificus totalus*"

Tiernan's body went stiff with the same expression still on his face.

"There, isn't that easier to hold now?", said Tom. Tiernan, of course, did not reply.

"What are you doing to my cousin?" came Lucretia's voice, interrupting. She approached them and regarded Tiernan's immobile form with suspicion.

"Art", said Tom, taking out a bronze Knut and liquefying it. "Art and function"

The liquid bronze was quite easy to manipulate in the air, and as Tom made it into a thin plate the size of Tiernan's face, he directed the holes that appeared into useful places, forming slitted eye-holes, and a grill covering what was now appearing as a slightly more menacing smile than Tiernan's own had been - or rather, still was, underneath the mask that Tom now caused to mould itself to the outside edges of the boy's immobilized face.

"That's not a permanent fixture, I hope?" asked Lucretia.

"No", said Tom, lifting the mask up and away, and also releasing the Body-Bind Curse.

"Warn me next time, will you?", said Tiernan.

"Don't touch", said Tom, moving the mask out of Tiernan's reach. "It's not finished yet, but it knows your face now, which is the important part"

"What's it for?", asked Tiernan.

"Isn't that obvious?" replied Tom. "It's like Slughorn said, keeping our names and faces out of trouble, when doing mischievous things"

"What mischievous things have you in mind?", asked Lucretia with a frown.

"Well for a start, you might for instance want to dissuade certain Hufflepuffs from harassing certain Slytherins who are minding their own business in public?"

"Valentine and co., you mean? That'd be lovely, but anything we do, it'd be obvious it was us"

"Only it wouldn't be", said Tom with a smile.

"Huh?"

"We'll be faceless demons", said Tom. "Legions, if you will; any one of us could be anyone"

“They’ll guess and it’ll come back on us”

“Sit it out”, said Tom. “A bunch of us third-years can do it; we haven’t been implicated at all previously. You lot, meanwhile, can be seen innocently doing your innocent thing, and clearly nothing to do with any visit we may pay to the Badgers”

“What if you get caught?”

“O, ye of little faith. We won’t”, said Tom.

“Who’s we?”

“I’ll take a couple of wingmen. Tiernan and Antonin will join me, I’m sure”

Tiernan nodded his assent.

“What about Belinda?” asked Lucretia. “She’ll want in, especially after missing out on the last one, and you know she likes a more hands-on approach to these things than I do”

“Hmm. Bit of a liability, though... Belinda’s big mouth. She’d tell everyone everything if caught; need to work on that. But meanwhile, I’m sure we’ll be fine. Belinda can tag along if she wants. It’ll be fun.”

Lucretia and Tiernan both looked at Tom with some measure of skepticism and surprise.

“What’s brought this on?”, asked Lucretia. “You’re not normally one to be in the thick of rule-breaking”

Tom gave a high, cold, but genuine laugh at this view of him.

“Oh, Lucretia, you have no idea”, he said, having regained his composure, but still with a smile. “The fact is, I just don’t get *caught* in the thick of rule-breaking; there’s a difference”

“Actually you... Oh never mind, that wasn’t rule-breaking, strictly” said Tiernan, shaking his head now. He had been about to mention the incident last year with the Killing Curse in the Defence Against the Dark Arts class.

“So... What’s your interest in this in the first place?” asked Lucretia. “You’re not mixed up in it already, you clearly like to keep yourself out of trouble; why are you getting involved now?”

“I don’t like my House coming under attack”, said Tom, simply, not troubling himself to explain his grander greater scheme that involved organizing them into an impressive fighting force. “And anyway, always a pleasure to do a favour for my Housemates; I’m sure that if I need some favour in the future you’d be equally happy to oblige”

“Well, depending on what it is, but in principle, yes, of course”

“There we are then”, said Tom with a smile. “Antonin!” he called, as this latter now emerged from their dorm into the main Common Room. “Bring your face over here a moment!”

After constructing base masks for himself, Tiernan, Antonin, and Belinda, Tom set about Charming them to look more intimidating than their initial form, cast Unbreakable and Anti-Vanishing Charms, before working on more complex tasks such as a Spell to make the voice of the wearer unrecognizable, for which task he needed to collaborate with both Tiernan and Marca in order to bring it to successful fruition, and last but not least, an

Impermanent Insubstantiation Charm that took him the best part of a week to get right, because it clashed with the Anti-Vanishing Charm.

The function of the Impermanent Insubstantiation Charm was to make it such that the masks could be as-though Vanished, without actually Vanishing them, and without needing to Transfigure and Disfigure them every time. In short, the masks needed to have a magical on-and-off switch, and this took work, not to mention reference to NEWT-Level Transfiguration and Charms textbooks, borrowed from older students who seemed both amused and bemused that a third-year should want to use such, but who also did not object so long as they were returned in good order.

A good deal of work later, the fruits of his labours were ready for presentation and a more thorough explanation.

“Now, you each have your masks”, he said to his assembled troops, Conjuring each mask onto its respective wearer in turn, “Tiernan... Antonin... Belinda”.

“Thank you”, said Antonin, touching his with his hand, and tracing his finger over its lines.

“This is rather a lot better than when you first made it”, said Tiernan. “I should never have doubted you, of course”

“Naturally”, said Tom with a smile. “I eventually intend to build Shield Charms into these, but for the moment, I recommend to avoid catching Spells in the face just as readily as you would otherwise, as it’s only a physical barrier, the same as your clothes. Stronger, yes, but no more a magical shield than your robes”

This was true of their masks, in any case. Tom’s own was constructed of one five-hundredth part Titanium melded with the extremely rare and tricky Seventy-Seventh Element, which would repel most Spells by virtue of its metallurgical properties, but he hadn’t the time or resources to arrange the same for the others.

“What’s this... what’s this made of?”, asked Belinda, the hesitation born of being momentarily surprised at the distorted sound of her voice.

“Yours is gold on copper”

“It feels so light...” said Belinda, somewhere between skepticism and marvel, tilting her head this way and that, to note the sensation.

“Definitely safe to say that I’m some way ahead of the class in Alchemy”, said Tom, thinking more of his own mask than hers.

“It is nearly a tragedy that Professor Al-Muharik will not be able to inspect them and give House Points to Slytherin”, observed Antonin.

“Quite”, agreed Tom. “I don’t think Dumbledore will be getting to give out House Points for the Transfiguration effort, either, for that matter. Speaking of which... To take them off, just retract them with your wand; the feeling should be like peeling it off, though it’ll Disfigure into vaporous quicksilver when you do so, and then Refigure into a pin just inside the collar of your robes - the will with which I’ve instilled it to do this should be sufficient that even if you inhale sharply at that moment, you should still not breathe in quicksilver vapour and die. So, let’s see you take them off; go on, do it”

“May I first say, you are really quite brilliant”, observed Tiernan.

“You may. Now, take your mask off”

Tiernan tried first to remove it with his hands like a normal mask, then remembered that Tom had just told him how to do it, thought for a moment, and tried to use his wand like he would for the physical movement of any other object, and failed.

“No”, said Tom. “Don’t try to wrestle with it; just move it along its natural Transfigurational path”

While Tiernan tried to process this advice, Antonin now succeeded in doing it. Belinda, meanwhile, was trying unsuccessfully to Vanish hers.

“Don’t do that”, said Tom. “It won’t work anyway”.

“But how?”

“Like this”, said Tom, removing it for her, in the hopes that she could better get a feel for what needed to happen with it.

“Are you sure it doesn’t respond only to you, Tom?”, asked Tiernan, still struggling with his. “No wait, you did yours”, he added, to Antonin, “So it must be possible”

“Yes”, said Antonin, “It’s more a thing about just relax and push it through the change”

A couple of tries later, Tiernan’s mask came off with a hissing of silvery vapour that quickly reformed itself into a pin inside his robes, just as Tom had said it would.

“Practice with those”, said Tom, “But definitely don’t let anyone outside of Slytherin see them for now, or their usefulness will be greatly diminished”.

Concealing their identities was all well and good, but Tom would also have to instill discipline in his troops. For that he needed something for them to fight for; right now that was easy: suppressing the Hufflepuff backlash. They’d strike the Hufflepuffs hard and fast; something completely deniable, but something that’d send a message. The message would be: do not be so foolish as to come up against us; if you do, we will always hurt you more.

What Tom didn’t want to do was to lead the others on an impromptu expedition that ended up in a merry chase through Hogwarts because plan only went as far as winning a duel. Instead, he’d make sure that they came and went like ghosts, nobody seeing them arriving or departing. Short of three additional invisibility cloaks, Tom found himself scouring the relevant parts of the castle for some of the very many secret passageways concealed within Hogwarts. Tonight he investigated what ought to be something like easy access to a disused water channel, which would allow them make much of the journey between Hufflepuff Basement and Slytherin Dungeons, if he could just be certain of access at both ends.

“What do you seek here?”

He turned to face the Bloody Baron. Tom didn’t reply immediately, unsure as to what degree honesty here would be useful or counterproductive.

“What do you seek here?” repeated the Baron.

“A project for the benefit of Slytherin House”, replied Tom, evasively. “You wouldn’t happen to know if there’s a hidden passageway here, would you?”

“You’re searching after secrets, secrets of those who have gone before”

“Well, in a manner of speaking, yes”

“You shall fail”

“Thanks. Is that an opinion or a threat?” asked Tom, evenly. A fair question as ghosts, while insubstantial, could probably throw a spanner into the works of any secret goings-on by raising the alarm, if so desired, to include the possibility of getting Peeves to assist with any more physical acts, as he’d be surely happy to oblige.

“It is my meaning”, replied the Baron, “Born of knowledge”

“What knowledge?”

“You must come of pure blood and the highest of breedings; this here is my domain”

“What do you know about my blood?” asked Tom. The Bloody Baron glided closer to him, the ghost’s dim and sunken eyes meeting Tom’s very much alive ones.

“Nothing, but you do. I do not believe for an eye’s blink that you have the blood as is needed to loose these mysteries, the mysteries of these stones wherein I dwell”

“What blood would that be?”

“Mine”, replied the Bloody Baron, whose voice Tom did not expect would be able to drop lower than its usual sepulchral timbre, yet it did now, its resonance almost tangible in its profundity. It made Tom’s head swim; he didn’t think a voice could do that, without casting a Spell.

“Yours?” asked Tom, hoping to prompt more information.

“Mayhap mine, or sooner that of mine uncle. Which bloodlines have crossed, from time to another, through the centuries, but which are now perchance spent; a tragic close to a dynasty of such potential”

Hmm. Pure blood of the highest of bloodlines; when reckoned by the ancient ghost of Slytherin House, could that be...

“Salazar Slytherin was your uncle?”

“The greatest of the Hogwarts four”

“Why is he dead and you’re here, well, also dead, but also not?” asked Tom, perhaps a little more directly than most people tried to be around the ghosts.

“I am but a part of my former self; the House, its forbear, is not so lightly lost”

“What did you lose?” wondered Tom aloud, regards what had happened to the other part or parts of him.

“Everything”

“Well not this, obviously”, said Tom, gesturing to the ghost’s mist-like form.

“What do you know, living flesh?” rejoined the Bloody Baron, passing through Tom and causing him to gasp at the icy chill in the process. Tom turned, but any conversation was now clearly uselessly over, as he was left alone, shivering now in the cold, in a dank passageway with still no idea precisely where the water duct could be found.

The warmth returned to Tom’s body as he contemplated where to go from here; in the end he opted for calling it a night now, as his mind could not stop going over Bloody Baron’s words, suggesting there might be something more important than disused waterworks hidden down in the deep places of Hogwarts.

Barely five minutes later, inspired by the exciting new distraction of a possible lead on the reality of the legend of Salazar Slytherin’s Chamber of Secrets, Tom’s eyes roved over the aging tomes in the small Slytherin library in the House Common Room. It was

only two bookcases, but then any reading needs generally could be met by the vast and expansive main school library. Here, however, was a small private collection of books more directly related to Slytherin House's history.

Tom had already at least browsed most of these books during the past couple of years, especially during holiday times when the main library was closed. He knew which book he was looking for, and now pulled it down from the shelf.

As almost nobody spent much time reading here, Tom expected the book to have dust on top, but it didn't; it must either be Charmed against the acquisition of dust, or else it was dust-free on account of the machinations of the House Elves.

Either way, Tom now placed the book on the small table in the cloistered reading area, and sat down at one of the two seats provided there.

Salazar Slytherin being broadly considered very much the progenitor of all things Slytherin, his own immediate family had been reduced to the most fleeting of commentaries, overshadowed by the greater attention being paid to the Hogwarts Founder himself. Tom did find half a page dedicated to Slytherin's parentage, and found that while being local to these parts, he was nevertheless the son of one Egyptian Warlock by the name of Mustaphar Slytherin, by his union with the famous Celtic Sorceress, Aisling Clóen; later known as Aisling Slytherin.

Tom had never really considered Slytherin having anything other than local blood in him, but come to think of it, it was reasonable enough that he not be entirely Irish; the name was after all *Salazar Slytherin*, not *Salaisár Sallithearínn* or somesuch.

There was no mention of Slytherin having a nephew, nor any mention of either he or his wife having siblings by whom to have a nephew. Everyone in the magical world - well, everyone in Slytherin, at least - tried to talk up their ancestry and familial connections a bit, but it seemed unlikely that the Bloody Baron would lie about such, having nothing to gain by it at this late stage in his... existence.

Upon reflection though, Tom was fairly sure that there had been no Barons in the British Isles at the time of Hogwarts' Founding, as he had learned that such titles had been dished out a little later, for services rendered during wars that ravaged the lands in the turbulent times of Hogwarts' first generations - there were families that had enjoyed such honours that were still at Hogwarts today, families like the Lestranges and the Malfoys; could they be related to the Bloody Baron? Could one of them have the blood running through their veins that would allow the Chamber of Secrets to be found?

Taking down another book and looking through the lists of the first generations of students at Hogwarts, indeed there was a Malfoy and two Lestranges; the Black family did not yet have representation there, Tom noted.

Names were not useful to him without knowing the Bloody Baron's name though, so Tom was about to give up on this for the moment, gazing at a collection of miniature portraits of the first students whose parents had in large part funded Hogwarts' early days, when an angry glare from one of them looked suddenly familiar. Underneath a darkly glowering young man unmistakable as the Bloody Baron, no matter how much more colour he had in his cheeks when alive, was written the name: *Berengar Gaunt*

Tom knew the name Gaunt from his reading of the much later exploits of that family, well after the Baron's time, intertwined with the Peverells. He was fairly sure neither of those families were currently represented at Hogwarts, if indeed those lines were even still extant.

Putting aside thoughts of finding a long-lost heir to Slytherin's secrets just yet, and returning his mind to the more prosaic task of showing his fellow Slytherins what they could do with the right leadership, he tidied up the books he had got out, and when he sat down again it was with the remarkably unread tome chronicling the controversial modernization of Hogwarts Castle's plumbing, which occurred under the auspices of a Slytherin Headmaster several hundred years ago.

A few nights later, Tom had resolved to not worry about finding a proper entrance to the water duct at the Hufflepuff end, as it could be accessed where a vertical pipe shaft neared the corridor by the kitchens, and the wall did not have any manner of Unbreakable Charms placed upon it, so it'd suffice to open it up by force and then repair it from the inside once they were through. If this failed, they'd have a long run ahead of them the other way, which Tom had mentally mapped out just in case.

It was Halloween tonight, which Tom had decided upon as being the best day to do it; it'd simply require following their targets - Felicity Valentine's big sister Audrey, as the main target, and the latter's boyfriend Peter Murus, as a secondary target, and surprising them alone on their way back from the traditional Halloween Feast in the Great Hall. This latter part - getting them alone - promised to be tricky, but Tom had a few ideas to at least minimize any extra parties' involvement. He absolutely needed to be able to count on those around him, though, which he discussed with the others:

"Now, I don't want to be deep down in Hufflepuff territory and have all Hell break loose if something doesn't go according to plan, so we need to be agreed on what to do in if that happens"

"Run, very quickly, of course", offered Antonin.

"No", said Tom. "If you run, someone will just Jinx you from behind, and you'll be caught before you turn the nearest corner"

"What then?"

"Firstly, listen to any instructions from me, and do what I say, without question, because there won't be time to argue"

"Very well", said Antonin, as the others nodded thoughtfully and did not raise any objections either.

"Secondly, stick with me unless I tell you otherwise, and if we get separated, get back to me as quickly as possible"

"What if we don't know where you are, though?" asked Belinda. "I mean if we got separated, doesn't that rather mean we might not..."

"I'm working on an idea for that", said Tom, "But I haven't been able to do that one before Halloween. So instead, if you do not know where I am, *then* run - but not to the Dungeons; we don't want to convey who we were"

"Where then?"

“Gryffindor Tower”, said Tom, simply. “They’re the obvious next most likely culprits, so if you run in that direction and succeed in escaping, they’ll think it was Gryffindors. If you don’t succeed in escaping, then it won’t matter which way you were running, of course”.

“That’s all very well and good”, said Tiernan, “But I don’t think the Gryffindors will be pleased to see us”

“No need to actually go all the way to Gryffindor Tower itself”, said Tom. “Once you get to the seventh floor in that corner, head across to our Divination classroom. It’s always unlocked, and would make a perfectly comfortable place to hide out for a bit”

“So”, said Antonin, “If chaos occurs, we try to stay near you, and if not, we run very quickly to the Divination classroom”

“You forgot the first thing”, said Tom.

“What first thing?”, asked Antonin.

“The first thing was: listen carefully to any instructions from me and do what I say without question because there won’t be time to argue”

“Oh yes, you said that. Well, it is important to have a leader, so of course”

“Good. Come on now; let’s go feast”.

## Chapter Eight

### *Halloween Attack*

“Tom, they’re leaving”, said Tiernan, indicating across the Great Hall.

“Yes, I know”

“Well? We’re going, right?” asked Belinda urgently. It was clear she didn’t want to miss the opportunity. Tom meanwhile caught Morgan’s eye, some places down the table, and gave him a nod. There then followed a notable commotion, as Morgan hexed Octavian in the face with what was clearly an *Aranifors* Charm, for the production of spiders, but in some manner modified to keep on producing them. Octavian obligingly leapt up and began to create quite a scene, brushing off the spiders and scattering them in all directions. When Octavian launched a Sliming Spell in retaliation at Morgan, and hit Milton instead (drawing him into the conflict too), Tom turned to Belinda and said:

“Now we go”

Making an exit with her, Tiernan, and Antonin was quite easy to do unnoticed now, as indeed very many people were endeavouring to distance themselves from the growing uproar. Slytherin might lose some House Points for this, but probably not many, as it was Halloween, all amongst friends, and quite in the spirit of the occasion in any case.

“Which way?” asked Belinda, upon exiting the Great Hall.

“This way”, said Tom, “Hufflepuffs turn off by the statue of George Valerian, remember”

“Who?”

“You’ll see. Just down these stairs... and... here we are. This is George Valerian that you pass six times a day, but now we go this way” - he turned and started off down the wider of the two corridors, as opposed to the route normally taken down to the Slytherin Dungeons. “Wait a moment, we don’t want to be followed” he added. “*Serpensortia*” he muttered, casting a snake onto the floor. With a swift undulation of its body, the snake rose its head up to just a touch higher than Tom’s own, flaring out a fleshy hood as it did so. Tom spoke to it in rapid Parseltongue:

*“Guard this corridor. Let nobody follow us. Spit at them if necessary but I don’t want a murder investigation so don’t bite anyone until you have no more venom, clear?”*

*“Abssolutely”*

“I didn’t know you could talk to... I want you to be the father of my children” gushed Belinda breathlessly.

“Really”, said Tom, laughing, “Now is not the time; come on, let’s go”

It was Antonin, the only one to be paying more attention to the surroundings than to Tom, who Slime Spelled the Hufflepuff boy that rounded the corner after them, obscuring his vision. He, Antonin, kept his wand ready and Stunned the second arrival that now leapt to the first boy’s aid. Belinda finished up the job by Stunning the first, who had been in the midst of trying to wipe slime from his eyes, and now thudded into the wall before dropping down onto the corridor’s cold stone floor in an untidy heap. The long snake wound its way up to their bodies to investigate them, or perhaps to simply huddle up to their warmth while waiting for more students.

“Good work” said Tom, “But let’s go. And masks on now”

They continued down the corridor at a quick pace; Tom had only been down this way once before, while exploring, but had looked at plans and was fairly sure of where he was going. Indeed, soon enough, they found themselves a short stretch of corridor behind their quarry; not only Valentine, but also two boys walking with her.

“Stun them”, commanded Tom, “Stun them all”

Tom’s voice - or rather the mask-modified voice that went in its stead - prompted one of the two boys to turn to see who was there, but it was too late; four wands were already Stunning the three Hufflepuffs with firepower to spare; the trio hit the floor before having any chance to return fire.

“What now?” asked Belinda.

“Ignore the spares”, said Tom; “We don’t have time for them”

“And this one?”

“*Occludoculi*” said Tom, pointing his wand at the fallen girl’s face.

“What was that Spell?” asked Antonin.

“It’ll keep her eyes shut”, said Tom; “You on the other hand, keep your eyes open, all of you; let’s have no surprises. *Rennerivate*”, he concluded, not waiting for assent from the others.

Valentine inhaled sharply, and reached for her wand, which Tom Summoned out of her reach and up into his own hand. “You won’t be needing that”, he cooed gently.

Valentine looked around, or rather tried to, because Tom’s Curse did exactly what he said it would. He had grown somewhat in his sorcery since he’d had to burn a unicorn’s eyes out to achieve the same goal of blindness - and he did want her blind, albeit temporarily, as they might be wearing masks, but his wand was quite distinctive and he would rather her not be able to report on its appearance. Valentine’s hand went to her face, as in her confusion she tried to work out whether her eyes were open or not.

“No, you don’t need to see us, either”, said Tom. “How’s that for Dark Magic?”

“I know who you are!” retorted Valentine, trying to scramble away now, only to have Belinda kick her and stand on her hair in order to keep her from roaming. “Get off me... Aargh!” - she gave a shout of pain as Antonin hit her with some Spell that stopped her hands from working, as she had otherwise been trying to dislodge Belinda’s foot from her hair.

“I wouldn’t try that if I were you”, offered Tiernan.

“Give me my wand!” demanded Valentine, “You’ll get more than detentions for this, you crazy inbreds!”

“*Kwegazimfula!*” spat Belinda, causing Valentine to cry out in pain, and again put her hands to her face; she was now bleeding profusely from her mouth, nose, and ears.

“You insane...” began Valentine, but whatever she said next wasn’t very clear, due to a spluttering of blood and trailing off into a pained whimper; Tom saw now that Valentine’s eyes were bulging - or at least, her sealed eyelids were swelling like blisters under the pressure of the blood that Belinda had made try flow out that way with her Curse, only to find the way blocked by Tom’s Eye-Sealing Curse. He gave a cold laugh, upon noting the interplay of these two Curses.

“Do you value your eyes, Valentine?” asked Tom softly, kneeling on her ribs, the better to talk closely to her, “Do you value your face?”

“Get off me, get me to the Hospital Wing, now!”

“Your eyes are sealed quite shut”, said Tom, ignoring her calmly, “But your blood is trying to get out of everywhere now, including your eyes, that’s it, touch them, go ahead... They’re about ready to burst; I’d say you have less than a minute left”

“Mulciber, is that you? Get me... Get me...” started Valentine, but could not complete the sentence with so much blood in her mouth.

“Skudshite Valkries! What the...” exclaimed a voice that was silenced abruptly as its owner - a new arrival to the corridor from the Hufflepuff Common Room, whose entrance was disguised as one of the large barrels - hit the floor, Hexed by Tiernan. At this, one of the other stacked barrels above the entrance-barrel now burst open, gushing far more liquid than it could possibly have contained, all over the scene. Tom instinctively Shielded himself, as did Antonin; Tiernan was a mite too slow and caught some of the shower; Belinda missed her chance to respond completely and got soaked. Valentine let out a scream that thankfully made more of a loud gargling sound than anything that would carry too far.

*Silencio! Finite incantatem!* - Tom’s second Spell cancelled out his first, but he was acting very much on impulse now, and had intended the second Spell to undo the effect of the Curses that were active and threatening to burst Valentine’s eyelids, which Tom didn’t actually want to happen. “*Consano siccomedeor*”, he muttered aloud as a third Spell, and some of the damage was now already undoing itself. “Secure the entrance” he ordered to Tiernan, who was nearest to it.

Only now did he take in the fact that the liquid that had half-drenched their little spectacle was, by the smell of it, vinegar. No wonder Valentine, with her then-open wounds, had been quite so discomforted by its arrival.

“Mulciber”, gasped Valentine, her mouth no longer so bloody, but her hands still to her eyes - which was good, since in principle she’d be able to open them now, even if in practice this might be difficult and seemed unlikely.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about”, said Tom.

“Whoever you are... This has gone too far... help me”

“Do not mistake my mercy for weakness, girl”, said Tom, whose remedial act had certainly not been born of mercy - was it weakness? No, he thought; he had acted on instinct, taken the action that gave him time to decide on the next action.

*Occludoculi*, he cast silently, resealing her eyes.

“This wand of yours, do you want it back?”

“Yes”, replied Valentine, hopefully.

“Tell me about it”

“I’d really like it back very much”, she essayed.

“Not the wand, the wand. Tell me about it”

“Uh... It’s cypress, core is unicorn tail-hair, it’s eleven and a half inches long... It has four carved points along the length of it; it’s slightly pliable, and...”

“Pliable, you say. You know, I’m going to ply it now, and I’m going to keep plying it until you apologize for persecuting innocent members of other Houses, and promise to desist from such in future”

“What?”

“I’ll hold it next to your ear so you can hear it when it snaps”, replied Tom, doing so and beginning to slowly but inexorably bend it; pushing the tip of the wand against the wet stone floor.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry for anything...”

“No, you need to tell me what you’re sorry for”, chided Tom.

“I’m sorry for... for persecuting Slytherins, and what was the other thing?”.

“You’ll promise to not do so in future”

“I promise I won’t do it in future; can I please have my wand?”

“You know, it already feels like it’s about to snap; there can’t be much more give in it”, said Tom, filling in for her lack of sight. “How can I trust you? What shall we do if you don’t keep your promise?”

“I will keep it”

“And if you don’t?”

“*Then* break my wand, but please give me a chance”

“You get your chance”, said Tom. “But if you go back on your word, or we even suspect that others are acting on your behalf in retribution... Well, let’s just say we’ll find you *and* those you love and re-educate you regards the meaning of the word *retribution*. Do you understand, Audrey Valentine?”. She whimpered her assent. “Good”, said Tom. “*Stupefy!*”

The conversation with Valentine had been concluded just in time for Antonin to bring Tom’s attention to approaching footsteps, coming down the stairs just around the corner that they’d come from.

“This way; hide” said Tom, pushing and pulling the others hurriedly into an offshoot from the corridor which should, if his memory served him correctly, lead to the kitchens. Hopefully no House Elf would pass them by, but right now, the approaching human footsteps were more of a concern, as they waited in the shadows, hoping they were dark enough to conceal them, if the owner of the footsteps looked their way.

“Who’s there?” asked Archie, drawing his wand and illuminating it. “Justus? What happened? Uh... *Finite incantatem*”

Justus’s body, which someone had Hovered Charmed up out of the way, hit the floor with a heavy wet \*thwack\*.

“Sorry Justus... Uhmm... *Mobilicorpus... Rennervate...* Whoa, whoa, don’t panic, it’s me”, said Archie, as the boy flailed around upon regaining consciousness along with the use of his limbs. “What happened?”

Needing a moment’s time to decide what to do with this situation now, Tom cast a Silencing Charm silently from his hiding place.

“*Incarcerus! Incarcerus!*” snapped Belinda from hers, binding first Archie and then Justus, before stepping out and pushing them both of them face-first onto the floor. “Well well well, what shall we do with you boys?” she mused aloud, standing over them

triumphantly. Due not only to Tom's Silencing Charm but also the Incarcerus Curse having manifested a gag each, they naturally didn't reply, but they did snort a bit as they tried to keep their noses out of the flowing vinegar.

Tom, however, was aware that if Archie had made it down here, then more Hufflepuffs would be on their way promptly, and that this was thus not the moment for careless gloating. He Stunned both of the prostrate Hufflepuffs, and they stopped trying to keep their noses out of the vinegar.

"Tom, you ruined all my fun", complained Belinda.

In a flash, Tom had raked her mask off her face with one hand, and brought his wand to her exposed visage with the other, as he shoved her roughly against the wall.

"If you call me by that name in a situation like this again", he said with his mask an inch from her face, "What I will do to you will earn me a life sentence in Azkaban and I'll make sure it was worth it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, T... I mean, erm... Sir" she replied, for lack of some more sensible term of address. Tom smiled under his mask, not that she would be able to see.

"Good", he replied, releasing her. "Put your mask back on. If this one's here, then more Hufflepuffs are arriving any second" he said, with a glance at the corridor behind. "We need to make our exit now. Not that way", he added, grabbing Tiernan who was about to head back up the way they had come. "This way", he gestured. They followed.

Around the next corner, Tom stopped next to where the disused vertical pipe shaft ought to be. There was a section of the wall some feet wide that was different to the surrounding wall, which was a promising sign. Standing back, he blasted his way through it, and it was obligingly easy to penetrate.

"Everyone inside", he said, ushering them towards it. Antonin illuminated his wand and looked down the shaft.

"It is a very long way", he said.

Tom rolled his eyes behind his mask, and pushed him into the shaft.

*"Arresto momentum - Alright, you two as well, go, now"*

Tiernan and Belinda followed, and Tom followed them, repairing the wall behind him. Down at the bottom, they were mercifully only ankle-deep in water. Tom remembered slightly too late the Aquarixia Charm - which would have enabled him to walk on water, had he recalled it just a moment more quickly - and so now found himself paddling with the others. He scowled.

"Where are we?" asked Tiernan.

"Near to the lake, beneath its surface, obviously", said Tom. "This isn't sewage water; it's leaked in from outside, through what was once an outlet"

"How do you know all this stuff?", asked Belinda.

"Overlooking the fact that it doesn't smell like a toilet", said Tom, "I read books; you should try it sometime. Why didn't you put your mask back on?", he enquired, as an afterthought.

"You never told me the bloody Spell"

"You just put it on the same way you put it off", said Tom, replacing her mask himself with a swish of his wand. He could do it with his hand alone - as he had previously - but he

didn't this time, as he wasn't using the wand to threaten her simultaneously. Belinda flinched as it went by.

"But what's the incantation?" she asked, her voice now distorted once more by the mask.

"There isn't one", said Tom. "You'll get the hang of it, but come on, this isn't the time to practice"

"Which way?" asked Antonin.

"This way", replied Tom, leading onwards. A couple of twists and turns later, the tunnel had veered upwards slightly, and was no longer flooded. Tom tried his socks and robes, and the others followed suit. "Should be just... this way or this way", he said, at a T-junction, but fortunately, the doorway - if it could be called that - that he was seeking was now in sight, a small trapdoor in the ceiling.

"We're supposed to fit through that?" asked Belinda.

"It'll be a squeeze", agreed Tiernan, "But I think we'll manage"

"We can do it, but how to open it?", mused Antonin, jumping up to push against it, without shifting it. Tom gestured for him to move aside, and he did so.

"*Bombarda*" incanted Tom, blasting at it. Dust fell down, but the hatch remained in place. "*Bombarda!*" he essayed again, splintering off both wood and stone, but without actually opening the trapdoor.

"Hello Sir or Madam?" came a squeaky voice from above that could only have been a House Elf. "Is somebody down there?"

Tom made a silencing gesture to the others, and called back up:

"Is anyone else up there with you?"

"Cilka the House Elf is alone, Sir or Madam, but if you requires help..."

"Can you open this hatch?"

"Of course, Sir or Madam; Cilka is a House Elf", replied the creature, who now became visible as the hatch lifted aside. The Elf peered over the edge, its large eyes clearly well-purposed for such a task. "Does Sirs or Madams require a..."

"*Avada kedavra*"

The Elf tumbled and landed head-first on the ground between them and did not stir. Nobody spoke for a moment after Belinda had cast the Killing Curse. Tom wondered whether she had practiced, and if so how.

"Well you didn't want it telling anyone about us, did you?", she asked.

"No, but we could have made ourselves sure of the situation first", said Tom.

"Good thing it was just an Elf, at least", observed Tiernan. "Not sure what we could've reasonably done if it'd been a person at this end"

"Well, what's done is done", said Tom. "*Evanesco*"

Clearing up after crimes was much easier with the Vanishing Charm now mastered, thought Tom. He should have learned this years ago, curriculum be damned.

"Do you think anyone will miss it?", wondered Antonin aloud.

"Nah", replied Belinda dismissively. It was obvious from Antonin's thoughts that he'd rather hoped for Tom's view, but Tom had no informed opinion on this occasion, and could merely hope.

“It doesn’t matter whether it’s missed or not”, he said, “It matters that it’s not found, and clearly it won’t be”

“True enough”, agreed Tiernan.

“Now, how to get up”, returned Antonin, back on the topic of immediate pragmatism.

“You’d think there’d be a ladder”, said Tiernan. “Maybe if we give one of us a leg-up”, he offered as a suggestion, gesturing with his hands.

“Good idea”, said Tom. “Kneel”

“What?”

“Kneel”, repeated Tom, “So that I can stand on you safely. Then I’ll find something to throw down”.

“Not completely what I had in mind, but if you think that’s best”, said Tiernan, putting one knee to the ground and bracing his arms to make a step for Tom.

Tiernan didn’t constitute the world’s best stepladder, but Tom was able to reach high enough to pull himself up, over, and out of the hole - a task that required a little squirming, as the trapdoor wasn’t huge, but he made it without too much trouble. As promised by the Elf, there was nobody else around. Tom dismissed his mask, in readiness for returning to the Common Room now in full view.

Looking around the small dungeon that appeared to be chiefly used as a storeroom, there was no ladder around or even rope. *I should know how to Conjure these things by now*, thought Tom. However, he didn’t. Noting a large dust-sheet spread over something that turned out to be a piano, he passed it through the hole as a credible stand-in for a rope, attaching it to the floor at his end with a Sticking Charm.

Belinda came through first, albeit with some difficulty, and some necessary support from both above and below, which she resented at least as much as she required. The boys down below seemed to be having a rather bad time of it, and when she had finally squeezed herself through into the room, no sooner had she straightened her robes than she was brandishing her wand once more, directed at Tiernan, who was next emerging.

“Who had their hands on my...” she began, but was interrupted -

“Quiet”, said Tom, sternly but calmly. “Also, masks off now, everyone. We didn’t want our faces seen out there, but we don’t want our masks seen at this end. In case you didn’t figure it out, we’re in the dungeons here, and quite close to home”.

Antonin and Tiernan did off their masks; Belinda struggled with hers until Tiernan aided her with it. Antonin closed the hatch, and seemed briefly at a loss regards what to do with the sheet, before giving up and just tossing it aside.

“Alright, here goes”, said Tom, now at the door. “If anyone asks where we’ve been, let me handle it, as the answer will be different depending on who’s asking”

Back in the safety of their Common Room, huddled in a quiet corner, the four of them went over events while they waited for the fourth-years to get back.

“Alright, so, what have we learned?” asked Tom.

“Don’t let Belinda near your House Elf”, said Tiernan.

“Don’t call you by your name when we’re all masked up and doing bad things”, said Belinda.

“Be aware of departure plans”, said Antonin.

“You’re a Parselmouth!” returned Belinda.

“Well, they already knew that”, said Tom, indicating to the two other boys.

“What? Why did they... Why am I always the last to know things?”

“It’s because you’re a Sneeze, Belinda”, joked Tom.

“A sneeze? Come again?”

“When a person sneezes”, said Tom, “They’re forced to close their eyes and open their mouth. For you, that’s a perpetual state of being. You close your eyes and open your mouth. Constantly.”

Belinda opened her mouth, but for once, did not reply. She closed it again.

“About the use of names”, said Antonin, “We need code names. Like spies”

Tiernan laughed, but Tom noted it was in fact a fair idea, to be able to address each other without clueing any eavesdroppers in to their identities.

“Let’s do that”, he said. “Let’s find a name each. Something that’s not identifying to others, but that we can tie to ourselves, that can have some meaning to us”. He wanted good names, but for his own part, he wanted to keep his Volodymyr Belovol identity separate too, so would not be using that.

“You can be Snakey”, said Tiernan with a smile.

“I was hoping for names with a little more gravity to them than that”, said Tom, wearily.

“Hmm. Well in Latin it’s *Serpens*, and there’s a couple of other words I forget...”

“Yes”, said Tom. “*Vipera, Anguis*, some others, nothing that seems good for a name”

“And for those of us who don’t do Glyphs and Tongues?” asked Belinda, “What do we get?”

“*Herpes*”, said Tiernan.

“Excuse me?”

“No, not you, it’s for Tom. *Herpes*, it’s Greek, it means snakey, creepy thing” - he gestured with his hand, a snakey creepy thing.

“Thank you, no”, said Tom.

“*Ovid, Basil*”

“What? Where are you getting these from?”

“This is the one thing I’m good at”, said Tiernan, like this should have been obvious. “I’m as good as you at Glyphs and Tongues, and that should be saying something, and I’ve had more time than you to think about names”

“Why?”, asked Tom, confused.

“Well, you know, I’m rather expected to have children one day, and you, you know... Well, you do what you want, don’t you?”

Belinda sat up from her previously more lounging posture and seemed about to speak, but Tom held up a finger to pre-emptively shush her, and was more focussed on the contents on Tiernan’s mind; a great dragon-like thing was there. *Draco* was a possibility, but didn’t quite feel right.

“Basilisk”, he said aloud.

“Yes” said Tiernan, “That’s what made me think of Basil, thought of it from Basilisk, you know, King of the Serpents and all that”.

“*Basil* won’t exactly strike fear into the hearts of my enemies”, objected Tom, “It’s a pleasantly fragrant herb”

This time it was Antonin who seemed about to speak, but Tiernan got there first:

“Baal”

“Excuse me?”

“Baal, it’s a these-places thing”, said Tiernan, gesturing with his hands at a mental picture of a map of Asia Minor and North Africa, somewhat absent-mindedly because nobody could be expected to know what places he had in mind, but as it so happened, Tom got the image anyway. “Baal, it’s a god-figure name thing, I thought of it because Basil made me think of Basel which pronounced like that but also like Baal, so...”

“What does it mean?” asked Tom, impatiently.

“Same as Basil, Kingy-thingy... Ruler, Lord, nothing unflattering”

“That works; Baal it is, then”, said Tom, consenting to take on the mantle. Baal, Volodymyr, he was getting a collection of names, but that was alright; he’d never been overly fond of *Tom*.

“I need a good name”, said Belinda. “One that represents my qualities. I’m water and fire, I’m power and focus, I’m always right there, like a...”

“...buzzy fly”, offered Tom.

Belinda looked deflated and gave an exasperated sigh, but recovered characteristically quickly.

“A wasp! A hornet!”

“*Vesparamanda*” said Tom, thinking out loud. Belinda instinctively reached for her wand, but he wasn’t Hexing her, just mentioning the Spell.

“*Amanda* has to do with love, being loved, fit to be loved”, said Tiernan with a frown, either through concentration or because he thought this was ill-suited to Belinda. “*Vespa*... That’s the wasp bit”

“Yes”, said Tom, “It says in Thurlow’s that the incantation’s from that and invoking the magic of the *Vespa mandarina*, which is...”

“...a bloody big hornet thing, yes I know”, rejoined Belinda. “Tell you what, though, nobody messes with them. I can go with that. My secret code name can be *Vespa*”

“What about you?”, asked Tom, of Antonin and Tiernan. This latter looked momentarily blank, as he clearly hadn’t been thinking of names for himself. Antonin, on the other hand, spoke first:

“For me, I thought of two things and I must now decide between them. There is... Oh, but it can wait, here are the others”

Sure enough, the fourth-year distraction brigade had now returned to the Common Room and were approaching.

“Ah, nice of you to join us”, said Tom. “Better late than never. Have a seat”, he added, causing a sofa to tip a couple of first-years onto the floor, and reposition itself next to where the four of them were sitting. Octavian and Milton sat on the sofa, and Morgan

sat on the arm of Belinda's armchair, inspiring her to elbow him to move aside, but otherwise tolerate his presence.

"Well?" asked Tom.

"Did you get into trouble?" asked Belinda.

"Not really", said Octavian.

"Bit of a telling off, nothing serious", added Morgan.

"Where've you been?"

"What, now? Hospital Wing", replied Milton.

"It took Tegner all this time to fix you up after some silly joke Spells?", asked Tom, surprised.

"Err... Not exactly", said Octavian. "It was kind of busy in the Hospital Wing"

Tom raised an eyebrow.

"Apparently", said Milton, "Somebody set a bloody great snake loose by the statue of George Valerian, and it was attacking anyone who tried to go by"

"And they still tried to get by?" asked Tom. "Why didn't they just wait? Did they know something was going on down our end?"

"It was yours then, the snake?" asked Octavian.

"Yes", said Tom, "But I told it not to bite anyone until its venom was used up from spitting; it didn't kill anyone, did it? It said it understood the instructions"

"No, it... what? It said? It could talk?" asked Octavian, before a look of realization dawned across his face. "You can talk... to snakes?"

"Yes", said Tom impatiently, "But right now I'm talking to you, so, how did it go, did it do any permanent damage, anything that'll cause a serious investigation we'll need to dodge?"

"No, nothing Tegner couldn't reverse. Slughorn was furious though, because people were saying it must have been a Slytherin"

"Well, it was a Slytherin, but nobody could know that for sure"

"Right, exactly. Bloody cheek, accusing our House just because it was a snake. Next time, conjure a badger, eh?"

"I'll see what I can do", smiled Tom, "But you never said, why were they so keen to get past it; did they know something was happening down by their Common Room?"

"No, but your snake was cuddling up to two unconscious Hufflepuffs and wouldn't let anyone near, and, well, you know what Hufflepuffs are like, they had to keep trying to get to their friends"

"They were just Stunned; did nobody think of just reviving them from a distance?"

"Erm... No", said Octavian, his tone making it clear he hadn't thought of it either. "Slughorn got rid of the snake - sorry - and revived them. They were fine, not a scratch on them. Can't say the same for the others who tried to get to them. But anyway, how did things go down at your end?"

"More or less as expected", said Tom with a smile. "I don't think they'll be so keen to provoke us again. Of course they guessed it was Slytherins, but they can't pin anything on us, and all the likely culprits - in other words, you - are obviously in the clear"

“Though we had a bit more company than we hoped for down there”, added Tiernan. “Valentine and Murus must have caught up with Baldwin, because he was with them already when we got to them”

“And some little scrote called Justus came out of their Common Room while we were busy with that lot”, chimed Belinda.

The three fourth-years looked momentarily stunned.

“Justus Diggory?”, asked Milton.

“I dunno”, said Belinda, “But he was out of it almost as quickly, even if we did have a slight spot of bother with a booby trap thing”

“Wait”, said Tom, “Diggory, as in...”

“Yep” said Octavian. “As in Professor Diggory’s son. He’s in our year. Annoying little squirt. We’re going to be in for some jollies now, that’s for sure”

## Chapter Nine

### *Silence and Stillness*

The expected “jollies” extended so far as fourth-year suspects being called first to Diggory’s office for questioning and then to Dippet’s; as they had watertight alibis up in the Great Hall, obviously they could not be suspected of direct involvement, but this didn’t prevent Diggory from threatening that if they had got others to act on their behalf, he would find out who.

Sufficient was his keenness to get to the bottom of it, in fact, that he tried to get Slughorn to furnish him with Veritaserum, which request Slughorn refused quite vehemently due not only to its illegality, but also because he, Slughorn, objected strongly to the assumption that his students were behind the attack, when his students were the ones who had been attacked without provocation by Hufflepuffs previously.

These exchanges soured relations between the usually friendly Professors Diggory and Slughorn enough that they now ignored each other in the Great Hall at mealtimes, and abstained from their usual practice of referencing each other’s lessons and expertise, in their own classes.

Naturally, there were fears of further hostilities all around, and Slytherins and Hufflepuffs alike were on constant guard while out and about; Professor Merrythought commented favourably on the improved focus on Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons.

Today, she strode into her classroom with her usual purposeful gait and wasted no time in greetings, as the assembled Slytherins and Ravenclaws, who shared this class, made sure to sit up and pay attention.

“For some of you”, she began, “today’s lesson will come easily, and for others, perhaps not so much. However, it is absolutely vital that this river be crossed, so let’s have at it. Today we’re starting with non-verbal Spells”

Tom was quite sure he’d have no problem with this as he’d been doing non-verbal wandless magic for as long as he could remember, not to mention having essayed simple non-verbal Spells over the course of the past good while. Others in the class varyingly nodded, or contained their surprise.

“Miss Jabez, of what wood is your wand made?”

“Dogwood, Professor”, replied Belinda, “Ten inches”. Her thoughts went next to the core - dragon heartstring - but she did not get to mention that as Merrythought interrupted her:

“I do not care how big your wand is, Jabez” said Merrythought, prompting some suppressed titters from the the class. The Professor glanced in the direction of such, daring them to bear anything other than serious countenance, before continuing: “As for the wood, however, I thought as much. That will make today’s lesson a little more difficult for you. Does anybody else present possess a dogwood wand?”

There was a pause while nobody raised their hand, and Merrythought went on:

“As you may know, a quirk of dogwood is that it is very resistant to performing non-verbal magic. However, I assure you, it can be done. From your general performance, I would guess that the core is dragon heartstring; is that correct?”

“Yes, Professor”

“Well, that’s something at least. In any case, let’s see where we’re all up to as a starting point, and then take it from there. Wands out please, anyone who hasn’t already. You’re going to Spell your names onto the blackboard, but you’re going to do it silently. To ensure there’s no cheating...” - here with one swift swish of her wand, she cast what was obviously a Silencing Charm across the class. A few of the class reacted quickly enough to try to block this, and a smaller subset actually succeeded. “Please stand up if you just blocked my Charm”, she said, with a tone of approval.

Of the Slytherins, it was Tom, Marca, Antonin, and Abraxas who stood up. Of the Ravenclaws, it was Elvira, Millicent, Errol Carter, Katrina Gwynt, and Lana Renard who responded.

“Very well, those of you who have just stood up, please state your names”

Everyone but Errol Carter did so in chorus; he however now put a hand to his throat as though to check for some physical manifestation of the Charm.

“You didn’t in fact succeed, Carter?”

Carter tried to reply, failed, and settled for shaking his head.

“Sit down, Carter”, said Merrythought, simply. “The rest of you... Twenty points for Slytherin and twenty points for Ravenclaw, by virtue of five points for each one of you. However, I do actually want you to be silenced so that there’s no muttering under your breath, so this time you will resist the urge to block”

She cast the Charm again, and Tom endeavoured to put aside his anger at the indignity of such.

“Now, sit down, those who are standing, and all of you may now Spell your names onto the blackboard”

A very few predictable names were Spelled onto the board almost immediately, with Marca’s being the very first. Abraxas surprised Tom by getting his name onto the board more quickly than Tom did; not that Tom struggled in the slightest, but it seemed Abraxas was perhaps readier to Spell out his name than Tom was. Tom’s name appeared around the same time as Elvira’s. Antonin and Tiernan weren’t far behind, along with a couple more Ravenclaws. Names continued to appear, and it was only a minute or two before at least half the class had managed it.

“Remember”, said Merrythought, “Even though this is called non-verbal magic, you can still verbalize in your mind. This is still a crutch, and still slows down how quickly you can produce some Spells, but is better than nothing if you’re otherwise struggling”

A few more names appeared on the board, with almost all of the class now being represented. Finally, Belinda and two Ravenclaws were remaining; they each desperately sought to not be last.

“Focus”, said Merrythought, “Stop panicking and maybe you’ll actually get this done”.

The words "Come on, please!" appeared on the board. Gerald Page, one of the few remaining, blushed and mouthed the word "Sorry". His next effort caused the words "So sorry" to appear on the board, as he cringed and looked like he might be about to cry.

"Concentrate!", urged Merrythought. "If you can get other words up there by accident, you can get your names up there deliberately. But magic is worse than useless if you can't control it, so I am insisting on you actually producing your names".

Soon, the two remaining Ravenclaws were no longer remaining, and now sat in relief admiring their names successfully Spelled silently up on the board.

Belinda, for her part, now was clearly enraged - keeping as much of a lid on it as possible; she certainly dared not antagonize Merrythought deliberately - and her wand was making light whip-crack sounds as she brandished it, but produced no effect more than causing the blackboard to shake off a little of its chalk dust with each attempt.

Belinda's constant efforts did not succeed in producing a non-verbal Spell, but they did eventually result in breaking the Silencing Charm that Merrythought had cast. As Belinda's attempts to mutter her name now became an actual utterance, her name appeared on the board at long last, albeit burned into it in huge smouldering letters:

BELINDA FUCKING JABEZ

Notwithstanding the Silencing Charm no longer being active, Belinda opened her mouth and for once no sound came out, as she beheld what she'd done.

"I never knew", said Merrythought measuredly, "that you had such an interesting middle name"

"I'm sorry, Professor", said Belinda. "I really didn't mean to, honestly"

There was a moment during which if Tom had been relying on sight alone, he would have thought Merrythought to be roving through Belinda's mind, as the former gazed piercingly directly at the latter - but as it was, at the forefront of the Professor's mind were various other students that had had the same problem, and it did not seem likely a punishment was going to be in order, for once.

"I have been teaching at this school for one hundred and twenty-four years", said Merrythought, ignoring some looks of surprise at this implicit information about her age, not to mention her career dedication, as she continued: "You are not the first to have been caught out by this quirk of the wand wood that chose you"

Belinda waited, with bated breath, hardly daring to believe she was perhaps being let off the hook.

"I can accept this result of your natural frustration regards being so hampered", said Merrythought promisingly, "But I cannot accept you remaining so hampered. You will practice and you will achieve this, or you will practice in detentions under my direct supervision which I assure you you will not enjoy. Do we have a bargain?"

In Tom's estimation it amounted to more of an extended threat than anything he'd describe as a bargain, but nevertheless, Belinda nodded, before remembering that she now did have her faculty of speech, and replied:

"Yes, Professor"

“Good.

The rest of the lesson had them working to cast Shield Charms silently, while Professor Merrythought launched Sneezing Jinxes at them. Belinda was, predictably, still not having a good time of it.

“But Professor, what if it just can’t be done?”

“I assure you, Miss Jabez, it can. Would you perhaps like me to demonstrate? I trust you’ll agree that if your wand will suffice to allow me to cast a Spell without speaking aloud, it will certainly do so for you, its actual owner?”

“I... suppose so, Professor”, said Belinda, reluctant to take Merrythought being able to do something as proof it was possible for her, but unable to argue with the logic that the wand would naturally perform better for herself than for another Witch, being as it was bonded to her such as wands were wont to be.

“Good. Well, bring me your wand, then” said Merrythought. After an instant’s hesitation Belinda did so, and handed it over somewhat reluctantly. “Stand back”, added the Professor, to get a little more arm-room, and purposefully pointed the wand at Belinda, who did not seem at all happy with this turn of events. For some seconds there was silence while nothing occurred, and it seemed Merrythought might actually be failing to produce a Spell non-verbally. Then, without warning, the wand made a *\*pfhutt\** sound, and Belinda sneezed.

“Was that you Professor?” asked Belinda, uncertainly.

“The Spell was mine; the sneeze was yours”, said Merrythought. “The wand was and remains yours”, she added, passing it back to her.

“Thanks”, said Belinda distractedly, looking at the wand with renewed interest. Merrythought nodded.

“Go back to your seat”

After the lesson and safely down in the Great Hall, Belinda expressed her malcontent at the unfairness of Merrythought’s “bargain” - though at the end of the day, Tom could not help but agree with both sides; it was unfair that Belinda should be so hampered by her wand’s reluctance to do it, even if it was as Merrythought demonstrated at least possible - but on the other hand, it was also an absolutely vital skill to be able to cast Spells without speaking - an inability to do non-verbal magic would effectively bar a person from being able to do very much in the way of magic beyond the school’s most basic curriculum.

Finishing up his meal and contemplating how a Witch so talented in some ways as Belinda could possibly fail at something he could do before he came to Hogwarts, Tom headed back to Slytherin House alone, as Marca had departed already and the others were still eating. As he made his way down the staircase, a voice called after him:

“Hey, Tom, wait up!”

Tom obligingly stopped.

“Oh, it’s you, Archie. What’s the matter?”

“I wanted to ask you, the stuff that went on the other night, do you know anything about it?” said the Hufflepuff hurriedly, as Tom started walking again and Archie walked with him. After all, both their Common Rooms were in this direction for now.

"Which stuff?", asked Tom. "Lots of stuff goes on around here"

"Down by the Sett, I mean, our Common Room. We call it that"

"How very quaint", replied Tom. "But why should I know what goes on in your Common Room?"

"Not in it, by it, beside it, outside it"

"I heard that you lot had a fight, is that right?" asked Tom, non-committally.

"Well, yes", confirmed Archie. "The question is who the others were; I wondered if you knew anything about it"

"No; why would I?"

"They're saying it was a gang of Slytherins, but all the likely culprits were already causing trouble up in the Hall, so it can't have been them"

"So, just people in Slytherin robes?", he asked, knowing the answer to this question - of course they had not worn anything identifying their House.

"I never saw them; someone Cursed me from behind"

"Did anyone see anyone from Slytherin, or was there no actual reason to suspect it was us?", asked Tom, coming to a halt now as they reached the statue of George Valerian where their paths would diverge,

"Actually, everyone was Cursed from behind", said Archie, "and only Audrey got to talk with them, and she did that with her eyes closed"

"That wasn't very clever of her", observed Tom.

"She was Cursed; she couldn't open them"

"Oh, I see", said Tom. "I don't know that Curse; do you know it?"

"No", said Archie.

"Hmm. Will have to ask Professor Merrythought about it", said Tom. "But anyway, you were saying, she saw Slytherins with her eyes closed?"

The lantern in the alcove of George Valerian flickered.

"Yes, I mean no, not saw, well she did, but not with her eyes closed", said Archie, stumbling over his explanation of the happenings now.

"That makes no sense", challenged Tom.

"The Curse got lifted for a moment, and she saw people in masks and black robes standing over her"

"People in masks", repeated Tom, "and black robes. Go on", he prompted.

"Well that was all she saw"

"Ah", said Tom. "So, they said they were Slytherins, I presume? Notwithstanding the likelihood of people in masks pretending to be, you know, someone they're not?"

"Yeah, no, I know... No, there was nothing, even the voices were strange and distorted.... It was... I don't know, Audrey said one of them something about getting their own back for something to do with the Quidditch", offered Archie, hanging on to the notion that there was at least some reason to suspect Slytherin.

"Archie", said Tom, "Slytherin is a House of pragmatists. I hardly think it has anything to do with us and Quidditch, as we've already played you this season. And we won, if you'll remember, so there's obviously going to be no hard feelings from our team's

end. If it has to do with Quidditch, then it's much more likely a team that Hufflepuff has yet to play"

"Huh, I didn't think about it that way"

"Sounds like Gryffindor pranking - that's my bet, but really, it could have been anyone, by the sounds of it"

"Yeah, you know, that's probably it", said Archie, thoughtfully. "Oh wait, there was that snake at the same time"

"Yes, I heard about that, though I never got to see it", said Tom.

"Well, snakes, Slytherin, seemed to be connected, probably a Slytherin who Conjured that, don't you think?"

Tom drew his wand, and replied in a single word: "*Avis*". The bird that he conjured fluttered madly around the ceiling for a moment, before heading off down the corridor back the way they had come. Tom resisted the urge to kill it for sport, as such an action might not help the image he was hoping to convey.

"What was that about?", asked Archie.

"Bird", replied Tom. "I conjured one. I'm not a Ravenclaw"

"Point taken, old chap", conceded Archie, running out of points of his own. Tom smiled.

"Anyway, I'm going to head back to Slytherin Dungeons now; I have dark and evil things to do", he added melodramatically, "Or, actually, I just want to have a bath"

While Tom hatched no further dark and evil plans for the coming weeks and contented himself with schoolwork, duelling, and his private research projects, things were not going so smoothly for everyone.

Belinda's frustration regards her as yet non-production of non-verbal Spells was eating a little into her spirit when it came to Quidditch practices, as she was aware that if Merrythought resorted to giving her detentions to practice, the Professor would be hardly likely to be amenable to scheduling such detentions around Slytherin Quidditch training sessions. Naturally Violet as Team Captain would, if aware of the clashes, try to work around them, but there were only so many hours available for training, and the Quidditch pitch was a hot commodity the use of which, naturally, the four Houses vied for even at the best of times.

When the time came for the second match of the season, Slytherin vs Gryffindor, any House tensions that might have started to work themselves out flared up once again; the Hufflepuff stands showed a lot of them to be supporting Gryffindor, doubtlessly on account of the recent unfortunate rumours regarding Slytherin House, though Tom was pleased to note that there were also a few Slytherin supporters in the Hufflepuff stands too. Given the line-up, Tom considered unlikely that the Slytherin Quidditch team had particularly good friends in Hufflepuff House, but it was always entirely possible that some Hufflepuffs found more reason to dislike Gryffindor than Slytherin; there were always petty squabbles going on here and there between all the Houses, and all kinds of groups and individuals within the Houses.

Many Hufflepuffs had come out simply sporting their own House colours and slogans despite not being in the match, which was of course also a perfectly respectable option. The Ravenclaws broadly bore a mix of their own House colours, or no particular House colours at all.

After Slytherin's rather convincing defeat at the hands of Gryffindor, both Violet and Belinda managed to keep something of a lid on their usually stormy tempers, but as Tom discovered, this was in Belinda's case at the very least more a matter of looking to release her rage in a more covert fashion.

"Can we do that thing again?" she asked Tom, urgently.

"What thing?", replied Tom, initially confused and thinking at first that she meant the help he'd been giving her working on her non-verbal Spells. However, just as soon as he asked this, the image was already flooding his mind from hers, of the business down by the Hufflepuff Common Room.

"You know, striking fear into the hearts of the other Houses"

"If you were a bit better on your broom, you might", chided Tom; he didn't actually bear any ill-will to Belinda for their loss; he was fairly detached from Quidditch at best and merely went through the motions to keep up the façade of interest that was necessary to stay in the good books of Slytherin House as a whole, but the words came automatically to him.

"What? I... There was... Oh come on, you saw it; it was hardly my fault"

"Well, if you want to strike fear into hearts, then I suggest Thursday evening at the Duelling Club"

"Come on, let's go and ambush the Gryffindors like we did the Hufflepuffs"

"No", replied Tom, flatly.

"Why not?! Is it because of her? It's because of her, isn't it?", demanded Belinda. "You like having her around and don't want to upset her"

"If you're speaking of your opposite number", said Tom, who knew quite well from Belinda's overflow of thoughts that she was, "she has her redeeming qualities. But even if she didn't, the whole school is still watching out for us after last time, and you didn't exactly help us to keep a low profile"

"We were there to scare them; I scared them", protested Belinda.

"You've no subtlety", said Tom. Belinda began to reply, but he shushed her, and continued on a more positive note: "You can be great, Belinda. You've good talents; you are a top class Seeker, today's match being by the by, and you're a skilled duellist. You have aggression and bravery, and everyone knows how true you are to the Wizarding world, fighting the ugly push from blood-traitors to embrace the disgusting Muggle world that deserves only to burn. Loyalty to our magical world; people value that. I value that"

"So..." began Belinda, who had clearly got lost in Tom's accolade, "How can I be better? You know I try to be as good as I can; you know I do"

"Yes, you've... that fire within, the same as I have, the same as the best Slytherins do, to push onwards, to defend what is ours, to viciously eradicate weaknesses. In your case, your greatest weakness is what?"

"Er... Non-verbal spells?"

“Hah! No, though that’s probably on account of it”, noted Tom. “Like I said, you lack subtlety. You need to... Learn when to unleash your fury and when to control it, keeping it to hand, but using it, not letting it use you”

“I want to unleash it at Teires”

“Yes, I’m sure you do, but if you do that immediately, all you’ll do is get caught, gain support for her, and get us all into trouble; yes, us all, because it’ll come back on Slytherin House as a whole, and us in particular if they can get our identities from you, which, for all your strengths, I suspect they probably could”.

“What then? Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it”

“Patience”, smiled Tom, pleased nevertheless at her pledge. “Do you think I’d have invested so much time and energy into our little Halloween outing, just to kick the Hufflepuffs back into order?”

“You’ve something bigger planned?”, asked Belinda, hopefully.

“I’m not sure if *planned* is the right word at this stage”, said Tom, “But I have ideas and projects, and the operation at Halloween was merely a testing run - I don’t know about you, but I’m in this for the long game, and sometimes it’s necessary for the pieces to be in the right places before we can make our moves”

“You’re talking like it’s a chess game and we’re all pawns”

“Not pawns”, said Tom soothingly, “Knights, perhaps, and Halloween was our opening gambit. The game itself might take years; it only matters that every move brings us closer to winning”

“Fine”, conceded Belinda, a touch sulkily. “So we wait in the shadows if we must. But you’d better remember I’ll be ready to leap into action if the opportunity presents itself, hopefully with you”

“I’ll count on it”, said Tom.

## Chapter Ten

### *Marca's Secret*

“A vital bread-and-butter Spell for your tool-basket, if you’ll excuse the mixed metaphor, is the humble but versatile Memory Charm”, began Professor Vassy. “In fact”, she added, “It need not even be an entirely mixed metaphor, if you imagine a picnic basket, and of course kitchen utensils can also be considered tools. Now, what was I saying? Ah yes, Memory Charms!”

Vassy’s introduction to the lesson might not be instilling great confidence in Tom, but he was at least keen to learn this art. It seemed to him that an awful lot of problems could be made to go away with this skill, once properly mastered.

It had occurred to Tom while reading about the “Unforgivable Curses”, that one of them, the Imperius Curse, had effects that could easily be reproduced with the much more favourably viewed Memory Charm.

The Imperius Curse was deemed a Curse because it gave the caster the ability to have their own will override the will of the Cursed, thus making one person able to get another to do anything desired - and so was, of course, considered potentially very harmful.

The Memory Charm, on the other hand, was deemed a Charm because it gave the caster the ability to have their own ideas override the memory of the Charmed, thus making one person able to rewrite a portion of the other’s life - and so was, of course, considered completely harmless. Never mind the ease of using this rewriting opportunity to make a person forget their affiliations, believe an ally betrayed them, misremember an order as coming from some other more trusted source, and so on.

Today, however, they would only working on the erasing of real memories, not yet on the more complex topic that would be the matter of creating false ones.

“It’s very important that we all become proficient at this”, said Vassy, as usual including herself in the statement in the hopes of instilling a sense of camaraderie, or at least pre-emptively dodging the inspiration of resentment in those who were not clever enough to figure out for themselves that their Charms teacher was, in fact, better at Charms than they were. “Who can tell me why this is so important?”

For once, Tom’s hand was not amongst the first to rise; it took him a moment to fully acknowledge that she was really asking that question in all seriousness, as though after several years of magical education it could possibly have escaped anybody’s notice that one could rarely read more than a few pages of the Daily Prophet without some mention of Muggles having their memories wiped after being accidentally (or otherwise) exposed to the magical world without a State-approved reason, such as having a Witch or Wizard in their immediate family.

“Yes, Iolanthe?”

“So that we can keep Muggles in the dark about us, Professor”

“Good, Iolanthe, yes; five points for Slytherin. It’s about doing our bit to uphold the International Statute of Secrecy, so that we can all go about our business safely. Yes Emlyn, you have a question?” she added, responding to Emlyn raising a hand.

“Why though? I mean, it’s not like Muggles really pose a threat, is it? We’re organized and we all know each other within the magical community; it’s not like it was back when the Statute was written”

“It’s not so much about threat; it’s rather about maintaining our peaceful way of life - our separate peaceful ways of life, that is. It’s... best for everyone, this way”, she concluded with a smile, after narrowly avoiding saying “for the greater good”, now that those words had become quite unfashionable in these present climes, with such being Grindelwald’s slogan - ironic, really, since Vassy and Grindelwald apparently had opposing views on what, exactly, was for the greater good.

“But Professor...” began Emlyn, but Vassy uncharacteristically cut him off:

“I’m sorry, but we really do need to press on with the lesson, as this is so important. That said, if you do want to delve more into the importance of the Statute of Secrecy, that’s absolutely fine, in fact, does anybody else want to go into that topic in more detail?”

A good half of the students in the class raised their hands to indicate that yes, they would indeed like to debate or at least examine the issue, and it wasn’t one predictable half or the other - that is to say, it wasn’t just Slytherins or just Ravenclaws, but quite a mix of the two.

“Very well”, said Vassy, as her quill finished taking down the names for her, “those of you with that desire may exercise it between this lesson and our next, by which time I will be looking forward to reading your well-researched essays answering the question: *What key problems does the International Statute of Secrecy address that could not practically or ethically be addressed without it?* - I think six feet of parchment should be sufficient for the most concise writers, but I’m not setting an upper limit if you wish to go into more detail. Did you write that title down? Here, I’ll Spell it onto the blackboard for you to copy down”

Tom was glad to have dodged this particular bullet by not raising his hand, even though he’d not foreseen her plan; in her mind he’d only seen a scroll and a library; it could have meant any number of things.

His actual reason for not raising his hand was rather because he had his view, she had hers, and it seemed quite likely that even if he could argue with the utmost logic for the correctness of his view, she’d still cling to hers as though her job depended on it, because after all, it was entirely possible that her job did depend on it. It had become obvious that the parents of Half-Bloods, by some way the most populous Blood Status situation in the school, were a dangerous group insofar as they would throw around whatever weight they could muster (weight that the parents of Mudbloods obviously wouldn’t have, and that the parents of Purebloods would have but wouldn’t be likely to lend to the cause) if they felt that a teacher was rabble-rousing and garnering support for Grindelwald’s manifesto here at home in the classrooms of Hogwarts.

To this end, any Hogwarts teacher was going to either staunchly defend the Statute of Secrecy, or at least avoid appearing to be critical of it.

When the scratching of quills ceased, many of the class - chiefly Slytherins - were now irritated to have acquired extra homework, while some - chiefly Ravenclaws - seemed

at worst indifferent about the matter, some even being quite content with the surprise research project.

Tiernan gave Tom a smile; he was clearly pleased to have followed Tom's lead in not raising his hand. Professor Vassy, however, pressed on:

"We're going to be working in pairs, and writing numbers on parchment, for our partners to read and memorize. The number being memorized, the rememberer will then be Memory Charmed and the memory erased; thereafter the Charmer will test that the rememberer has in fact now forgotten, by asking the rememberer to remember the now-covered number. Clear?"

From the immediate response of the majority of the class, apparently it was very far from clear.

"Let us go through an example", said Vassy, with a sigh. "Let's say that person A and person B are working together - in fact, let's say person A is Abraxas, and person B is Belinda, because they're sitting next to each other and they have names that suit our exemplary needs"

Neither Abraxas nor Belinda seemed especially impressed to be treated as though they had been named for Vassy's convenience, but Vassy continued brightly:

"Abraxas writes a number, let's say three digits so that it can't be guessed; that's it, yes, please Abraxas, do write a number - it doesn't matter if she sees it at this stage"

"Alright, done that", said Abraxas when he had done so.

"Belinda, please now memorize the number"

"Done", said Belinda.

"Good. Now, Abraxas, cover up the number, and without picking up your wand just yet, please point your finger at Belinda and say: *oblivate*"

"*Oblivate*"

"Good, now ask her what the number was"

"What was the number?", asked Abraxas.

"Three hundred and forty-seven", replied Belinda confidently.

"Yes, well done", replied Vassy, not bothering to check whether it had been correct (it had been). "Of course, this is because Abraxas didn't really do the Charm, but does everyone see how the test works?"

This time, there were murmurs of assent throughout the class. There followed an explanation from Vassy of the exact mechanisms of isolating and effectively Vanishing the memory of the numbers, with due attention being paid to the note that ideas were often more resilient than objects, and as such, sometimes trickier to Vanish.

"Firstly, without your wands, take a trivial memory in your mind; say of this morning's breakfast, for instance. Concentrate on it and be aware of all that's there within it. It doesn't matter if the details are accurate or not, but they need to be real to you. Colours, tastes, textures, smells, sounds. Now take that memory and drain it of its colour; mute the sound to a buzz, distort the form and pull it apart, distance yourself from it, shrink the memory down, make it smaller and duller and more fuzzy, and as it disappears away off to the corner of your mind where lost things go, it can vanish into a tiny speck and simply cease to be"

Soon they were practicing this - working in threes, to avoid the temptation to cheat by merely pretending to have shown one's partner the number, letting the partner think that the memory of this had been successfully erased, when in fact it never occurred at all. Tom was partnered with Tiernan and Marca, the latter of whom went first.

She wrote down a number, and showed it to Tom, in sight of Tiernan. One hundred and thirty seven. She then folded the parchment and put it in her pocket. Taking out her wand in its stead, she pointed it at Tom.

*"Obliviate"*

He immediately had the very recognisable sensation of having forgotten something, and took an instant to remember what it was he was supposed to be remembering; the number. Three hundred and forty-seven. No, wait, that was the example with Abraxas and Belinda.

"So", said Marca, "What was the number?"

"A moment", said Tom, concentrating, and not finding the number. If she were almost anyone else, he could just take it from her mind. Alas, it was not so easy with her. He glanced to Tiernan, who raised his eyebrows. Aha! This mind on the other hand was quite open to him, and offered readily the number one hundred and thirty seven. Tom looked back to Marca.

"I have no recollection of what you wrote", he said, with a hint of annoyance. It was bothersome that he could not usefully use the number he took from Tiernan's mind, as he was not sure that Tiernan held it because Marca used it, or because Tiernan himself was thinking of using it. If the latter, it would not only make him look silly to claim to remember it as the number from Marca, but it'd also convey to Tiernan that his thoughts were not in fact private. Not that Tiernan would probably have a problem with his mind being open to Tom as much as Tom himself would mind if the reverse were true, but still, a long-standing tactical advantage was a good thing to keep to oneself.

"Hmm" said Marca noncommittally, regarding him thoughtfully. "Very well. Your turn".

Tom wrote the number five hundred and eighty-two, as far as he was aware quite arbitrarily; he didn't want to use a more obviously meaningful number. The others having seen and acknowledged it, he did as Marca had done, and folded it, placing it in his pocket out of the way.

He raised his wand, and incanted:

*"Obliviate"* - the rest of the mental machinations of the Charm took only some seconds to go through in his mind. Marca cocked her head slightly, as though confused or trying to throw off the Charm, or possibly both. She frowned and looked down at where the parchment had been, trying to recall the number.

Seemingly admitting defeat, she looked back up at Tom, as though now ready for the answer from him. He was just about to tell her the number that she had forgotten, but at that moment, her lips moved very slightly - did she just say the number under her breath? Tom now said the number under his own breath, to test where and when his lips would move. She had. She had clearly not known the number, then she had looked him in the eyes, and now she knew the number.

He returned her gaze, processing this, realizing he might not be the only person in the class to be able to take information from people's minds. That could be a serious problem if she were aware of certain other things and his thoughts were not private.

Several things happened near-simultaneously. Tom realized that Marca's lip-movements almost certainly meant that Marca had knowledge of things she could logically only have knowledge of if she did indeed have similar skills to his own in the category of access to the thoughts of others. Marca became aware that Tom had realized this, and the implications of his newfound knowledge of her knowledge. Marca surmised correctly that Tom might consider this a problem, that she had access to his mind, and Tom felt pressed to beat any pre-emptive strike from her in response to this now-apparent threat. Both swiftly raised their wands, which each had already had in hand in any case.

A slight buzz of invisible magic later, and Marca toppled from her chair, nearly but not quite regaining her balance in time. Tom, for his part, narrowly avoided doing the same.

They had both first cast Shield Charms simultaneously, and these had collided with each other mid-air, having some percussive effect back on their respective casters in turn.

"What's going on there?" asked Vassy, her attention drawn to Marca clambering back to her feet.

"Sorry Professor", said Marca, "Accidentally cast a Shield Charm"

Tom could tell from Vassy's mind that the Professor did not consider this a full explanation, but also noted that she was unlikely to get to the bottom of what had happened immediately before. As nobody was bringing forth any complaint to her, and whatever the matter was now seemed to be over, Vassy did not press this issue.

"Please do be more careful, all of you", said Vassy.

"Yes Professor", chorused Tom and Marca. Tiernan looked confused, catching on a moment later than they had to the idea that Vassy had no way of knowing whether he, too, had been involved in the incident.

However, whatever Vassy might think, and whatever Tiernan might have no idea about, the matter was far from resolved, merely a momentary unspoken truce established.

*Do not make an enemy of me, Marca*, offered Tom in his thoughts. He then glanced at her, to try to ascertain whether she had heard that thought. She looked away.

"Marca", said Tom. She looked back, and Tom raised an eyebrow.

"What?" she asked, holding his gaze now.

*Do not make an enemy of me, alright?*

"Do not worry about anything", she said aloud. I suggest, that we talk later". It wasn't completely clear whether she'd heard his thought or not, but her reply had been appropriate in any case.

"Is everything alright?" asked Tiernan.

"That remains to be seen", replied Tom. "But I assure you, it will be", he added, with a glance back to Marca, who again averted her eyes.

At the end of what became a long and tense Charms lesson, Tom had succeeded in waylaying Marca en route to their next class, to get the matter resolved as swiftly as

possible. They now stood on a small landing off from the main staircase; Marca, suspecting a trap, had drawn her wand - Tom already had his in his hand.

"Let us talk without violence", she suggested.

"I'm listening", said Tom, lowering his wand slightly and backing off a little, but still alert and mentally on guard. Marca similarly lowered her wand a little.

"I have an ability that you seem to share, but it is coupled with a problem for me", said Marca. "If there is eye-contact between me and a person, I experience glimpses of their thoughts in that instant. But it is all I see or hear or such at that moment, all else is... overcovered by it"

"Go on", prompted Tom.

"It interrupts my own thoughts, ruins my thinking, makes it impossible to... Well, it is more often a problematic distraction than it is a useful source of information. You yourself must know how useless are the thoughts of most people most of the time"

"I do", said Tom, unconsciously raising his wand a little again.

"So I needed to learn to shut out that contact, in order to be able to function in normal societal interactions without needing to all the time avoid their gaze in order to be able to continue thinking coherently"

"But you don't. You didn't. You've been inside my mind", challenged Tom.

"I am not yet perfect", said Marca. "I sometimes fail, especially if am seeking the answer to some question, and if I have felt at ease with the person"

"What do you know?", asked Tom, raising his wand fully again now. Marca, after a moment's thought, lowered her own entirely.

"I know, that it would be unwise to challenge you or to otherwise make an enemy of you", she said.

"What have you seen from my mind that may be of interest to me to know that you know?", asked Tom, a little more pointedly and with less room for rhetorical diplomatic answers.

"Not a lot", she replied. "Probably some trivial things, but in the category of important considerations, I am for example aware - and I do not threaten to reveal to anybody about - that you can see Thestrals because you killed a werewolf in the Forbidden Forest. I am also aware - unless it was entirely imagination on your part, which I am also content to believe - that it was you who killed the famous unicorn in our first year here, for the acquisition of its blood, which then went into a glass bottle, which if you actually did that, now is or has been in the castle somewhere. I know not more than that"

"How do you control it, close your mind?"

"Well, when I look away, I do not enter people's minds. But to learn to shut it out while still there is eye contact, that was more difficult and took more time to master; it is... a disconnection"

"But the rest of the time, and the other way I mean, that your mind resists penetration"

"Oh that - it occurs by the same mechanism. I imagine you wish to do also, to protect your thoughts"

"Yes, I do indeed wish", affirmed Tom.

"I think it became a natural result of my habit to shut off from others. It isolates my mind. I am content so; it is good that my thoughts are not violated."

"Oh, you think so?" said Tom, tersely. "Let me put this bluntly; how do I close my mind such that it cannot be penetrated by you or indeed by others?"

"I can see that this would be a serious concern for you", said Marca, insightfully but unhelpfully. "Well with me, you have merely to avoid eye-contact. With others, I am not so sure. Nor I am sure who has such abilities in the first place. My mother says, that they are quite rare".

"Sure or not, your mind is one of only two so far that I've encountered that I cannot enter at will. The other is Dumbledore's"

"I have no idea how to teach you Zaklumnosty... Occlumnosty... Occlumentsy or however it is called in English - to achieve this closing that you want - but I can surely try to help you. You can try with various methods and I can try to penetrate, and you can discover what works for you"

"Alright", said Tom, simply, while still thinking through this in his mind.

"Meanwhile I suggest we go to our Potions lesson if you do not mind"

"That's a good idea", said Tom. "Let's do that".

They hurried down from the landing with only some small amount of concern on Tom's part - and perhaps also on Marca's - for the possibility of renewed hostilities by surprise, taking advantage of the naturally non-defensive state inherent to descending a tower as swiftly as possible due to being late for a lesson.

When they did arrive down to the Potions classroom, Marca hesitated at the door.

"So, with regard to our lateness to the class..."

"We'll be fine", said Tom, "It's not like he's Merrythought or someone", he added, before opening the door and walking through, holding it open for Marca.

"Ah, better late than never" said Slughorn, without much ire, when he saw them. Indeed, they clearly remained in his good regard, their lateness notwithstanding, as at the end of the class he held back the two of them, plus Tiernan, Abraxas, and Jana, to inform them of a Sunday Dinner get-together he'd be having with his "select few students", that he trusted they'd attend.

## Chapter Eleven

### *Together and Apart*

Slughorn's dinner party was to be held in one of the more spacious dungeons, and they found upon arrival there that the room was - unsurprisingly, considering it pertained to Slughorn - very richly decked out in a thick carpet, with shiny marble-clad walls lined with tapestries, and a very large grand piano was playing itself in one corner, filling the room with a rather regal sound and a feeling of importance. Above, a broad crystal chandelier hung like a crystalline jellyfish, its lower fragments bobbing about some way above what would be head-height, if anyone were able to stand directly under it.

Certainly nobody was at risk of knocking it, however tall, as beneath it was an even wider round table of polished wood in light and dark segments that formed a zig-zagging pattern like a stylized sun radiating out towards the seats that were placed around it.

There were enough chairs around the table to accommodate perhaps the equivalent of a full class, and unlike the banqueting table at Fengrey Hall, it seemed that tonight all the seats would be filled, as all the place settings had been arranged.

"Do sit anywhere", said Slughorn, by way of greeting; he was in good cheer, and he himself was not yet seated, instead rather talking to a Ravenclaw boy. One chair was notably larger than the others, and Tom supposed that Slughorn's direction to "sit anywhere" did not extend to that seat, so opted to avoid it rather than be ousted from it in short order. He considered sitting next to it, but didn't consider that he was "right-hand man" material, and would rather Slughorn make the effort to come talk to him if he so desired, rather than the other way around. He took instead the seat that was furthest from any occupied seat, though naturally Tiernan and Marca flanked him, with Abraxas talking the seat the other side of Marca.

"Will Sirs and Madam be having a Bubble Juice?" asked a House Elf, that had stealthily appeared behind them - without Apparating, judging from the lack of sound associated with such.

"Yes", said Abraxas. "I presume?" he added, with a glance to the others.

"You presume correctly", replied Tom.

The Elf did not go away to get the drinks, but merely clicked its long and knobby fingers, causing the drinks to appear. Like most if not all of its kind, the creature looked much like the one that Belinda had killed not very far from here. Tom hoped its wide eyes were not capable of Legilimency. He looked across to Marca, who was ignoring both the Elf and the drink - and him, for that matter - and was certainly no source of information.

The Ravenclaws from their year were already present, and seated near the older Ravenclaws, a couple of whom Tom knew - Ossapheme Fame and Sofia Clarence, both from the year above - the boy next to them talking to Slughorn, however, he had no idea about as yet. The Gryffindors from their year were also present, opposite them, with some older students near them; a dark-skinned boy whom Tom had seen around, and a pale slender girl whom Tom had not, or rather, doubtlessly had seen but not noticed.

Tom was busy trying to work out from their minds and the minds of those nearby who exactly they were, but was interrupted by the arrival of a couple of Hufflepuffs; he

smiled to see Audrey Valentine enter the room, then endeavoured to look like he was merely a contented person by nature, rather than fondly recalling her memory of her immobilized and bloodied and afraid. Begging; well, not begging, he corrected himself, quite defiant actually, but at least acquiescent in the end, even though she might have done well in Gryffindor.

With her, and looking something like a bodyguard, was Rastus Warren. Tom did momentarily think that this answered the question as to Warren's blood status, as Slughorn would surely not value a Mudblood so highly as to invite him here, but then, there was Jana across the table, so perhaps their Head of House had a, well, pragmatic view on the topic of blood status. Nevertheless, it wasn't thoroughly clear what Warren was doing here, aside from the boy's obvious competence on the Quidditch pitch.

The Badgers were greeted by Slughorn with a smile and a friendly wave, and he directed them quite needlessly to the table. They sat near the Gryffindors over at the opposite side of the table from the Slytherins, just as more Slytherins came in the door - the Pureblood trouble-makers crowd from the year above, and another older student whom Tom didn't recognise, talking with Violet Selwyn, whom of course he did know.

The table soon filling up, Slughorn stopped chatting with individuals and waddled around to his chair.

"Looks like we're just missing Miss Pinkstone; what have you Gryffindors done with her?"

"It was all his fault" said the dark-skinned Gryffindor, with a surprisingly deep voice that made him seem older than he looked. Brandon, to whom he now pointed, protested that it was nothing to do with him. "No, I'm kidding", clarified the older student. "I've no idea where she is or why; she did know the time and place though, I'm sure".

"Well, let's get on without her, shall we; I don't know about you boys and girls, but I'm famished", said the teacher, clapping his hands and causing a wide selection of small dishes of mostly seafood to appear on the table. Tiernan smiled, and Marca pushed away the nearest dish that had appeared, regarding it as though it were a bowl of Flobberworms. It was not, though Tom was not utterly sure what it actually was either; it seemed to be largely comprised of slimy looking white rings.

"Hope you all like seafood", said Slughorn happily, as though this could be taken for granted, and indeed with the exception of Marca, most were now either already helping themselves, or at least surveying with interest at dishes that were currently being raided by their neighbours, as they waited to get a look in themselves. "Don't worry though, we've a roast beef main to come, and..."

He was interrupted by the arrival of what Tom at first took to be a ghost, but then from its brightness and its form (as an animal, a fox) identified it as a Patronus, but not cast by anyone in the room as it had breezed in through the closed door. Not content with causing this much surprise, it now spoke, in the lively voice of a young woman:

"Two minutes and I'll be with you!", it proclaimed, before vanishing first into a single bright point, and then completely into nothingness. The room seemed darker in its absence now.

“Hoho”, said Slughorn, breaking the silence, “Might have known Miss Pinkstone would opt for a dramatic entrance if given the opportunity; do you know, I’ve never been able to do a talking Patronus - very few Wizards can, of course. Any of you lot able to do one at all?”

“I can, usually”, said the older Gryffindor boy. Tom noticed he had a “Head Boy” badge on, that made him... Shacklebolt. Marcus. No, Marius. Marius Shacklebolt.

“Well, let’s see it then, don’t be shy”, exhorted Slughorn.

“Alright, here goes”, he said, drawing his wand and standing up. *“Expecto patronum!”*

Shacklebolt’s Patronus took the form of some large and hefty dog, and spoke with his voice:

“Greetings everybody”

Spontaneous applause broke out around half of the table, the other half joined in more reluctantly. Shacklebolt released his Patronus Charm, and the dog disappeared from view.

“Well done, well done”, enthused Slughorn. “I see it’s getting to be a bit of a Gryffindor thing, that one, isn’t it? Professors Merrythought and Dumbledore, you and Pinkstone...”

“Professor Merrythought helped me with the Patronus more, back when I first started on it. But Dumbledore gets the credit for the voice”

“Nonsense, boy; it’s you who gets the credit for it, not that a good student isn’t always a credit to their teacher, of course”, he added with a chuckle. “Anyone else?”

It took an instant to realize Slughorn was asking if anyone else could conjure a talking Patronus, but the question was being met by a resounding silence, and everyone making an effort to not attract attention to themselves.

“Not even you, Andy?”, asked Slughorn, to the older Ravenclaw boy, who shook his head. “Well I must say, I hope you Slytherins learn to do it; no need to let the Gryffindors run away with it - you know our very own Dorea Black could do it as well, don’t think we’ve had another student able to do it since - but there’s time for you yet”, he said, with a meaningful nod in the general direction of the younger Slytherins, or perhaps just Tom and Marca.

Tom, alas, had still not succeeded in producing any Patronus, let alone a talking one. Neither had a fair number of the others present, in fairness, but it still irked Tom, as he did not like being unable to do something. He suspected it might be in part due to a shortage of happy memories on his part, and in part due to an inability to acknowledge any greater more powerful thing than himself, to await as a protector - like he needed protecting.

“Sir, what form does your Patronus take?” asked Sofia Clarence, imagining it to perhaps be a giant brightly glowing slug.

“Aha, it’s always a personal question that one, isn’t it?”, rejoined Slughorn, “What do you think it is?”

“Err... Could it be... You wouldn’t have a slug, would you, Sir?”

“A slug? What on Earth gave you that idea?”, he replied, in mock offence. “No, it’s not a slug, but what it actually is, I think, is best left a mystery. So unless there’s a Dementor attack while we’re dining, I’m afraid to say you’re going to miss out”

Tom tried to work out whether Slughorn was embarrassed by the Patronus that he saw in his mind’s eye, in the form of a great toad.

The conversation was interrupted by a banging at the door.

“Let’s hope this is Pinkstone and not a Dementor, shall we?” joked Slughorn. At a prompt from him, a House Elf ran to the door and opened it; surely Slughorn could have done this himself from where he sat, but then, that was Slughorn to a tee; getting others to do things for him that he could very well do himself.

“Sorry I’m late”, said the Witch whom Tom recognized from the earlier thoughts of Slughorn and the Gryffindors to be Carlotta Pinkstone.

“Not to worry at all my dear; we’ve saved you a seat”, said Slughorn, gesturing to the only empty chair, which was next to the other Gryffindor girl that was not Jana.

“Hey Andy”, she said, sitting down, addressing the Ravenclaw to the other side of her, before again turning to Slughorn - “I’d have been here on time, but I was halfway through a series of Charms on my eye, so I had to finish the set or else I’d be falling down the stairs to meet you”, she laughed.

“Scylla’s Iorgnettes, what is that you’ve done with it?” asked Slughorn, his attention drawn finally to the fact that her eyes were mismatched in colour; her left eye was perhaps a natural green, but her right eye was an unnatural golden hue.

“When it’s finished”, she said, “I should be able to see in the dark, through most objects, even through invisibility cloaks”

“Everyone can see through invisibility cloaks”, objected Ozzy Fame. “Seeing through them is the easy part; seeing only halfway through them, to view what’s in the middle, that’s the tricky bit”

“And that my dear is precisely what I should be able to do”, said Pinkstone.

“Should be?”, asked Andy, next to her.

“Well yes, it’s a work in progress”, admitted Pinkstone.

“And right now?”

“Right now, I can at least see out of it, which is more than I could do ten minutes ago”, she grinned.

“And the, err, colour”, said Slughorn, “that’s just a temporary fixture, I suppose?”

“Yep”, said Pinkstone. “When I’m done, I don’t know for sure yet, but I expect it’ll have an active warm glow to it”

“You don’t plan to use that around Muggles then, I trust?” asked Slughorn.

“Well it’s my eyeball”, said Pinkstone. “Of course I’ll use it around them; I’m not going to walk around with my eyes closed whenever I’m in non-magical places, am I?”

“But, what about the Statute of Secrecy?”, challenged Slughorn, at once both exasperated and yet also seemingly resigned.

“Well, if a Muggle asks, I’ll just act surprised and pretend it must have just started doing that of its own accord” she said, shrugging, prompting no small amount of laughter from around the table.

“Who needs Grindelwald when we have you, Pinkstone”, joked Violet, apparently on surprisingly friendly terms with her despite the usual inter-House rivalries, and Violet’s lack of reputation for inter-House friendships.

“We won’t have her at this rate”, said the other older Gryffindor girl, “She’ll be carted off to Azkaban”

“Nonsense, Selina”, said Slughorn, “I’m sure Carlotta will find away to keep herself under wraps and out of Muggle view”.

“Is that the plan, Pinkstone?” asked Abraxas with a smirk, surprising Tom by being ostensibly already acquainted with a seventh-year Gryffindor girl, “You’re going to hide yourself away?”

“Oh, definitely”, said Pinkstone, her voice heavy with sarcasm.

“You know you’d have been Head Girl, Carlotta, if it weren’t for all this nonsense?”, said Slughorn, amiably enough. “Not that Violet wasn’t a fine choice, of course”, he added, as the latter raised a goblet in appreciation of the mention.

“And you know I don’t care about things like that, Sir”, said Pinkstone. “I’d rather make an impact in my own way”

“Well, you certainly do that”, said Slughorn with a laugh.

Most of those present were interrogated by Slughorn to a greater or lesser extent at some point during dinner, ranging from to Marca denying any special knowledge of whether Germany and the Soviet Union were going to form an alliance, to Andy Atagh’s patent application pertaining to his experiments with partially and temporarily Transfiguring birds and any attached items into smoke without loss of consciousness or content, something that could revolutionize the Owl Post service, and as Slughorn pointed out, make Atagh rich and famous in the process.

Those Slytherins from more prestigious Pureblood families had to field questions about the goings on of their various relatives; it transpired that Slughorn had attended Hogwarts alongside several sets of parents or other relations of the current attendees, though in other cases, such as Tom’s, focussed entirely on the person himself; Tom, in Slughorn’s estimation, would do well in any field - which prompted an objection from Violet that she’d yet to see him on a broom. As the conversation went the way of Quidditch - one of Slughorn’s first students had gone on to captain the England Quidditch Team - and didn’t return to Tom until the very end of the evening, when all were being ushered onwards and back to their Houses, since they’d overrun on time and were now after hours.

“From what I’ve seen so far, I look forward to seeing a lot more from you”, said Slughorn to him. “Exceptional talent, and not like these Ravenclaws” he added, gesturing towards the door where the last of the Ravenclaws had now departed. “For even the best of them it’s almost always focussed on one or two things, but you’re quite the versatile young Slytherin, it’s safe to say”

“Thank you, Sir”

“Just need to get you to open up a bit, and we’ll figure out just the place for you yet”, added Slughorn with a smile. “For now though, off you go, I see young Mr. Lestrangle is waiting for you”

Opening up more was not what Tom thought best, all things considered - quite the contrary. Marca had already disappeared by the time Tom left with Tiernan, but she would be the more useful ally in his quest to keep his own mind closed from invaders - a liability, but a short term liability for a long term gain.

As per Marca's suggestion, Tom practiced - or rather made mostly unsuccessful efforts at - Occlumency, working from her feedback over the course of a number of sessions in evenings here and there. For now he seemed unable to keep her out while they had eye contact, but he could at least show her things of his choosing to blot out other thoughts and keep her distracted from the things he was working to hide. A risky but necessary exercise in calculated distrust, it was a start.

If there was a person Tom absolutely wanted to be sure could not access his thoughts, it was the equally inscrutable Albus Dumbledore who now stood before them in his Transfiguration classroom, in which he had set up a collection of tea-making equipment on his desk. Unless he was going to multiply the single cup there, he didn't seem to be brewing up for all present, as Professor Sortsun did from time to time, if he found an excuse to have them work with tea leaves on a given topic.

"Good afternoon children; today's lesson will be about an area of Transfiguration that is rather advanced, although if I may say it, also rather fundamental"

He was interrupted at this moment by the silver kettle boiling and beginning to emit a piercing whistling sound. Ignoring the class now as though he were in his private study making a drink, he advanced upon the tea-making apparatus with a smile that faltered only for an instant when the sound suddenly stopped, even as the steam continued to billow forth. Marca lowered her wand and looked as innocent as possible.

"Thank you, Miss Zelyonaya" said Dumbledore, "Though the sound was also a contribution to the lesson today".

Drawing his wand, he set the next step of tea-making in motion, as the kettle now poured steaming water onto the tea.

"I understand from Professor Vassy that you have been working on the involvement of the senses in your magic, and here we will be expanding on that theme". A flick of his wand caused the kettle to return to its place, as the fire that had been heating it went out. The tea now poured itself, with Dumbledore conjuring a golden tea-strainer into the stream of liquid just in time to catch the first traces of tea endeavouring to make their escape from the porcelain prison. Taking up the teacup and tasting the brew, he proclaimed "Alas, it needed longer. But time can be neither hurried nor slowed, no matter how we try to befuddle our reckoning of it with the sweet entrancements of light frivolities".

Trying to peer through the veil of his eccentric abstractions, Tom wondered if this meant the lesson was going to be, in fact, dealing with making things more permanent in the face of the ravages of time, something which would indeed build on some of his latest learnings not only in classes, but also in his extracurricular studies, not to mention his overall aspirations of ensuring his own permanence. Unbreakable Charms were something that Tom knew already; he'd used them on the masks. But knowing it to a deeper level, such that he might be able to apply it to living things, that would be something quite more.

As Dumbledore went on, it became more and more apparent that the lesson would pertain to changing the base properties of things, without changing the things themselves. Tom raised a hand.

“There is something you wish to say, Tom?”, asked Dumbledore, making his usual assumption that Tom would have a complaint rather than a question.

“Isn’t this Alchemy, Sir?”

“Alchemy is the most basic form of Transfiguration, Tom, as I should hope you would know by now”

So, yes, then. Well, that would be rather a slight to Professor Al-Muharik, but Tom wasn’t averse to simply having a little more Alchemy in his timetable - he was already notably ahead of the class in simple Transfiguration, in any case. The greatest downside of this lesson, aside from Dumbledore’s annoying manner, was that it was *not* an Alchemy class, and as such didn’t have anywhere near the usual practical aspect that Alchemy classes would.

Al-Muharik kept everyone involved, all the time; Dumbledore kept the centre-stage to himself, all the time, only shifting the limelight onto one student or another here and there, usually to expect too much of them, and invariably to patronize them. His eccentric ways entertained a lot of the students and made him popular with them, but others, like Tom, saw this for nothing but a constant sham and a charade, revealed only from time to time when he showed his more sharp, serious, and severe aspect. At least Merrythought was honest about her nature; Dumbledore hid his behind a mask of jollity.

Nor was Professor Al-Muharik thrilled when he learned that Dumbledore had essentially been teaching them Alchemy through a thin veil of disguising it as Transfiguration.

“But it’s good if it means we’re ahead, right?” asked Peter Tinworth, who as a Hufflepuff had been in the same Transfiguration lesson as Tom.

“Unfortunately, my friends, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. If the knowledge is small enough, even trying to observe that knowledge enough to maintain it can be sufficient to change it, and before you know it, you can no longer be certain as to the nature of its reality”

“So, we grow the knowledge to the point that it is stable?” asked Enid Albertstone.

“Yes, that”, replied Al-Muharik. “Although of course with anything, literally anything, changes can still occur. Yes, Tom?” he asked, as Tom raised a hand.

“Is nothing permanent, then?”

“Nothing”

“Is that... always true?”

“Unless it changes” smiled Al-Muharik, regaining a little of his more usual cheery nature.

This didn’t last long - appropriately enough - as when it came to discussing the matter of Transmutative Vitrification, it became apparent that Dumbledore had not merely been straying into the teaching of Alchemy, but had outright pre-empted Al-Muharik’s lesson plan.

“Some people, even esteemed colleagues, must have everything for themselves, it seems”, he complained. “Of course Alchemy is the most exciting subject at Hogwarts”, he said, as though this were an objective truth, “But I do wish I would be left to teach my own subject at least”

Al-Muharik’s thoughts regards Dumbledore seemed to be more focussed on the latter’s status as a Head of House, something that Al-Muharik himself would like; unsurprising, with his highly friendly and outgoing nature, that he would want to be surrounded by something like a family. This gave Tom pause for thought; he knew nothing about Al-Muharik’s family - granted, he didn’t know much about the families of most teachers at Hogwarts, but it seemed likely that Al-Muharik’s might be further afield, if he had one, and potentially more directly in the path of war than others here in Britain. But then, if that were so, he’d be worrying about them, and they’d stray into his mind often enough that Tom would have caught a glimpse at some point, surely. No, Al-Muharik was probably a lone soul like Tom, for whom Hogwarts was his home, and Albus Dumbledore a pest.

“Now, this is what I expect you did not do already”, proclaimed Al-Muharik when they got to the most hands-on part of the class; and indeed he was right, they had not even discussed the quenching disorder of Vitriolic Essence, let alone performed it.

As Al-Muharik gathered up his traditional long-and-wide sleeves a little further to first demonstrate this task for them all to have a go, Tom noted a shiny scar on his forearm. It looked a little neat to be accidental, and Tom wondered if this was a form of deliberate bodily embellishment, like the tattoos of sailors. It looked like a Greek letter  $\phi$ , some of whose history he had learned in a Glyphs and Tongues class.

“Is that a *phi*, Sir?”, he asked, indicating to it. “I mean, intentionally?”

“This?”, asked Al-Muharik, stalling for an instant’s thought. The instant’s thought was not completely lost on Tom, who noted it to have some connection to a stone and a wand. “Yes, I suppose it is, though I got it by accident”

Tom frowned for a second at the obvious disparity between the idea of it being intentional yet simultaneously by accident, and something only just now being considered. He adjusted his expression to appear more accepting of the answer.

“Is it to do with the Philosopher’s Stone, then?”, he asked, connecting the conceptual elements. “I mean, I’m sure most great Alchemists have an interest in that”, he added.

“Yes”, said Al-Muharik with a half-laugh, tracing the straight central line of his scar with a finger, and then running it around the circle that the straight line bisected. “I’m sure they do”.

“Have you ever made one?”

“It’s not something that one can just... Well, it’s really not the topic of this lesson, and I’m already scrabbling to salvage my plans for the day, so probably best if we get to this Phasal Transmutation, don’t you think?”

“Of course, Sir”, smiled Tom, wondering as to why Al-Muharik had been about to say that it wasn’t something that one can just make - surely it was indeed precisely that. For now though, no more answers seemed forthcoming, even directly from the teacher’s

mind, as this latter now refocussed itself on Elemental Metasubstantiation, with what seemed like a conscious effort to pay attention to his own lesson.

It would not be until later that Tom realised that whether or not it had to do with the Philosopher's Stone, the Al-Muharik didn't think of the scar as a *phi*.

Specifically, he realised it when he traced the letter himself while thinking about it; nobody writes the vertical line before the circular part, do they? It would be like dotting "i"s and crossing "t"s before writing the "i"s and "t"s in question. This was entirely circumstantial of course, but it did bring his mind to another more obvious clue he shouldn't have missed: he had been so distracted by the flash of memory of receiving the scar - a memory that was itself unhelpful, as it merely showed what was clearly an Alchemy accident; a cauldron meltdown with some white-hot substance spurting out - that he hadn't really taken in the fact that Al-Muharik's thoughts had still been on the stone he was trying to create; not a word, not a letter, but the stone, pure and simple, and the wand with which he might create such - and he longed for both; he didn't have either.

Was it that the Philosopher's Stone could only be made with a certain kind of wand? There was nothing ostensibly wrong with Al-Muharik's current wand of fir. Tom's knowledge of wandlore was quite basic, but even he knew that fir was good for Alchemy and Transfiguration. Maybe the Philosopher's Stone needed to be made by a wand of yew, like his own, the wood that gave its wielder the greatest power over life and death?

He racked his brain for any knowledge of pairings of wood and stone, but came up blank. Not finding what he needed in his own mind, he resolved to try someone else's. As Al-Muharik's wasn't easily reached from Slytherin Dungeon in the evening, Tom tried another:

"Marca", he asked, "Do you know anything about pairings of wood and stone?"

"In Alchemy?", she replied.

"Well possibly, or in wandlore"

"There are not stones in wandlore", objected Marca. "There are woods, lengths and individual properties and such, and there are cores, none of which are stone, so far as I have learned"

"No special properties pertaining to stones?" he suggested.

"No"

"Nothing that would put a specific wand and a stone together conceptually?"

"Like the Relics of Death?"

"The what?"

"The Relics of Death", said Marca, as though this were something about which Tom ought to know. "You have read *The Rise of Gellert Grindelwald*, have you not? The Relics of Death were his early obsession, and they became his symbol later"

"The Deathly Hallows", said Tom. Of course! That was what the scar meant for Al-Muharik; it was two out of three of the Deathly Hallows; the Elder Wand and the Resurrection Stone! "But they don't exist as literal things, do they? It's a cautionary tale, a morality story, isn't it? If they existed, they'd have been found and we'd know about them"

“Well, I do not have them and have not knowledge of them”, said Marca, non-committally.

## Chapter Twelve

### *The Misfits*

As usual, almost all of Slytherin House were at home with their families for Christmas, but this year a lot more students than normal were staying over at Hogwarts for the holidays.

This, Tom quickly learned, was on account of the Muggle evacuation programme, and that many students who lived in Muggle households, due to having one or more Muggle parents, were staying here in a magically protected castle rather than spending time in their largely evacuated-of-children city homes. Their fathers, if Muggles, were for the most part away now in any case, and their mothers, if Muggles, were ill-equipped to offer them any more than the most meager protection.

At breakfast time in the Great Hall on Christmas Day, this was especially pronounced on account of everyone being around at once, instead of drifting in and out of the Great Hall in dribs and drabs, or missing it entirely due to sleeping in or being out in Hogsmeade on previous days.

Being the only Slytherin left in the castle, what with even Antonin being down in London with his parents and Marca making the most of the option to return to visit Sverdlovsk while the Pan-European Floo Network was still operational, Tom sat breakfasting alone as usual, somewhat downcast at the astonishingly notable presence of Muggle blood in the room, present in clearly greater quantity than magical blood. Here, in Hogwarts of all places, a beautiful and supposedly pure magical place, where there ought not be any intrusion or disturbances from Muggle mundanity.

In an ideal world, this would mean there would be no contamination of this sanctuary by non-magical blood. Of course, in the real world, in practical terms, Tom could understand making exceptions, especially for the more talented of Mudbloods, for instance, but it gave him something of a sick feeling to be surrounded by quite so many insipid Muggle-loving traitors to the magical world, with their nauseatingly fond thoughts of childhood Christmases with Muggle relatives, and worse, their tokens of familial love in the form of Christmas cards and such, in many cases displayed proudly at their place sittings in the Great Hall, as though they actually wanted to be associated with that painfully ordinary world devoid of magic or any kind of importance or specialness.

“Hi Tom; happy Christmas!” enthused Jana, having stopped only a moment at her own table with some friends before coming to visit him. “You don’t look happy though, are you alright?”, she added, sitting herself down next to him at the otherwise deserted Slytherin table.

“I’m just a little out of my element here today”, he said. “So many people who are so... tied up to a world that’s nothing to do with me”

“Oh, family life and all that, you mean?”, asked Jana, after a moment’s thought. “It’s not always all it’s cracked up to be, you know”, she sighed. “But if ever you need someone to talk to, or just to spend time with, you know I’m...”

“It’s not that”, said Tom, interrupting. “I’m just a little, well... Out of it, today”, he said with a weak smile. He opted to not tell the Mudblood that it basically boiled down to a

matter of hating how many Mudbloods were in the room. Ironically, Jana's own family situation made her much less of an intrusion by his reckoning, as she wasn't quite so wrapped up in Muggle entanglements as were the others; she was less connected to the Muggle world than even half of the Half-Bloods.

"Thanks for the chess set", said Jana, perhaps hoping to shift the conversation to a more positive tone - "I'm no great shakes at chess, but maybe I'll get better if I practice"

Tom had got her a Wizard's Chess set, but the pieces were not standard. Rather, they had an assortment of magical beings and beasts. The "Black" pieces were indeed of darker hue, though not entirely black, and the "White" pieces were broadly paler, but again, not entirely white. The Black pawns were immediately identifiable as Dementors; their White counterparts were ghosts, though not any specific ghosts that Tom recognised from around Hogwarts. The Kings and Queens were the Hogwarts Founders, with Salazar Slytherin and Rowena Ravenclaw standing opposite Godric Gryffindor and Helga Hufflepuff. The Bishops, to their sides, were some manner of elephant-like creatures that Tom did not recognize, unless they were in fact supposed to be elephants. The Knights were oft-rampant hippogriffs, and the Rooks, rather tubby-looking dragons.

"You're welcome. Thank you for the strange potion whose name you neglected to mention"

"It wasn't a potion; you didn't drink it did you?" asked Jana, shocked. "I did put on a note saying..."

"...to open it carefully, which I did, but upon investigation to find out what it actually was, I decided to pour a little into a glass"

"Oh no, did it all escape and go everywhere?"

"Well, not quite everywhere, but it certainly did a tour of the Common Room before I was able to recapture it and rebottle it; liquids I can control quite well, but not so easily when they've burst into flames and seem to have a life of their own"

"Oh, I'm really sorry... It didn't do any damage, did it?"

"No", said Tom, shaking his head. "The fire doesn't seem to actually burn anything, though it is warming"

"Yes, that's what it was supposed to be, just a fun warming Fluidfire thing; I researched it as my Christmas project for Professor Al-Muharik"

"I'm sure he'll be thrilled", said Tom. "I got a broom as well by the way, finally", he added as an afterthought.

"Ooh, what kind; where is it?" asked Jana, looking around as though he might have brought it to the table for some reason.

"Bestbuzz Three", replied Tom. "And, it's back in my Common Room, but it's just like any other Bestbuzz Three, so you're not really missing out on much by not seeing it"

"Those are pretty expensive; who got you that?"

"Tiernan, though I suspect his father also had a hand in it"

"You're lucky to have rich friends"

"Don't you? It's not like House Gryffindor is devoid of Pureblood families; your Valerie Clemence for instance..."

“Her family are all magical, yes”, affirmed Jana, “But that doesn’t necessarily mean rich, you know”

“True... But old blood does tend to mean old money; when families have been magical for centuries, they’ve had lots of time to build up their wealth”

“Well, that or they just took it by force or had it handed to them centuries ago”, said Jana. “Sorry, I don’t mean to be rude about your friends, and it’s not like they’re the ones who did it, but you know... History of Magic and all that”

“If you were heir to something great”, mused Tom, ignoring this last, “Wouldn’t you want to do something great with it, rather than let just anyone squander it?”

Jana considered this.

“I don’t know. I’d buy a new broom. Maybe some things for my friends. But I’m not. I’m heir to a cottage full of knick-knacks. Still, it’s more than you’re heir to, I suppose”

“Thank you for that observation”

“Sorry, that was so thoughtless”

“Don’t worry about it”, said Tom. “I have my... situation, such as it is. I will rise from it, and I’ll do all a Wizard may be expected to do, and more. Here, look at this” - he held his wand before Jana - “It’s yew”.

“Me? Oh yew, the wood, right, yes. What about it? Someone said it has to do with death, I think, and...”

“Life”, said Tom. “Yew chooses Wizards - well, and Witches, I suppose - who will have a supreme power over life and death. Isn’t that the greatest of all powers? You see it’s not about inheriting money, convenient as that may be. It’s about... real magical gifts, gifts that can be in turn bestowed on the magical world, breathing life into the lifeless, building our beautiful haven, away from Muggles of the kind that fear and reject us. Isn’t that something?”

“I’ll leave changing the world to you”, said Jana, with a smile. “I’ll be on the Quidditch pitch”

“Bah, you’ll see”, said Tom, conceding her temporary apparent disbelief. She’d see in time. “I’ll put life into things in ways you’d never have thought possible”, he added, almost to himself, thinking back to the Bloody Baron’s words.

“Well, sounds like you have a plan”, said Jana. “My plan, meanwhile, involves going for a broomstick ride out over the lake before dinner; do you want to come with?”

“Why, what are you doing on the other side of the lake?”

“Just flying with some of the other Quidditch players or Quidditch hopefuls who are here over the holiday, maybe play with some balls - you’d be very welcome; it’s all Houses, or rather will be all Houses if you come”

Tom reflected on how Quidditch players flew, be they competitive players or merely aspirants to such, and did not fancy spending the morning trailing behind Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws who were better on brooms than he was.

“I think I’ll politely decline on this occasion”, said Tom, “and keep my sporting pursuits to duelling, for the time being”

“Fine”, conceded Jana, albeit with a smile, “But I’ll get you out there on a broom at some point”, she added. “I’d better go rejoin the others, but you’re all alone; do you want to come join us at our table?”

“I’m done here”, said Tom, quite glad that he was in fact finished. “I’ll leave you to your friends and your flying”

“Well, if you change your mind about the flying, you’ll probably be able to see where we are; it’s a pretty clear day”

Making the most of the castle’s relative emptiness, Tom went to try, as he periodically did, to get back in to the Lost and Found room - his unicorn blood was no good in there if he couldn’t access it, and it was beginning to vex him now.

After at least an hour’s unsuccessful effort, he had given up and was making his way down towards his own House, when while descending a set of stairs currently near the front of the castle, he heard raised voices of some of the others who had stayed on over Christmas, down in the Quad.

From an overlooking meurtrière, Tom saw that a couple of Hufflepuffs had built a snowman, and were now trying to enchant it - while at the same time dodging or deflecting stray snowballs, as they shared the Quad with some Gryffindor students; older than the Hufflepuffs, but younger than Tom, who smirked as a snowball whizzed into one the ear of one of the younger children with a doubtless sting. He smiled, and decided to help them out with a fairly simple Charm.

*Oppugno.*

Directing the still-lifeless snowman at the Gryffindors, he smashed it first through one, and then into the second, before rising it into the air and planting it on top of the third.

“What the Heck, Hufflepuffs?!”, exclaimed the first of the Gryffindors, now having recovered from the collision, whereupon he dispatched snowballs directly for each of them, being clearly unsure as to who had Charmed the snowman.

“It was an accident!” proclaimed one of the Hufflepuffs, under the illusion that it had indeed been such.

“Oh yeah, it accidentally flew into all three of us, some accident indeed! C’mon, there’s snowball fights and there’s dumping a snowman on someone three times in a row; we’re drenched now! How d’you fancy a swim in the lake? Because we can arrange it for you, you know”

Further protestations were interrupted by the arrival of Jana and Hufflepuff Keeper, fellow Mudblood Edmund Peterson, gliding into the Quad on brooms, clearly returning either later or earlier than their other companions; more likely the latter.

“...but that’s my point”, laughed Jana, “ultimately we’ve both got to catch balls, but the Quaffle’s bigger and slower, so...” - she trailed off, upon noting the situation in the Quad.

“You lot alright down there?” asked Peterson, concerned.

“No, get this lot off us; we were all just playing nicely and then...”

“Hang on a minute”, said one of the Gryffindors, “It was a normal snowball fight until you set a snowman on us”

"I didn't mean to!"

"Come on everyone", chided Peterson, "Let's have a bit of Christmas cheer and goodwill shall we"

It wasn't long before any potential for violence had been completely talked down; it was clear this wasn't going to play out like other inter-House scraps such as the one he'd witnessed in Hogsmeade, or the one he'd orchestrated down by House Hufflepuff. Tom wouldn't have minded a bit of inter-House mistrust that didn't involve Slytherin for once, and indeed when such did occur from time to time, Gryffindor was usually the instigator.

Tom did wonder if he'd be invited to the Gryffindor table again when it was time for Christmas dinner, but he noted upon arrival that Jana wasn't there yet in any case - nor were several other Gryffindors, including Rubeus Hagrid, usually very conspicuous in his presence and so far conspicuous in his absence. At the table nearest, that being the Ravenclaw table, Sofia Clarence attracted his attention.

"Come sit with us", she said, beckoning to where she was sat with a few boys and another girl.

"Why?" asked Tom.

"Because it's Christmas, and you shouldn't be on your own" she replied.

"Really, come join us", agreed one of the boys. "We don't bite - or peck, or whatever"

"Oh, fine", consented Tom, who didn't have a pressingly strong argument for staunchly resisting their invitation - and from what he'd gleaned from passing thoughts here and there, they were better company than he'd find on either of the other occupied tables; not that he was likely to be invited to join the Hufflepuffs, and Jana still hadn't made an appearance over at her table. He got up and made his way around the end of the Slytherin table in order to go join the Ravenclaws.

"You're Tom Riddle, right, third-year, isn't it?" asked the boy.

"Yes"

"Call me Ishmael", he said, "and this my brother Isidor"

"Otherwise known as Ishy and Izzy", added the latter.

"I'm Reynaud", said another, "Happy Christmas"

"Pleasure", said Tom, glad the immediate hand-shaking session seemed to be over. He already knew Sofia, and the other girl present, a first-year, was too far away for hand-shaking and didn't seem about to offer such anyway.

"Yes, have a seat, no wait, let's do the crackers, shall we?" said Ishmael. Tom disapproved of the Christmas crackers at Hogwarts; they tended to contain silly and useless things. Nevertheless, he very shortly became the owner of an unreasonably wide-brimmed hat.

"Does anybody want this before I Vanish it?" asked Tom.

"Wait", said Reynaud, "If you're not going to wear it, let's put in on a snowman"

"What snowman?", asked Isidor.

"Aha, good question, let's see if we can borrow some of this snow", said Reynaud, standing on his chair and brandishing his wand. Upon muttering an incantation, or rather a

short string of incantations, he caused most of the Hall's magical snowflakes to be drawn into a turbulent vortex, before snowing all in one place, specifically, onto their table, just a couple of places down from where the cluster of them were sitting.

The snowflakes didn't merely fall, however, they fell directly into place, building a snowman from the table upwards, until it was tall and large enough that Tom's wide-brimmed hat could be placed upon it. With a further flourish of Reynaud's wand, the rest of the Hall's snow went back to falling evenly throughout the room, disappearing into nothingness just above head height. The Ravenclaws applauded, and so did some of the Hufflepuffs.

"That was quite good", said Tom, admiring the magic despite his cynicism regards its application. "How did you do it?"

"Eh, it's a bit complicated", said Reynaud.

"Are you able to explain?" asked Tom, placing the doubt firmly on Reynaud's explanatory prowess, and not on his own comprehension.

"Well, it has to do with Elementary channels, and patterning Egregores, I don't know if you've studied..."

"Egregores are... thought moulds, of a sort?" asked Tom, peering into Reynaud's mind and grappling with the dynamic abstractions he found there.

"Yes, have you done them already?" asked Reynaud.

"Not as such, but I can follow the concept", said Tom. "So you have the idea of a snowman, your mind knows about snowmen you've seen or better yet created previously; the Elementary channels are not too different from the kind used in Lightning Conjuration; the trick then is being able to broaden the start of the channel sufficiently to connect with all the snow, and then being able to weave the Spells together to result in this... frivolity", he concluded, a little dismissive of the snowman itself.

"Well I must say I'm impressed; I don't think many third-years would get all that, especially not in..." - he stopped there, realizing he probably shouldn't imply that he has low expectations of Slytherins.

"Especially not in?" asked Tom, not letting him off the hook.

"Sorry, I just mean... Well, I realize it's not like Ravenclaw has a monopoly on intelligence; it's just always nice to see it when it does show up in other Houses too"

"I'm not sure how much intelligence it takes", said Tom, "But I'll take it as a compliment", he added, with a smile.

Over Christmas dinner, Tom learned a little about his companions' parentage, as naturally conversation covered what they were all doing at Hogwarts instead of with their families - even though naturally some of them already knew each other's stories, it was clearly not the case for all.

"Our parents are both all wrapped up in the war effort", said Ishmael, not seeming too concerned about this. "Our dad's part of a unit trying to re-establish control of Yugoslavia - you know, keep Grindelwald out of the Muggle affairs going on there - but I don't know much more than that. Our mum though, we don't really know much at all for sure. She works for the Ministry, but whatever it is she does, it's all hush hush".

“What, like Ministry of Intelligence?” asked Reynaud.

“Ministry of Magic”, said Isidor, confused. “What’s the Ministry of Intelligence?”

“Sorry, Muggle thing”, said Reynaud; “It means secret agents, spies and things”

“Oh”, said Isidor, “It sounded much better as the Ministry of Intelligence - I thought it maybe had to do with putting together mental power of some kind. But to answer your question... We really don’t know; we don’t even know what the name of her Department is”

Tom smirked as he wondered whether their mother in fact had some very mundane job at the Ministry and merely refused to talk about it, in order to glamorize it.

“What about you, Reynaud?” asked Ishmael.

“Oh, me”, said Reynaud, “Well, my mum’s also doing something for the Ministry; nothing so exciting though, just Floo Maintenance, but the Pan-European Floo Network does keep coming under attack, so they need people at it constantly or we can’t get people where they’re needed for the war. And my dad, well, my dad’s a Muggle, and he’s out in North Africa. Egypt, last we heard, so... Well, it’s a different world, different kind of war”, said Reynaud with a sigh. “Mostly I just hope he’s doing alright and hope we don’t get a telegram saying something happened to him”. There was a moment’s silence at the Ravenclaw table, owing to the others being unsure how to best respond to this, and he concluded: “But let’s not get a downer on, hey. Chin up, and all that. What’s your story, Sofia?”

“Well I’m in both places” said Sofia, “I mean, I’m here right now, but since we only live in Hogsmeade, I’m off for Christmas tea with my mum and dad later, though in reality I doubt I’ll have room to eat anything else. And, erm...” - she hesitated, turning to the first-year girl who had barely spoken - “Myrtle, isn’t it?”

“That’s me”, said the first-year. “Why, do you want to know why I’m here too?”

From her voice that sounded like she might cry at any moment, Tom could already tell that he didn’t in fact want to hear from her, but the others assented.

“Yes, of course”, said Sofia.

“Daddy’s a wireless technician and he’s been stationed over in France, so he’s gone until who-knows-when, and mummy’s a nurse, which means she has time to look after everyone except for me”

Tom’s mind flashed between various places, high amongst them being a longing to be back over on the Slytherin table, and fleeting thoughts of how he could get away with murdering her such that he didn’t ever have to spend time in her company again.

“Aww, I’m sure they’d be with you if they could”, said Sofia, sympathetically.

“Well they don’t”, said Myrtle, “and here I am”

“Still, not the worst place to be for Christmas”, said Isidor, clearly looking to raise the cheer a little, and then looking to Tom, saying “So... what’s a Slytherin doing here? I don’t mean here at our table, at which you’re very welcome, but I mean, well...” - he gestured at the empty Slytherin table, his meaning clear: Slytherin is full of rich Purebloods who have families waiting for them at home.

“Ah, that’s simple: I’m an orphan; I don’t have anywhere to go”

This revelation usually prompted either nosey enquiries, or annoying efforts at looking out for emotional needs that he did not in fact have, or a combination of the above.

Refreshingly amongst the Ravenclaws it did neither, and after an “Oh, right then, that explains it”, it even silenced them for a couple of minutes, before conversation resurfaced and continued down other tracks.

Despite keeping an eye out for her, Tom did not see Jana again until the next day, whereupon she explained having missed Christmas dinner while looking after Hagrid, who had been in a terrible state after receiving an owl mid Christmas morning informing him that his father had died.

Quite why this was Jana’s problem was beyond Tom, but it was clear that Hagrid had been very sad about it, not to mention in something of a state of shock as his father had kept the sickness secret from him. The scene in Jana’s thoughts, of Hagrid wailing like an immense baby about how he’d have stayed to be with him if he’d known, was really quite displeasing to behold.

Jana’s inexplicable concern for an oversized first-year’s wellbeing notwithstanding, she did still remember Tom’s birthday on New Year’s Eve. Following her trend of very hit-and-miss decisions regards presents, this time she gave him a mood cactus, an ugly plant that would change its behaviour in accordance with its owner’s mood.

“People give people flowers as presents, but when you think about it, cactuses are so much better”, she opined happily.

“Cacti”, said Tom. “Why?”

“Well, flowers need lots of love and attention and still wither and die quite quickly unless you use special Charms. The cactus on the other hand is small and spikey, can look after itself, is ferocious in the face of attackers, and yet still has gooey sweet stuff on the inside”

The mood cactus reflected Tom’s appraisal of this all too well.

“Oh come on”, said Jana, “I think it’s a good present. Hey, have you got me anything for my birthday tomorrow?”, she asked, with a reprisal of enthusiasm.

“No”

“Oh. Well, you can still have some of my birthday cake if you want; I got it today from Aunt Marte”

“Is she dead or alive, by the way?” asked Tom, conversationally.

“Alive, why wouldn’t she be?” replied Jana, concerned.

“It said in the paper that Manchester and the surrounding area was bombed to Hell and back this week, and obviously she lives near there. Granted, they also said the same about Whitechapel, and I’m quite sure my place is still standing, regretfully”

“Oh, the Blitz... Manchester did get hit quite badly, but she lives out in the countryside and nothing fell near the cottage. Your place is definitely safe, then?”

“Slughorn put all sorts of Spells on the place”, said Tom. “It’ll be fine. Probably saved the Muggles’ lives, as St. Paul’s got hit, which is right nearby”

“That’s good”, said Jana. “I wish the Ministry of Magic would put Enchantments like that over everyone’s houses and keep everyone safe”

“Well, if they did that, it’d be basically ending the Muggles’ war for them and deciding the outcome by magical means, not to mention revealing Wizardkind for what we are: powerful enough to make their greatest conflicts look like child’s play”

“That sounds like Grindelwald... On second thoughts, maybe they’re best just sticking out the Blitz as they are. They’re doing alright, I think; just a matter of keeping their heads down and putting out fires”

“Which reminds me”, said Tom, “do you know how to Conjure lightning?”

“No, why?”

“Thought you might find it fun. I’ll teach you; how’s that for making up for not getting you a birthday present?”

“That sounds great!”, enthused Jana, thoughts of global politics forgotten in a moment upon the presentation of something glamorous and dangerous to do.

## Chapter Thirteen

### *The Highs and Lows of Respectability*

Such frivolities would not last forever, of course, and even once mastered, certainly Lightning Conjunction was not a Spell they'd continue to get away with using anywhere near Hogwarts during term time, when the place had a full complement of staff.

Consequently, while they'd had a good time not quite blasting each other to cinders with lightning bolts, now that everyone was back at school, it was time for a reprisal of focus on lessons and classwork; the end-of-year exams seeming much nearer now that they were this side of the New Year.

Not that academia was everyone's topmost priority, of course; the second weekend back included the first Quidditch match of 1941, and this was a hotly contested Hufflepuff vs Gryffindor affair, and while the Badgers put on a fine display of talent after clearly having trained hard, Seth Halbert was not a patch on Jana, and it was the Lions who went home victorious, putting them a place ahead of Slytherin in the Quidditch Cup standings.

This dire situation would preoccupy many for the following fortnight, until everything they thought was important suddenly shifted in their minds, when Headmaster Dippet announced that the school would this year be having a Valentine's Day Ball, open to all students, albeit with staggered curfews according to school year. Hogwarts had not had such a Ball in recent years, but those older students who remembered the last one told such tales that made it quite understandable that Dippet had been wary about permitting another, and was only just relenting some years later.

As the clamorous throng made their way out from the Hall, Tom caught up with Marca, and tapped her on the shoulder.

"So, shall we?"

"Sorry?", she replied, apparently unsure what he was talking about.

"Ball. We need dates. Shall we go together?"

She looked him up and down appraisingly, as though she didn't see him every day.

"Alright. But right now we have Potions, so, shall we?"

"Yes, let's", said Tom with a smile. Not much further on their way, it was Tom who received a hand on his own shoulder, but this time it was Tiernan, who had got slightly separated from Tom in the crowd.

"Did you just ask Marca to the Ball?" asked Tiernan, showing better than usual perceptivity, and gesturing ahead of them at Marca.

"Yes", replied Tom.

"And?"

"Erm... Just Marca", confirmed Tom, unsure where Tiernan was going with that.

"No, I mean, what did she say?"

"She agreed, obviously, and then reminded me unnecessarily about our timetable", said Tom.

"Huh", mused Tiernan.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing, it's just... Hard to imagine her, you know, with an actual person"

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she’s just... I don’t know... Doesn’t seem like the girlfriend type”

“Who said anything about girlfriend? It’s just a ball. We need dates.”

“Whoops, sorry”, said Tiernan, now crashing into Marca whom he had apparently forgotten was not far in front of them, and who had paused in the corridor, perhaps listening to their conversation as the crowd had now thinned out notably.

“And who do you think is the girlfriend type?”, she asked, confirming the suspicion.

“Uhm... I don’t know... Other girls, maybe?” offered Tiernan, at a loss.

“Well then, I suggest you find *other girls* before they are all taken. You do not want to end up with Ermentrude Smith, I think”

“I wouldn’t”, said Tiernan, defiantly.

“You wouldn’t?”

“I’m a Lestrangle; I can have my pick”

“Not if everyone is asked already”

“Marca, the announcement was made not ten minutes ago; I think my chances will survive me putting it off until the evening”.

As he measured beetle eyes in Slughorn’s class, Tiernan sought Tom’s opinion on the previously discussed matter, with Marca now at the next workbench along, the other side of the central aisle of the classroom, and with her the other side of Antonin, unlikely to rejoin their conversation now.

“So, whom *should* I ask?”

“Whoever you want”, said Tom, with a shrug. “Like you said, girls will be queueing up to be with you for your family name”

“Maybe, but that means the pressure’s on to live up to it, you know”

“So?”

“It’s alright for you”, sighed Tiernan, “you don’t have name to live up to, all the expectations; everything you do is brilliant”

“I don’t see what my less prestigious name has to do with my brilliance”, said Tom, irked at the mention of his own situation.

“Oh, never mind. I just hate having to do things for duty instead of because I want to do them”

“Well... who would you take if it weren’t for familial duty?” asked Tom, curious now.

“I don’t know”, said Tiernan, whose mind flitted between various Slytherin girls, but without settling on anyone in particular. “To be honest I’d rather just go and have fun and treat it as a jolly good party without all this dating nonsense. But I can’t, because I’m a Lestrangle”, he added, bitterly.

“You can add those beetle eyes now”, said Tom. Although they were now each working on their own potions, rather than in pairs as such, Tiernan was still in the habit of relying on Tom to tell him what to do. Tiernan sighed, and resignedly scraped the beetle eye paste that he had made into his cauldron.

Nearby, Valerie Clemence was talking with Jana:

“Are we supposed to keep the heat on, like that?”, she asked.

“What? Oh, er, no, thanks” Jana replied distractedly, turning down the heat under her cauldron. Not like her to be anything less than the very model of modern potioning perfection, and Tom pierced into her mind to see what was going on there:

*Come on, Jana, get it together, she thought to herself, try not to make a fool of yourself for once.*

Making a fool of herself in Potions would indeed be novel, thought Tom, but as her thoughts now strayed to him, it became obvious that she was rather trying to evaluate her prospects of Tom asking her to the Ball. Now, as Tom had already asked Marca, who was a respectable option, without it even having occurred to him to ask someone outside of his own House, let alone a Mudblood, her chances were precisely zero, but she naturally didn't know this, hence her inner turmoil.

Tom mused over how respectable or not it would have been to ask her. A Mudblood, but clearly of exceptional talent in at least a few magical Arts. A school hero, after her performance as a champion in the International Potions Championship last year, and a star Quidditch player too. But then, that was for Gryffindor, so may count for negative points in her respectability factor when it came to a Slytherin's dating options.

When it came to assessing someone's worth, there was sometimes a kind of tug-of-war between talent and Blood Status; it had seemed to him that the former should outweigh the latter; after all, look at himself, likely a Halfblood, contrasted with Abraxas or Tiernan, or Emlyn even, Pureblood wizards of exceptionally mediocre skill. But then, in an ideal world, the perfect date would logically be someone with Blood Purity *and* talent, so his instinctive choice of Marca ticked both boxes there.

He flicked his rocking knife, and it began neatly chopping the stargrass he had placed before it.

By the time the first Hogsmeade Weekend of the new year came about, there was much chatter amongst the girls of Hogwarts on the topic of plans regards their attire for the upcoming Valentine's Day Ball. In many cases they had ideas already of what they wanted; in others, they merely enthused over which shops they would patronize. Of course, options were limited in Hogsmeade, but for such an occasion as half the school wanting to buy ballgowns, it seemed probable that one or two extra purveyors of such things would make the effort to set up shop temporarily in the village.

The boys, while by and large less preoccupied by the task, were also clearly going to have to furnish themselves with some manner of appropriate robes, and nor did Tom's dwindling funds seem likely to be up to the task of acquiring him anything especially worthwhile.

“You will require dress robes in black”, said Marca, as Tom prepared to head out into the village. “A Vantamantine weave would be good, but also quite acceptable also would be something in raven black, onyx or obsidian weave. Spider or midnight black are probably better to be avoided, or else you may appear as a poorer student. Crow black is of course distinctive, but I think that you do not want to become blended with passing teachers who may also wear crow or coal black, so do not wear that either. Ink black would be very respectable. Ebony black and pitch black will probably be represented the most

commonly, but as they are untimely classics, they would also be reasonable options for you”

Tom looked at her wordlessly.

“I suggest you to find something and then show it to me”, she sighed. “I will inform you, whether it is acceptable or not. Then you can keep it or return it.”

“What about you?”

“I have my dress already, that will arrive by owl soon enough. It is snow blue, and of a sheer design, in Tutovijan silk”

“Snow blue?”

“It is of very pale colour. Almost white”

“You know what, Marca? I really don’t care. I’m sure you’ll look fine”

“Obviously. If the fit is not perfect, I should be able to alter it myself, in any case. I know, that there is a frost blue seam that runs around here, which draws it in slightly, such that it will be less noticeable my hate-worthy absence of bust arrival despite that now I have accomplished fourteen years”

“Delightful”, said Tom. “And, you’re fourteen now? When was your birthday?”

“September the third”, she replied.

“Hmm. Oh well, I’ll remember next year maybe”

“And then you will probably give to me another gift to benefit yourself?”, Marca proposed, referencing what had been his Christmas present to her, a copy of *Teaching the Unteachable Arts*.

“Are you complaining if I want you to be better at things?”

“It is of benefit to both”, conceded Marca, “I merely notice your intention, that I become better at teaching Occlumency”

“Well, indeed I’d rather that our practice sessions became more fruitful”

“In the category of practice sessions, we will also need to schedule time for dancing”

“Dancing?”

“You have asked me to the Ball; it will be necessary to dance; you probably have not much skill so far, and would prefer to learn, than make necessary that I use an assortment of Spells to make your body dance”

Not enamoured with the prospect of Marca controlling his body in addition to being able to access his mind, Tom agreed to spend time in the evenings going through some dances with her. He had a passing knowledge of several already, from their studies of the very Charms she was now threatening to use, but would need to actually be able to put them into practice.

Right now, however, he was late to meet Tiernan, who had gone ahead into the village and would be waiting for him with the others at the Lonely Broomstick, from where he had said he’d show Tom the best place to get robes. Tom was skeptical, as it didn’t seem likely Tiernan’s knowledge would run to finding value for money, but there was no harm in going out, and even just viewing them would give him a better idea of what he was looking for if he went on to buy something by Owl Order, for which there would still be plenty of time, as Valentine’s day was not until the Friday after next.

“You said you were thinking about asking Julia to the Ball?”, asked Tom, aside to Tiernan in order to avoid being heard by others in the crowded room. Tiernan had not in fact said it, so far as Tom could recall, but he had nevertheless been thinking of it.

“Maybe, why?”

Tom indicated across to the Lonely Broomstick’s bar area, which at this time of day on a Hogsmeade weekend was naturally filled with Hogwarts students.

Near the table where Julia sat with a few fellow Slytherins, Fergus Lughlan had approached Julia and was now clearly - clearly to Tom at least - about to ask her to the Ball himself.

“Lughlan is about to beat you to it”

“Balls”, said Tiernan. “Alright, you didn’t see me do this, but... *Brocababbel vernicus*” he muttered, with a jab and a twist of his wand.

“Paint, salad wetwall skatey” said Lughlan brightly, opening his conversation with Julia, with a smile.

“Huh? Say again?” replied Julia, confused.

“Bobbin-reel shankfluff? Blue singe inkwell?” essayed Lughlan, anew.

“I’m sorry, I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, is this some sort of code?”, asked Julia.

“Sausages, page!” said Lughlan, affronted. “Spark deigned is or, bergamot flutterby!”

“Erm... Are you feeling alright?”, asked Julia, as Lughlan’s friend Boothby now tugged at his sleeve.

“Fergus, you’re talking rubbish, did you take a Babbling Beverage or something?”

“Waterwheel slide function!” replied Lughlan irritably. Then, with a frown and a note of comprehension, he added: “Blackboard? Feast regrettably?”

“You’re not making any sense at all, it’s just random words”, said Boothby, with a half-laugh.

“Proclivity!” muttered Lughlan, before turning to Julia, and saying, in a sincere but slightly plaintive tone, “Bricked drawers, sun tangle flakes”. When this manifestly had no impact on Julia who looked as confused as ever, he concluded with the single sorrow-laden word “Soapslug”, and strode off, dismissing Boothby grumpily as he did so.

“That was good”, assessed Tom.

“Thanks”, said Tiernan. “I’m not actually sure it wears off of its own accord yet, but I’m sure Tegner can sort him out either way”

“Meaning, of course, that you’ll have Cursed him for no greater good than mere entertainment, if you don’t now follow through and actually ask Julia yourself”

“Yeah, there is that”, said Tiernan, resignedly - “But how? I mean, a right tit I’ll look if she already has someone, and if she says no, then it’ll tell anyone else that they weren’t a top choice... I should ask her in private”

“Private is... relative”, said Tom. “This conversation is private yet we’re surrounded by plenty of people. On the other hand, ask any one of them for a private word alone, and half of the others around them will immediately want to know what it’s about, and will

guess if they can't actually find out for sure. And be assured that they'll guess the most scandalous thing they can, if they do"

"What then? Do what you did, and just ask even if it's in the middle of a crowd? But it was different with you and Marca; the thing had only just been announced and you knew she wasn't already taken"

"I'll get her to come over to us both", said Tom, "Then we'll just be friends having a butterbeer before shopping; do try to look casual about it though otherwise the ruse will be obvious"

"How am I supposed to look casual?"

"I don't know, just look sort of vacant like you do in most lessons. Pretend you're in History of Magic for a moment"

Ignoring Tiernan's entirely inappropriate look in response to this suggestion, Tom gave Julia the sense of being stared at; easy to do by accident, and even easier to do intentionally as he now did. She looked his way, and he indicated for her to come join them.

"Hello", she said simply upon arrival, unsure of Tom's intentions.

"Sit down", said Tom with a smile, indicating to where Tiernan was sat opposite him. "Tiernan, move up; let your Ball date sit down", he added, catching them both completely off-guard, as both reacted in surprise and offered protestations, even as Tiernan was halfway through moving along as instructed, and Julia was halfway through moving in to sit down as instructed.

"What? I... We're not..."

"Oh I'm sorry", said Tom, "Are you not going to the Ball together? I had just thought you would surely be the obvious pairing; please do forgive me"

"No, we're not a pair", said Julia, "Not that I wouldn't be thrilled, of course, but, no, we're not" she added, blushing noticeably.

"Aren't you going with whathisname, in any case?" asked Tiernan, with a practiced air of polite social enquiry. Thrown into a ready-made set-up, albeit admittedly somewhat at the deep end, he was doing just fine so far.

"No, not yet"

"Then would you kindly consent to let me do you the honour of accompanying me to the Ball with me, in fact actually?" asked Tiernan, immediately aware of how badly he'd bungled that question due to nerves, and dearly hoping that she hadn't noticed.

"Yes" answered Julia, with a nervous laugh of her own.

"Oh, my intuition wasn't too terrible after all, then" said Tom, smiling warmly and feeling as though he ought to be pronouncing them man and wife now. "Well, I shalln't impose", he added, "I do need to go and look at dress robes myself, so I'll leave you two in each others' good care". He stood up to go, and made a slight bow of farewell.

"No, but wait" said Tiernan, before stopping, unsure of where he was actually going with that; he had merely reacted in panic

"Don't go on my account", said Julia, "I should get back to Meredith and the others anyway, we're going dress-shopping, unless you..." she broke off, turning back to Tiernan for some clue as to whether he wanted her to now do something with him.

"I... suggest we both go get our respective dress-things, and see each other back at the castle if we don't bump into each other before"

"Perfect", said Julia, looking happy at the affirmation, before rejoining her other friends, doubtlessly to share the tale with them first of all.

"Well, that was... At least it didn't go too badly", observed Tiernan, after she had departed.

"What the Hell was that exactly that you asked her, again?", laughed Tom.

"Ohhh", groaned Tiernan, "I have no idea; my brain just flew out somewhere"

"Still, the deed is done; you have your date"

"Yes, I certainly owe you for that", said Tiernan, "We should probably head off though; let's go to Wiswitwear, shall we?"

"Whichwhatwhere?", asked Tom, simultaneously seeking the answer from Tiernan's mind, which held an expensive-looking clothing shop in mind.

"No, Wiswitwear", said Tiernan. "It's either *wis* like Wizard, *wit* like Witch, and *wear* like the clothes one wears, or else *wis* like wise, *wit* like, well, wit, and *wear*, like again, the clothes one wears"

"I don't think I know it. How come I haven't seen it?"

"You probably just haven't passed it; it's up that hill off from the side of the main street, over that way", he said, indicating in its general direction - "I went there once before, with my parents, it's at least as good as Madam Malkin's in Diagon Alley, even if probably a bit overpriced because of the lack of competition up here"

"I'll certainly look with you", said Tom, "Though it seems likely I may need to get my robes by Owl Order if they're so pricey here"

"They won't be as good", said Tiernan. "Get yours with me; you deserve better and I owe you a favour, so I'm sure we can square you away with some robes that are a bit higher class than you'd get from an Owl Order company"

"You're offering to pay?", asked Tom, quite sure this was Tiernan's meaning, but wanting him to confirm it - not that he was sure he'd accept. He did not want the dynamic between them to become imbalanced in Tiernan's favour.

"Well, yes", replied Tiernan. "I'll just tell the shop assistant that I owe you a debt and to put your order on my account - or rather, my family's account"

"Won't your parents care about that?", asked Tom.

"They probably won't notice, or will just think the prices went up", said Tiernan. "I don't think my dad knows what anything costs, and my mum, well, she'll be so distracted by me having a date that she won't care about a small financial fiddle like that"

"Well, there's some kind of logic to that", agreed Tom. "Alright, let's do it"

Heading out into the chilly air from the warmth of the Lonely Broomstick, the boys adjusted their scarves from "decorative order" (loosely draped over their shoulders) to "eighteen-sixteen order" (folded in half, looped around the neck, and the ends passed through the loop, to form the warmest possible arrangement). This latter got its name from the year in which the Global Dementor Pandemic occurred, covering much of the world in depression, cold, death, and decay - not to mention confused Muggles who had no idea what was happening and why.

For Wizardkind, they did all that magic-wielders could do; it had been an existential battle of its era, as anyone who could cast a Patronus Charm did their best to protect themselves and their nearest and dearest, while national governments sought to conscript them to do battle where they were considered most needed, instead. Naturally, those who were press-ganged into service quickly lost their ability to cast a Patronus, as they themselves succumbed to depression and anguish, with many of them suffering the Dementor's Kiss and never getting as far as making the return to their loved ones whom they had left with scant protection, in all likelihood to the same fate.

For Muggles, they did all that Muggles could do; they suffered, prayed, suffered some more, and those who had food raised the price of it for those who did not.

The Global Dementor Pandemic strengthened the Wizarding World, in Tom's view, not only by excising the weak and the foolish souls from their midst, but also by uniting the world's magical folk against a common enemy. When he had learned about it in History of Magic, he had been inspired by it, and half-hoped for something similar to occur again.

Maybe Grindelwald could be useful in more ways than one, or maybe Tom would have to grow up to arrange everything himself. In an absolutely ideal world, the threat that united Wizardkind would be Muggles themselves, the problem was painting them as dangerous when they were merely contemptible pretenders to the throne of civilization.

"Should have brought brooms for this hill, eh?" joked Tiernan, as they neared the top of it.

"It does rather incentivise learning to Apparate", said Tom. "Any idea how to go about that, or even whom to ask?"

"No idea", said Tiernan. "But there was a piece in the Daily Prophet about how the Ministry might suspend Apparition testing because of the war"

"One would think they'd want more people able to Apparate" reasoned Tom.

"That's exactly it", said Tiernan. "It's the testing they'll be suspending, if they do it - meaning we can all go ahead and Apparate without licences"

"I definitely look forward to that", said Tom, coming to a halt outside the shop, which bore signage saying *Wiswitwear* in large golden letters - "But for now, it seems we're where we want to be, so shall we?" he suggested, gesturing to the door.

After a good deal of unnecessary discussion, the boys returned to Hogwarts with dress robes in order; Tom was pleased that they passed Marca's inspection - though he had considered that if they hadn't, she could jolly well go and change them herself, so her approval worked out as well for her as it did for him.

Preparations for Valentine's day were not, however, absolutely all-consuming for everyone, as there was to be fair distraction the weekend before it; namely, Quidditch. After losing quite so badly to Gryffindor earlier in the season, and Gryffindor having such a clean record of wins, Team Slytherin were quite keen to bring home the win today against Ravenclaw, which would bring Slytherin up to level with Gryffindor, tie-breakers notwithstanding.

"Belinda, catch that Snitch today or die trying", exhorted Violet in the Great Hall at breakfast time. "Do what it takes, understood?"

“Clear as an undetectable poison”, replied Belinda. “Which is not my strategy, but anyway, point taken. I’ll make Fame wish I *had* slipped something in her drink”

“Good. My last year at this, so I expect to take us to victory. I can block the Quaffle all day long, but it won’t mean a thing if Fame gets the Snitch before our Chasers rack up the one-fifty”.

“She’ll be in the Hospital Wing sooner than that”, smirked Walburga, repositioning her Beater’s bat on the table.

“Good, see to it”, rejoined Violet. “And she’s such a *prima donna*, look, someone sent her flowers”, she added, as a little way up the Ravenclaw table, an over-burdened owl indeed delivered a large bunch of pretty flowers in delicate pinks and whites with a few bits of deeper purple thrown in.

“Oh, those are from us”, said Lucretia with a slight laugh. “Asphodel, Monkshood, Dragonswort, and a get-well-soon card signed from both of us”, she explained, gesturing to herself and Walburga.

Tom looked back to Fame in time to see her smile falter upon reading the card. She shot a doubtful glance over towards the Slytherin table, before turning to discuss the card with her Beaters, Colin Merle and Howard Ingram. With Tabitha Plaxy (who had formerly been a Chaser for Ravenclaw) now having left school, Ozzy Fame was the only girl currently on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, as Plaxy had been replaced with one Trispen Hodnet who had not yet distinguished himself particularly in Ravenclaw’s other match so far this year, which had been vs Hufflepuff.

Out on the pitch, injuries were in the end surprisingly minimal despite best efforts; any disappointment about that, however, cast aside in favour of celebrations, after Belinda caught the Snitch to secure a Slytherin victory, making her very much the House hero for the whole of the next week, all the way up to the next big distraction.

## Chapter Fourteen

### *Valentine's Day Ball*

They filed in to the Great Hall, mostly two-by-two. Marca, for her part, had taken Tom's arm, but otherwise looked her usual aloof self. In contrast to this, most of the couples were making more of a show of coupliness, whether intentionally or otherwise.

Julia was clinging quite closely onto Tiernan, who seemed unusually ill-at-ease. He smiled awkwardly when Tom caught his eye, and then looked around him, as though looking for someone or something, but whoever or whatever it might be was not at all clear to Tom.

Morgan Rosier and Octavian Nott were flanking Belinda, who had linked arms with both of them. The three of them were having a distinctly jolly time of it; Belinda was clearly smug to have captured the attentions of not one but two older boys, and popular ones at that; Morgan and Octavian meanwhile seemed quite pleased with themselves to be turning heads with their silly arrangement flying in the face of expectations while not actually breaking any rules. Tom didn't doubt that their shared attraction to Belinda was sincere in and of itself, but being privy to their thoughts as Belinda was not, he could observe quite directly that what was most important to them right now was the general social hubbub, not the girl between them.

The Hall itself was sporting rose petals fluttering down from the level of the floating candles, each vanishing a little above head-height, or rather, above head-height for everyone except for Hagrid, who was looking quite a sight next to a cluster of Gryffindors, but predictably alone. He tried ineffectually to waft the petals away from his face with a hand, but obviously there was a limitless supply of them, so this effort was doomed to failure. He was going to be in for a long and trying night, if he didn't find a magical solution, or think of sitting down. It wasn't like anyone would be dancing with him anyway.

There was music, being played by ostensibly unhandled instruments up on what would usually be the teachers' daïs. It had a catchy rhythm, but Tom had no idea what this beat was supposed to be, or how one would dance to it.

"It is called Swing", said Marca, answering his unasked question. "Let us not dance to it"

"Alright then", said Tom. "I wasn't even looking at you that time", he added, in an undertone. Marca gave him a patronizing look.

"You were gazing at the stage and frowning, and as far as I know you have no musical education beyond that what I have taught to you, so an explanation seemed to be in order"

"Thank you for that summary", said Tom, perhaps a little more acidly than was merited. After all, her words were true, and in all likelihood intended only as a straightforward explanation, rather than a criticism of his poor upbringing. He just hated the disparity, not to mention his apparent readability even without magic. Marca opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by a Gryffindor boy, hand outstretched.

"May I have the pleasure of this dance?"

"No, you may not", replied Marca curtly.

“Right you are then”, said the Gryffindor, a little taken aback by her manner but obviously aiming for a look of graciousness nevertheless. “I’ll leave you to your... yeah”, he said, trailing off, and also turning away now before heading over to a couple of Hufflepuff girls who didn’t appear to have a date.

“Are we going to be bothered by people all evening, do you think?” wondered Tom out loud.

“Probably”, said Marca with a nod, “but let us find drinks, to ward off people from asking us to dance, and await other music”

“A good plan”, said Tom, gesturing to the large ring-shaped table in the middle of the room, covered alternately in flowers, snacks, and drinking goblets. Above the table, also in a ring, more snacks and goblets circled slowly in midair. The topmost flying victuals would be out of their reach - physically, at least - but probably not out of the reach of the eldest students, or the teachers, or of course Hagrid, whom Tom now noted was eyeing up the offerings.

“Great place, Hogwarts”, said Hagrid, to nobody in particular. Tom agreed, but wasn’t about to engage him in conversation about it.

In the middle of it all was a fountain that spurted what seemed to be the only selection of drink, filling the otherwise empty goblets as people picked them up. Tom shook his head as he envisaged the various things that could go wrong with this set-up. He also wondered how refills would work, but for the moment, he and Marca picked up a silver goblet each, causing the fountain to shoot drink into them in the process. Upon doing so, it became obvious that they were in fact not silver, but white gold. Tom gave a slight laugh to himself that he, poor as he generally was, had become quite an expert on precious metals and gemstones, while at Hogwarts. This was mostly on account of the study of their properties and uses in Alchemy classes, of course, but still.

“To good health”, said Marca, “and to being left in peace and quiet by predacious Gryffindors while we have drinks in our hands”

“You mentioned audacious Gryffindors?” said Jana brightly, appearing to the side of them, her date in turn to the side of her; it was Brandon Gorri.

“Predacious, actually”, corrected Tom.

“Oh... Er... You all know each other, don’t you?” continued Jana, recovering her stride, and gesturing now between Brandon and the two Slytherins.

“Of course we all know each other, Jana”, laughed Brandon.

“You look very nice”, said Jana to Marca, gesturing. Marca looked down at her dress and then back at Jana, as though wondering why she was telling her this.

“Thank you. You look... Like a Quidditch player disguised as some kind of flower”, returned Marca, uncertainly. There was a moment’s silence between them. “A lovely flower, I’m sure”, she added. Jana smiled, or rather grimaced.

“Let’s get drinks, shall we?”, said Brandon, tugging at Jana now, who took this escape option quite readily.

“See you about”, she said to Tom with something closer to an actual smile again this time, as she moved to collect a drink from the fountain with Brandon.

Before long, the music changed, and became a lively waltz, prompting Marca to prompt Tom to lead her into a dance. He nodded, bowed, took her by the hand, and then - a couple of steps later - also by the waist. He smiled; this was more familiar territory now.

Naturally, they attracted some attention while dancing, as there were not too many couples who actually danced, and in all likelihood most could not. It was fun to show off a little, but also it was simply pleasant to engage in an activity that was free from having to juggle the social tendencies of everyone around them.

"Pity that this is not a masquerade ball", said Marca quietly, as a slower dance permitted conversation. "You could have shown off your craftsmanship"

"I rather think it might have required a bit of a remodel", replied Tom. "Still, everything under wraps, let's keep it that way"

"Is it?", asked Marca, locking eyes with him a moment before breaking that contact.

"Look at us", said Tom. "Do you think either of us really need extra masks?"

"You confuse me", said Marca, halting suddenly.

"Dance, or you'll confuse everyone else", said Tom. They resumed dancing, though Tom did not immediately clarify his meaning. He sought, at the same time, to both keep Marca out from his mind, and also to find a way to convey what he had meant, that really they were both just things behind masks. But then again, maybe she was a much more human thing behind her mask than he was behind his.

"You did not make a mask for me", said Marca, who had of course been following her own train of thought as Tom pursued his.

"You didn't need one", replied Tom. "Do you want one?"

"I would appreciate the magical artifact", said Marca, "But it was about your words, that I thought".

"Which words?"

"Extra masks. I do not have a mask to which... upon which... in extra to which..." she trailed off, searching for the construction that was not forthcoming. Tom paraphrased for her.

"A first mask that'd make the next mask count as extra"

"Yes, that, unless you do not mean literary...ry?"

"Literally"

"Yes, that. So you mean indeed not literally?"

"Well, you do hide more behind your mask than Belinda ever does behind hers, for instance", suggested Tom.

"It is quite an extreme comparison, but truly enough, if we speak of what a person keeps to themselves, and what they announce to everyone"

"With or without Legilimency and Occlumency", observed Tom.

"Well... to have both between two people is the same as to not have either, in the result anyway", argued Marca.

"In the result", echoed Tom, "Nothingness. In the process, on the other hand, it just results in frustration all around"

“Very much like this Valentine’s Day Ball will probably achieve for most people present”, opined Marca, prompting Tom to laugh out loud at the shift in thoughts-made-apparent that she chose to share conversationally.

After the waltz came a cha-cha, and after that, another waltz. Thereafter, they took a little break from dancing, and as they stopped, Tom noticed Jana gazing at them with rapt attention. Upon making eye contact, she looked swiftly away, and then looked around her, probably for Brandon, who was now nowhere to be seen.

“Hey, you two can really dance” enthused Julia, as they rejoined a group of mostly Slytherins. “I really can’t, but Tiernan makes up for it”

“Kind of”, said Tiernan, perhaps somewhat bashfully.

“Don’t be so modest, you’re a great dancer”, said Julia.

“Oh, then we will have to try together”, said Marca to Tiernan, “If you do not mind”, she added, to Tom.

“Not at all”, said Tom. Julia smiled again a little too suddenly, after she had lost her natural smile upon the mention of Marca stealing her boy, even if just for a dance or two.

“Do you Foxtrot?” asked Tiernan, as the next song began.

“I do”, said Marca, and the pair of them made their way into an open space.

“Erm, do you want to...?” began Julia uncertainly, but Tom answered already:

“I think I’ll sit this one out, thank you”, he said, with a smile. Julia, being thus rebuffed, rejoined the now diminished huddle of Slytherins. Tom, for his part, strolled to less busy spot and watched Marca and Tiernan. Tiernan’s dancing was a little simplistic, but then, it was a Foxtrot, and Tom wasn’t sure what else he’d do with it either. He knew the steps, and it was reminiscent of a Waltz, but the music threw out half of what he knew how to do, by no longer having the same rhythm. He laughed to himself as Tiernan momentarily lost the beat and had to re-find it.

Curious as to where Tiernan’s mind would go while dancing with Marca, Tom connected to it across the crowd.

*One two three four one two three four balls two three four dum do dee four one two three four troll poo sweep floor oops “Sorry!” three four find a space four...*

He switched to trying to penetrate Marca’s mind, but to no avail, and nor did her expression yield any clues. Or maybe that was a clue, as he knew she did sometimes smile or frown, that she was presently not finding any reason to do either. Perhaps more likely, she did indeed find reason to frown, but also resolved to make the best of a bad lot as Tiernan clumsily navigated the room and mostly avoided standing on her feet.

Tom glanced through the other dancers, or rather more commonly, pairs of students tick-tocking around the Great Hall, neither willing to admit that neither of them can really dance. He reflected on how people could possibly have gone quite so unprepared, as though they didn’t know this would happen. Musing on this, he saw Jana making her way over to him, weaving alone now through the crowd. She smiled.

“Your date’s been stolen”, she said, upon arriving to him.

“Yes”, said Tom. “Where’s yours?”

“Also stolen” replied Jana dejectedly, with a glance over to where Brandon and a girl in a blue dress were now wrapped around each other. “Remember, I said she goes through boys like... Well, I don’t know like what”

“Oh, it’s Ozzy Fame”, noted Tom, out loud.

“You didn’t recognise her?”

“No”, shrugged Tom. “Not a very good view, is it?” Jana seemed at a loss for an answer to that particular question.

“I think she used a Beautification Potion as well”, she replied.

“As well? Did you?”, asked Tom.

“Don’t I look different?”

“You’re... a bit taller?”

“No, that’s just these stupid shoes”

“Hmm. Your hair’s still the same”. Really, beyond that she was wearing a ballgown, Tom was pushed to identify anything else different from her usual appearance.

“Yes, I know, but generally?”

“You’re... short and stand very close to people?”

“I give up”, she said, “I’m supposed to look beautiful”

“What’s beautiful, though?” mused Tom aloud. Jana gave him a contemplative look.

“Do I stand too close?”, she asked, drawing closer still, and very tentatively taking him by both hands.

“Too close for what?” asked Tom with a frown, concerned with where this seemed to be leading. It did not appear that Jana had dancing in mind.

“Good question”, said Jana more quietly, and with a tug of his hands, closed the gap between their bodies completely. Alright, this would not do now, thought Tom. Time for a swift exit. He glanced around for Marca, and not seeing her, looked back at Jana.

And then she kissed him.

Tom’s heart felt like it would pound right out of his chest, or was that just the lurching of his stomach? Jana’s eyes were closed, which meant she could not see the look of surprise on his face. He pulled back from her, but she just moved with him, blissfully unaware. Having wrested a hand free from her loving embrace, he was about to hit her on the head to disengage her, when she stopped kissing him as such, and bit his lip.

“Owwww!” was his only possible response, as he was momentarily unable to do anything more active for fear of tearing his lip.

“Ooh, I’m sorry”, said Jana, returning to reality very suddenly, with a fearful look.

“Oops, yeah, sorry... you’ve got a little bit of... I didn’t mean to”

Tom touched to his lip, and then looked at his hand, which now had the tiniest bit of blood on it. Great.

“Idiot”, he said, looking around. Mercifully, and much to his surprise, nobody seemed to be paying attention. Then he caught the gaze of Valerie Clemence, who apparently had been paying attention. She raised her eyebrows, and swiftly looked away. Even more great. He touched his lip again, and a second tiny bloodstain was transferred to his hand. Still bleeding then. He put his hand back and held it there this time.

“I’m so sorry”, said Jana, “I didn’t...”

"I don't need your sorriness" said Tom tersely, "I need my lip in one piece, and being sorry doesn't help in the slightest"

"Yeah, of course, sorry", said Jana, biting her own lip now, doubtlessly more gently than she had bitten his. "I'll fix it", she said, now producing her wand from her tiny handbag that was certainly much smaller than it.

"*Confervo*", she incanted, and Tom felt a slight tingling sensation in his lip. The tingling lingered. "I think that's fixed the skin", she said, reaching to touch it with her finger. Tom pulled back a little and touched it himself instead. No more blood this time. Jana smiled weakly. "How does it feel?"

"Tingly, but I don't care about that. How does it look?" - He peered into her mind as she regarded his face. Indeed his lip was no longer bleeding, but it looked sore and swollen now instead. This was scarcely an improvement; rather it had simply changed the problem.

"Not quite perfect yet", said Jana. "Ooh, I know what will work... Only, I... it's back at Gryffindor Tower"

"Well, that's no good to me, is it?"

"It will be though, come on, let's go get it"

"You want me... to leave the Ball... with you?"

"Well... yes?", she replied, somewhat hopefully.

Tom weighed up his options. The only clear alternative would be to wait here while Jana made the trip, but he'd rather not have to explain his injury to whoever might accost him in the meantime. There was an outside chance he'd be able to get something from the Hospital Wing, but he'd seen Tegner here in the Hall, and didn't know what he'd be looking for, should he sneak into the place by himself.

"Alright", he said. "Let's do it". He glanced across the crowd, momentarily catching sight of Marca catching sight of him - where had she been when he needed her? Still, one person potentially noticing their departure together was already too many, so a distraction was in order. He considered doing something with the floating party food, but opted instead for applying a magical pressure to the drinks fountain in the centre. There was an obligingly shocked reaction from the students nearest to it, as they were squirted with bubble juice in their most expensive clothes. "Now", he said to Jana, making his exit from the Hall.

## Chapter Fifteen

### *Patching Up*

Out in the Entrance Hall was - as per usual in the evenings - noticeably chilly after the warmth of the Great Hall. Also noticeable was a pair of students in one of the alcoves to the side. An instant later, they were slumped in the narrow space between the wall and a statue, as Tom turned on his heel, wand still in hand, to head up the central staircase.

"Tom? Are you alright?" asked Jana, alongside him.

"Yes, just want this fixed, that's all", said Tom.

"But Leonid and Katrina?"

"What?"

"You just Stunned them", Jana reminded him.

"Oh, them", said Tom, dismissively. "I didn't pressingly want to talk to them"

"I don't think they wanted to talk to you either; I think they were a bit distracted with each other"

"This way's quickest, right?", asked Tom. He was fairly sure, but if there was a shortcut, Jana would be more likely to know it. After all, while Tom knew where Gryffindor Tower was, he had never actually gone all the way there.

"Yeah", said Jana.

Emerging from the final staircase out onto the seventh floor, Tom momentarily hesitated.

"This way", said Jana, leading on. "And look, Tom, you know I'm really sorry about..."

"Forget about it"

Jana seemed to be about to reply, but either thought better of it, or else the words stuck in her throat; either way, the ensuing silence was not broken until a short way further down the corridor, when one of the portraits addressed them:

"Password?", asked a plump middle-aged Witch in a large square frame.

"Uhhh..." Jana and the portrait stared at each other for a moment; the portrait with a look of polite expectation, and Jana with a look of alarm. "Wingheart?", she offered, uncertainty.

"No", replied the portrait, unmoved.

"Balls..." muttered Jana under her breath.

"No", came the reply again, sounding bored.

"Squash-niffler something...? Come on, you know it's me", pleaded Jana.

"*Confundo*" said Tom, pointing his wand at the portrait. "The password is *idiotic lions*", he said, choosing at random.

"Yes, that's it", said the portrait in a slightly dazed tone, as it swung aside, revealing a passageway behind it.

"I didn't know you could Confund paintings", said Jana, looking at Tom, the open doorway, and the witch in the painting, who now looked very content indeed.

"Neither did I", said Tom, "But now we do. After you", he added, gesturing.

"Err... You want to come in?", she asked, hesitantly.

“Well, your things are through there, so yes”, said Tom.

“I’m really not supposed to let you in, you know”

“You didn’t. I let *you* in, remember?”, said Tom.

“Right” said Jana, now climbing through the large square hole in the wall, trying and failing to do it in a dignified fashion while wearing a ballgown.

“You have to climb through here every day?”, asked Tom rhetorically as he climbed through after her.

“Yep”, she replied, straightening her dress.

“Still, it’s not as bad as I’d expected up here”, observed Tom.

“Maybe I can pay you a return visit sometime”, said Jana, leading onwards through the largely circular room, “Now that I know paintings can be Confunded”

“Good luck with that; we don’t have a painting”

“Statue?”

“No”

“Suit of armour?”

“No”

“I give up; what do you have?”

“A more secure Common Room than yours”, said Tom. “Also larger”, he added, looking back across the room.

“It’s not all about size, you know”, said Jana. Tom gave her a withering look, and she continued on a more practical note: “I’ll go and get my blemish kit - you wait here”

“I’ll come with you” said Tom.

“No!” said Jana, looking startled at the prospect, and blocking his way from entering a narrow staircase heading up away from the main Common Room. “Sorry, I just mean, you’ll set the stairs off”

“Set the stairs off?”

“Yep, girls only on this staircase; it’s Enchanted. Sorry. I didn’t Enchant it”

“What happens if I...?”

“Alarms, klaxons, lights, slidey thing” said Jana, and Tom caught a glance of a memory of such, complete with Xavier Vermeil tumbling down.

“Well, hurry up then”, said Tom, dismissing her.

She returned promptly, and applied some liquid with a pipette, before taking up a small sponge and using that with some sharp-smelling ointment on it. After these things, whose application Tom had hated on the grounds of them being wet and smelly, Jana took out her wand, hopefully the final stage in her treatment of which she seemed so sure.

As Jana worked, and Tom contemplated what he’d do to her if she made things worse, there was a sound behind him - someone was entering the Common Room! In an instant, he had half turned around, and grabbed the most accessible wand, which was not his, but rather Jana’s. His hand now around hers, as her hand was still on it, he launched a Stunning Spell immediately at the intruder before they could get all the way inside. As the Spell made contact, the newcomer hit the floor of the corridor outside the Common Room.

“Valerie!” exclaimed Jana, rushing to check on her as Tom released his grip.

“Stop” commanded Tom, and Jana froze in her tracks.

“But...”

“Ssh” said Tom, and hauled Valerie’s unconscious body into the Common Room with his mind, and dumped it onto the carpet. Jana knelt down next to her, and pointed her wand at her.

“Stop”, commanded Tom again. Jana looked up. “No point in reviving her while I’m still here”

Jana seemed conflicted, but stood back up.

“Right”, she said, “I’m nearly finished with this”, she added, indicating to Tom’s lip. “Hang on, my hand’s all tingly after you cast a spell through it; I’m surprised my wand responded to you with my hand between yours and it”

“What’s the core?” asked Tom.

“Dragon heartstring”

“And this wood, this is... surely not elm?” he asked, incredulously.

“No, it’s sycamore”

“Really? Hmm. Hard to identify in this light. Makes more sense though.”

“Why?”

“Well, you must know elm only chooses Purebloods, for a start”

“No, that’s not true”, said Jana, “I mean, there’s... umm...” she trailed off, clearly unable to find an example of a Halfblood or Mudblood with an elm wand. “Hold still a minute”, she said, to draw attention away from her failure. Tom was already quite still, as she now finished fixing his lip. “There, you’re beautiful again”, she said.

“You are forgiven”, said Tom, checking it.

Jana approached him cautiously.

“Can I kiss it better? I promise to be gentle”

“No”, replied Tom. “See, this is why an elm wand will not choose you. You wouldn’t catch Abraxas asking if he can kiss someone after mucking things up so badly. You alternate between being truly brilliant and being an embarrassment to Wizardkind. Honestly you get more patience from me than most people do, but tonight you’re really out-doing yourself. And... why is your face wet?”

Upon Jana failing to immediately reply despite two attempts, Tom realized she was in fact crying. His initial thought had been that perhaps her face was sweaty or something.

“You have no idea how you make me feel, do you?” asked Jana.

“Wet?” offered Tom, “I mean, I can see that you’re crying; I’m not sure what you expect me to do about it. Wait, there’s that Cheering Charm, let me think a moment” he added, struggling to recall its mechanism - he had not used it since learning it in Charms two years ago.

“It’s not about Cheering Charms, Tom. What’s wrong with me?”

“You’re... an emotional mess?” suggested Tom.

Jana sat down on the floor at the edge of the room, and looked up at him, her eyes still full of tears.

“Would you... like me better if I were all calm and collected, like that block of ice you brought to the Ball?”

Tom reflected on this.

“Yes, I think so”, he said. “But if it’s not in your nature, it’s not in your nature, is it?”

“She’s so lucky”, said Jana.

“Because she’s not a gibbering wreck?” asked Tom. “At least, I hope she’s not; I did rather abandon her at the Ball, but I don’t think she’ll care; she’s not like you”

“No, I mean she’s lucky because she has you”

“Well, not right now she doesn’t, but I’m sure she’ll cope”, laughed Tom.

“But she does generally, I mean, you’re seeing her, aren’t you?”

“Not romantically, if that’s what you had in mind” - a quick look into Jana’s mind confirmed that yes, that was indeed what she had had in mind - “She just seemed a wholly respectable date when I required one”

“So there’s... nothing in it?”

“Definitely not”

“Huh” mused Jana, contemplating this new information. Some moments of silence passed, or rather, no words or further tears, and just the ticking of a grandfather clock that stood in an alcove in the wall.

“That time’s wrong”, said Tom.

“Yeah, I think it’s been Hexed so many times that it’s given up - you know, people duelling in the Common Room” replied Jana, her voice a bit hoarse. She took a sip of her drink from her shoulderbag. Her eyes visibly became less red, and now only the residual wetness on her face betrayed that she had been crying.

“You cry often enough that you carry around a remedy?”, asked Tom.

“No”, said Jana, “Well, it does the trick”

“You look much better for it; shall we head back to the Great Hall?” suggested Tom, gesturing.

“I don’t think I want to go back”, said Jana. “My date’s with someone else, you don’t want me, Valerie’s here; I think I’d rather just stay here”

“What will you tell Valerie?”

“I don’t know; what should I tell her?”

“You came here because you were sad because of your date being stolen”, said Tom with a shrug, “And Stunned her because you were startled, that was all”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense”, consented Jana.

It occurred to Tom that Valerie had seen him and Jana together back in the Great Hall, but at the end of the day, what could she do about it? Or at least, what would she do about it? Probably nothing, if Jana asked her to remain quiet on the topic.

“Well then”, concluded Tom with a smile, “I shall see you when I see you. Goodnight”

Jana looked like she wanted to say something else, but settled for merely returning his goodnight, as he made his departure, conjuring the portrait-hole closed behind him.

Upon his re-entry to the Great Hall, Tom didn’t have the benefit of a distraction to mask his arrival, but at least he was returning alone, an act far less likely to spawn rumours than if he had been seen departing with Jana.

He looked around for Marca, but he had not yet found her when he made eye-contact instead with Brandon, who was no longer in the arms of Ozzy Fame. He quickly approached Tom, to ask him if he'd seen Jana.

"Oh, you've misplaced your date too?" asked Tom. "I was looking for mine, actually"

"Yeah, Ozzy asked me to dance and Jana didn't seem to mind, but I didn't expect... I didn't plan to..."

"Say no more", said Tom with a smile; the politest way he knew of saying *you can shut up now, as the rest of what you have to say is tragically predictable*. "If I see her, I'll be sure to mention you're looking for her. Meanwhile, I've found Marca" - indeed, he had seen Marca now - "So I'll go catch her".

"Where have you been?" asked Marca without preamble, as she took his offered hand.

"Out", said Tom, leading her a few steps, "But I'm back now", he added, turning her.

"And you do not care to share the story of your exciting adventure?" asked Marca, her sharp blue eyes already seeking answers in his. Tom opted to disguise his thoughts by vividly imagining dragons, causing her to mis-time a step. He laughed as he led her back into the rhythm of the music; she followed easily enough.

"I do not think it had to do with dragons", she offered.

"No indeed", confirmed Tom, spinning her, and holding Dementors in the mind when he reclaimed her hand and her face was once more in the proximity of hers.

"If there was kissing involved, I do not think that it was Dementors", she divined.

Tom smirked, but let his guard down momentarily. "She kissed you; she bit you; the Mudblood actually bit you?" asked Marca.

Now it was Tom's turn to miss a step. Upon regaining the rhythm, he threw Marca a little roughly into a turn. A few steps later, he held her closely to him, to speak more quietly now.

"I don't think I need to voice any threats for you to understand how disappointed I would be if you were to share that information, Marca", he said to her.

"You do not; I can consider the threats to be assumed", said Marca. "However, you can feel secure, that if you must deposit your secrets into another person, then I am probably the safest receptacle"

"I don't deposit them anywhere; you take them, which is a bad habit of yours", said Tom, as the music stopped. Being too late to reasonably dip her, he settled for a last spin. "I require a drink", he added. "Shall we?"

Upon their eventual return to Slytherin House, the boys and girls returned to their respective dorms, or in some cases, had disappeared somewhere along the route home.

Antonin, on the other hand, had never left the Dungeons, making himself somewhat conspicuous by his absence up in the Great Hall, but nevertheless surprising those who had failed to notice this previously, when they now saw him already in their dormitory, and clearly not having been up above with everyone else.

"How is Marca?" he asked, looking like he had woken up from an effort at an early night.

“Perplexing and sometimes infuriating, but definitely better as an ally than an enemy”

“I meant how she is right now this evening”

Tom instinctively reached out with his mind to find her, but of course he could not. He settled onto a nearby mind instead, that of Iolanthe, through which to find out about Marca. Iolanthe’s mind was turbulent, and focussed on some kind of pain or suffering that kept throwing him off.

“I’m sure she’s just the same as ever”, said Tom, for lack of a more informed answer. He reached out for Belinda, but - which was unusual - could not find her. He tried for Julia, found her, but her thoughts were reliving scenes with Tiernan, with some sort of... inquietude of which Tom could not make sense.

“You’re sure? You do not know?”

“Well she seemed perfectly normal, or rather, normal for her, when we parted just now. If you wanted to talk to her, that was your chance, but you were hiding in here”

“I was not hiding, I was... maintaining integrity. I wished to take Marca to the Ball; you asked her previously, I had not a wish to take some other person, nor to arrive without a partner...”

It still seemed like hiding to Tom, but it did not concern him. He was irked at having tried to get information from four people’s minds and having failed in each case. He didn’t even care very much about the information, but he did not like failure. He tried again, for Meredith this time, who could be found, but was talking with Julia about Tiernan. Their conversation was interrupted by, usefully at last, Marca’s return to their immediate vicinity, probably from the adjacent bathroom.

“Thought you’d be out with Tom still”, she said.

“No, we are going to bed”, replied Marca. For a second, Julia tried to work out how this could possibly work logistically, then she realised that Marca meant to sleep, and not together.

“Did you get a goodnight kiss?”

“What? No, of course not. We are not courting”

“Why not? You obviously like each other”, Julia pointed out. Marca disrobed herself of her dressing gown, folding it and placing it over the back of a chair, and got into bed.

“I do not think, that he has any romantic intention towards me”, said Marca with a sigh that suggested not so much disappointment on her own part, but rather being wearied by the question. “If and when he makes any such... intention... known to my attention... Well then I will give it my consideration at that time”

“So you do like him?” asked Meredith.

“Some night, hey, Tom?” asked Tiernan, interrupting Tom’s focus on the other conversation.

“Hello Tiernan”, said Tom, ignoring the meaningless question.

“Even survived the dancing”, enthused Tiernan. “Still not really sure whether Julia expects me to, you know, keep seeing her, but it wasn’t so bad anyway”.

“I don’t think she expects anything exactly”, said Tom, “But she half hopes and half fears, and Meredith will try to set the pair of you up regardless”

“How do you know?”, asked Tiernan. Tom didn’t reply instantly, but those around him were used to this.

“Just intuition”, he said, when he did reply.

“Hmm. You really understand people, you know”. *I really don’t*, thought Tom. “What about you and Marca?”, Tiernan continued.

“Nothing newsworthy, Tiernan”, replied Tom. After a lengthier pause during which Tom thought he might actually now get to settle off to sleep, Tiernan spoke again:

“Tom, what do you mean, half hopes, half fears?”

“She hopes because she likes you and because you’re a Lestrangle. She fears because not only might you reject her, but also because if you don’t, she’ll have to live up to the expectations associated with your family, and so naturally she’s afraid of not being good enough”

“Me and my family name”, grumbled Tiernan.

Breakfast the next morning was an odd experience, as people’s thoughts usually being on their breakfast, any mail, and the coming day ahead of them, now they were largely focussed on the goings-on of the previous night.

Bitterness, envy, depression, intrigue, hopes and fears abounded. Knowing glances were exchanged between some of those present, and other sets of eye contact were avoided. Some heads were reeling on dizzy highs; others were groggy from illicit drinks and a paucity of sleep. Marca was impenetrable as ever, as she selected the plainest-looking bread roll from a basket on the table.

Gossips and scandals of various sorts reigned for at least the next week or so, but all in all, nobody’s life seemed to change quite so drastically as early predictions might have suggested. By the time February wore out and March came around, all the stresses and dramas that had seemed so very important at the time became confused, disputed, or outright denied as the various participants sought to distance themselves from events with all the keenness that Tom had sought to distance himself from the “tragic accident” that had occurred at seventy St. Mary Axe back in summer.

Indeed, Tom was learning that he was far from alone in the practice of causing a mess and then moving on as swiftly as possible in an effort to avoid the consequences - he was just more practiced at it than most.



## Chapter Sixteen

### *Defences for the Indefensible*

“Fulgor...”

“...*aerāmine!*” interjected Tom with a snarl, without thinking through whether this would work or not, taking control of the lightning that Jana was Conjuring, before she could do so herself. He flung the Spell safely into the ground between them, whereupon the searing flash followed, causing that part of the floor of the Great Hall to explode violently upon contact.

Tom flung himself backwards and away, and he achieved a far greater height and distance than he reasonably should have been able. Nevertheless, the bits of floor were about to hit him in the face regardless, so he returned swiftly to the other side of them, before realizing he should not have been able to do that either. He landed on three feet, no, two feet and a hand, and did not hesitate to hit Jana with a Stunning spell, though frankly she looked quite stunned already.

“Teires! Riddle!”

“Erm... Hi, Professor”, said Tom, in response. Merrythought looked at him incredulously, and Tom continued: “Sorry about the floor; I’ll put it back”

He rose to his feet and pointed his wand at the mess. He had a momentary mind-blank regards the correct spell, before essaying the very simple *reparo*, which worked.

“*Rennervate*” said Merrythought tersely, reviving Jana. She, Merrythought, looked quite cross. “What were you thinking, Teires?” she demanded, in a tone that suggested there was probably not a right answer here.

“I... don’t know” said Jana. “Sorry, Stunning spell, give me a moment please”, she added, gesturing to her head, which was not where the Stunner had hit her, but doubtlessly where she was feeling it anyway.

“You could have killed Riddle”, scolded Merrythought. “And even if he’d survived, how do you think he’d look with lightning scars all over his body for the rest of his life?”

“Probably quite pretty actually”, said Jana, brightening up slightly. Her mind held a mental picture of Tom’s body covered in zig-zagging lines that forked and forked, like tiny tree branches or giant snowflakes. “I saw this illustration of lightning scars, and...”

“Silence, idiot!” snapped Merrythought. “What possessed you to think it would be acceptable to cast a Lightning Spell indoors, let alone in a duel? Do you think it would be *pretty* to see Riddle’s corpse on this floor?” she asked, vituperously.

“No, I’m sorry, I just didn’t think; I didn’t mean any harm”

“You didn’t mean... Actions, Teires, reality, that’s what matters in life, not intentions”

“Professor, if I may?” said Tom, whom Merrythought seemed to have forgotten was there. “It seems she didn’t actually *do* any harm either; I’m fine, the floor’s fine, we’re all fine”

“You would defend this walking catastrophe, this troll-brained hothead, this hazard to herself?” asked Merrythought.

“Apparently”, said Tom uncertainly, wondering whether he should in fact have bothered to try to calm the situation down at all. No good deed, and all that. “I just meant,

I'm confident that I can handle anything anyone here can dish out - except maybe you, Professor", he added, deferentially.

"Be that as it may", sighed Merrythought, "Teires, you are banned forthwith from the duelling club. This is the third time now that you've been involved in something stupid here, so it seems it's my responsibility to ensure it's the last. In addition, fifty House Points will be deducted from Gryffindor. Now, leave".

While Jana's ban from duelling was irksome, Tom was pleased that at least he did not seem to be in trouble, not to mention about the deduction of House Points from Gryffindor's tally. After Jana's departure from the Hall, Merrythought did ask Tom what had happened there, and gave a series of quick-fire questions about his apparent ability to Apparate, for which questions Tom had no ready answers, as it had surprised him too and he still had no idea how to repeat the act.

The same questions were asked again by some of his fellow Slytherins as they headed back to the Dungeons thereafter, and at breakfast in the morning, it became apparent that they were not the only ones who wanted to ask him about it, judging from the missive brought by what Tom now recognised as the Headmaster's owl:

*Dear Mr Riddle,*

*Please report to my office immediately after your last lesson today. To gain access to the staircase approach, you may use this temporary password, which will be good for one use only: "SAFE HAVEN"*

*- A Dippet*

After a long day of lessons on what would have been a holiday in the Muggle world - it was the Friday preceding Easter - Tom knocked on the Headmaster's door, and was bade enter immediately by the Headmaster's voice, the door swinging inwards accordingly, brushing over the thick carpet as it went.

"You asked to see me, Sir", said Tom.

"Yes, Riddle, I did indeed", said Dippet, from behind his desk, from which seat he did not rise, but rather leaned back in his chair, as though to scrutinize Tom better from a distance, before asking "How are you?"

"Very well, Sir, unless I'm in trouble", said Tom, a little more confident than last time he had been here.

"No, you're not in trouble, not at all, dear boy, but I do need to know how it came to be that you were able to Apparate in the Great Hall, despite the Enchantment being in place that ought to make such impossible"

"I see", said Tom, quite glad he was being asked about this and not about the lightning. "I'm afraid the honest answer is I'm not sure; I don't even know how to Apparate in a place where there is no Enchantment against such".

"Well, what exactly did you do?", asked Dippet.

"I tried to move quickly out of the way of... danger", said Tom, avoiding saying *out of the way of the broken fragments of the Great Hall's flooring that I had just caused to be blown into bits*, "and found that I succeeded in that endeavour rather more than I had expected"

"So you're saying that this was more in the manner of the accidental kind of magic sometimes practiced unintentionally by younger children before they come here?"

"Perhaps, Sir", said Tom. "That is to say, I *did* intend to move out of the way, so to an extent it was intentional, but I certainly didn't expect or consciously intend to Apparate"

"It is very important that you learn to control this, Riddle"

"Apparition, Sir? I'd be delighted to learn", said Tom, hoping for lessons to be arranged.

"What I mean, is that we cannot have students transcending the limits of what is supposed to be possible in the castle"

"I'm sorry Sir, what are you suggesting?", unsure as to what exactly the old man was expecting of him here. It's not like he could limit his natural abilities - nor would he readily consent to do so if he could.

"The password I gave you to visit me here today, *safe haven*, it's a theme that's important to me and relevant in this situation. Can you imagine why?"

With full access to at least the most open part of Dippet's mind, it wasn't difficult to find the answer:

"Grindelwald, Sir? You fear that if I can break through an aspect of the castle's defences accidentally, he could do so deliberately"

"Yes, precisely, so you see how we do have a bit of a predicament here, don't we?"

"But Sir, I don't see how there's anything I can do or not do, that will affect in the slightest whether or not he can do it"

"Yes, strictly speaking that's true", sighed Dippet. "But if I could just understand how you did it", he said with a tone of frustration now, "it's possible I could find a way to improve our defences".

"Do you really think he'd try to come here, Sir?" asked Tom. "After all, Hogwarts is great, but it's a school. I mean, unless Grindelwald's in desperate need of inkwells and textbooks..." - Tom trailed off, uncertain if he had overstepped the boundaries of the expected student-to-Headteacher relationship.

"You're not a Ravenclaw, Riddle, so I'm not sure to what extent you'll understand this, but there is a price set on knowledge in the world that can be unmatched by other resources - and, well, there is nothing if not knowledge here within these walls"

Tom reflected on this. He knew Grindelwald had been expelled partway through his own schooling, but it seemed a strange thought to think he'd be sneaking into Hogwarts to catch up.

"You're right, Sir, I'm a Slytherin. As such may I humbly offer for consideration a possible practical solution to your problem?"

"Please go ahead", said Dippet, taken somewhat aback but content to at least allow Tom to present his idea.

“Place guards in the library; the Ministry might furnish you with Aurors if you make a good enough case - or failing that, put the portraits, ghosts, and House Elves on watch, and have Professor Merrythought and other volunteers standing by; perhaps even Professor Dumbledore, I’ve heard he’s a good duellist - then if he comes, he’ll be captured. You could even entice him by partially lowering the defences there, making it appear to be a weakness”.

Dippet laughed; this angered Tom, not that he let it show. But really, he’d just offered a perfectly good solution to the problem, and the old man appeared to be laughing it off.

“Would that not work, Sir?” asked Tom, pushing for Dippet to present his rebuttal if he had one.

“It’s not about the books, Riddle; it’s about the minds”, he said. Tom took in this statement without reply for a moment, and Dippet continued: “However, it is not your responsibility to furnish us with protection; it is our responsibility to furnish you with protection. In return I only expect your cooperation in not undermining such - or rather, where you do point out flaws, albeit inadvertently it seems, help us understand exactly how that occurred”.

Dippet had given away perhaps a little more than he intended - *to furnish us with protection*, he had said; rather suggesting that his mind was amongst those on any hypothetical list for ransacking. He feared Grindelwald was coming for him. Why?

“Sir”, said Tom, “It occurs to me that when I Apparated, I had at that time been connected to my duelling partner’s Spell; we had grappled for control of it between us, and I’d consider the possibility that it may have been that magical connection that allowed me to reappear at that location, the other end of it”

This was hogwash; Tom was fairly sure this was not the case, but he had had an idea that was worth a try.

“Go on”, said Dippet.

“Well, I was just thinking, Sir, that if you’re looking for weak chinks in Hogwarts’ defences, you might focus on any connections that these valuable minds have to Grindelwald” said Tom, prompting Dippet’s mind do go where he needed it to, to learn more about what Dippet thought Grindelwald might be after.

It took Dippet only a few seconds to dismiss this idea as entirely irrelevant to the question of Apparition in the castle, but in those few seconds that he entertained the notion, his mind had flitted between himself, Merrythought, Dumbledore, a third man who seemed familiar but was certainly not a teacher, and a blood-red rock, perhaps vermilion.

“We’ll be looking at all possibilities”, said Dippet. “Do you have anything to add?”

“No Sir, not that springs to mind right now”, replied Tom.

“Well, I’ll let you get off back to your House, then”, said Dippet. “If you should happen to remember anything else, please do bring it to me, as it could be important. In the meanwhile, I bid you good evening”, he concluded, gesturing towards his office door.

“Thank you Sir, good evening to you too”, said Tom, and made his exit.

As he descended the staircase from Dippet's office, Tom reflected on his willingness - in the initial scenario, the one with the library - to help the British authorities apprehend Gellert Grindelwald, whose cause Tom broadly considered to be more than laudable.

Of course, it had been unthinking and based only on his automatic tendency to solve problems, and the fact that it didn't cause any problem for him if his idea should bring the war to an early end in the favour of the International Confederation of Wizards, rather than in the favour of Grindelwald's Revolution. After all, the current status quo was... Not ideal, but at least acceptable for Tom for the time being. And if it came to it, he could always finish Gellert Grindelwald's noble work later.

All that notwithstanding, of course he needed to appear to be at one with the presumed cause of those around him; the school, the Ministry, and so on. He needed to be seen to be only interested in being valuable to their side - not because they would necessarily be the winning side; indeed it seemed quite likely they would not be - but rather because they were the side that was present and in power around him currently.

When the Revolution reached Britain, it would be quite easy to demonstrate his ardour for natural magical supremacy rather than pathetic, insipid, cowering away from the Muggles - or worse yet, attempts at integration as equals.

It was astonishing that even Witches and Wizards who lived so long and knew so much about magic as Dippet, over three hundred years old, or Merrythought, at least approaching a hundred and fifty if not older, did not see the sense in backing Grindelwald's plans for the world, which would so clearly benefit them. He wondered what position the English record-holders in age, the Alchemist Nicholas Flamel and his wife, took on the topic - then he stopped in his tracks, as he realized that this was who the other man had been, Nicholas Flamel - meaning that the red rock he saw in Dippet's mind was not vermilion at all, it was the Philosopher's Stone; Flamel must be supplying Elixir of Life to Dippet and Merrythought; that must be how they had been staying so well in their old age!

Of course Grindelwald would be keen on that; as Flamel was the only known maker of the Philosopher's Stone, and Grindelwald coveted any kind of powerful unique treasure, as Tom had learned from his biography - more than a mere will to power, such as any aspirant ruler might have; these things were an obsession for him. So he would seek to use Flamel's connections, to get to Flamel.

But where did Dumbledore fit into all this? He was not nearly so old as the others; or at least did not appear it. Was he an early starter on the Elixir of Life habit?

No, of course, Tom reminded himself, Dumbledore and Grindelwald had some other connection. Some other connection that had caused the former Minister for Magic - now resigned in disgrace, after the abject failure of his peace efforts costing half of Europe to the war, due to Britain not getting involved sooner - to seek Dumbledore's help in talking him down, like that was ever going to work. And there was that rumour, for which Tom had been unable to find anything written in Grindelwald's biography, or anywhere else for that matter, that Dumbledore and Grindelwald had crossed wands in their youth, for reasons as yet unknown.

As Tom returned to Slytherin House, he wished more than ever that he could gain access to Dumbledore's mind. For now, however, he'd have to content himself with

building his powers such as he may; the events in the Great Hall had shown that even powerful Enchantments had their failures, and that his natural brilliance could allow him to do things others could not - even if, granted, he'd been unable to repeat the feat, despite extensive efforts.

After an evening's mental battle with Marca - failing to get into her mind at any point, but at least keeping her out of his more often than not now - Tom felt he'd at least got the most benefit from her presence that he could before she departed in the morning; she was making the most of the Easter Holiday as possibly the last chance she might get to return to Russia any time soon, depending on how the wars progressed.

With Antonin also visiting his parents, albeit only down in London in their case, Tom's sometime companions in Slytherin House during holidays were absent; certainly all the other Slytherins were away for Easter, just as they had been at Christmas. It wasn't long before Tom found himself in Hogsmeade sharing Jana's company at the Lonely Broomstick, as she had again been amongst those who opted to stay, after finding at Christmas that Hogwarts in the holidays was more fun than her great-aunt's cottage. She'd expressed to her great-aunt the importance of keeping up with her practical Spellcraft in readiness for the upcoming exams, but right now, she and Tom were discussing her all so recent impractical Spellcraft, that of the Lightning Conjunction in the Duelling Club.

"I suppose it's my secret Ravenclaw side", said Jana. "When I learn about things, I just have to try them out"

"I should think it's the sign of a weak mind to be contained merely on another person's say-so", opined Tom, opting to not discuss just how secret Jana's secret Ravenclaw side was. "And anyway, Gryffindor House is not spectacularly well-known for its rule-following nature"

"You can talk, Slytherin", rejoined Jana.

"It's true", agreed Tom, "Our Houses have that in common; the other two, not so much perhaps. Although", he added with a smile, "I think we Snakes do better than you Lions at working at least somewhat within guidelines that we're given, going with the system rather than against it"

"Hey, being a rebel has its place, Tom", said Jana. "When liberty becomes tyranny... No, when oppression becomes liberty... Wait, there was something about rebellion..."

"Something you read?" asked Tom. "Is this your secret Ravenclaw side again?"

"The point is", said Jana, pausing to subdue her quivering milkshake with a tap of her wand before it spilled over, "Following rules just because they're there, just because you're used to trusting authority... Well, isn't that what's going on over in Europe? And look where it's getting them"

"Grindelwald's war?", asked Tom, but the image in Jana's mind was of Muggle soldiers, so clearly she had meant the other war, as she now confirmed:

"Actually, I was thinking of Hitler's invasions; they say he's brainwashed the Germans and got them to do all kinds of horrible things"

"How is he washing brains?", wondered Tom aloud. "Is he a Wizard pretending to be a Muggle? Memory Charms, Imperius Curses, that sort of thing?"

“No, or else it’s really under wraps if he is”, said Jana, “But he’s got them all marching in line anyway”

“Isn’t that what great leaders do?”

“Well, maybe, but he’s just... Got probably nice people, doing horrible things in an evil war”

“But that is war, Jana. War isn’t nice, and neither are people when they’re flung into it. Especially Muggles, they don’t have magic so they resort to barbarism”

“Grindelwald’s not being any less barbaric, and he does have magic... look what he’s doing with it”

“Magic does certainly give greater options for persuasiveness, that’s for sure”, said Tom. “And all your rebellious ideas would be gone in a flash in the face of an Imperius Curse; you’d be - as you say - marching in line”.

“It is a rather worrying thought”, conceded Jana. “I hope Grindelwald’s war doesn’t come this far, but it’s looking like it might. Still, it’s all academic, isn’t it? There’s no defence against the Imperius Curse, is there?”

“Merrythought says it can be fought” said Tom, “But only by strength of will, not by any manner of Counter-Curse”

“How?” asked Jana. “Do you know? Can you do it?”

“Obviously I don’t know”, said Tom. “When would I ever have had the opportunity to find out?”

“Hmm, true. Well, I don’t know, shady Slytherin friends and all. But... If it is just will, I suppose we should be able to do it, if it comes down to it. Not that they’ll be Imperiusing schoolchildren, I’m sure. It’ll be the Minister for Magic and people like that”

“You’ve heard Slughorn”, said Tom. “We are the important people of the increasingly near future”

“Well what would you suggest? Some kind of... Willpower Potion?”

“Potions would be useless for this purpose”, said Tom. “A defence has to be from within, so it’ll work no matter when one comes under attack”

“You sound like Merrythought”, laughed Jana.

“It’s true though”, said Tom. “So let’s train it. Not now, obviously”, he added, lowering his voice, “But we could practice defending against each other; it’d be our little secret, just like usual down by the lake”

“Do an Unforgivable Curse?” asked Jana, incredulous, but at least maintaining enough reserve to keep her voice down. “No way”

“As you wish”, said Tom, naturally unwilling to argue about it in this setting. “But think on it, because your life or your loved ones’ lives could depend on it”.

Tom never really understood the value people placed on others more highly than themselves, but had nevertheless found that many could be persuaded to do something to protect those around them more readily than they would if it were just their own safety at risk.

Jana was in any case Tom’s top choice for this particular experiment; he’d thought it through already. Marca had so much conscious awareness of her mind already that she’d likely be dangerously far ahead of him, and as such she’d be a better candidate for

graduating to after he'd already got to grips with what he needed to do. Tiernan on the other hand would probably be too easy - despite being a handy duellist, he lacked Jana's combative attitude when it came to interactions, especially with Tom. If anything, Jana's rejection of his offer was perhaps a good sign, indicating she'd not be a complete push-over. If she didn't change her mind, he would probably give Antonin a try.

Tom was not overly impressed with most the company that remained when his Housemates had departed; he found, when next it was time to lunch in the Great Hall, that not only were there no other Slytherins remaining, but precious few from the other Houses either; fewer even than there had been at Christmas.

There was nobody it seemed he could likely engage in friendly duelling, as there was not one person present who also attended the Duelling Club, unless Jana-the-recently-banned could be counted, and she was being unusually reticent to engage in further rule-breaking at this time.

That gave Tom an idea; maybe given the circumstances, Merrythought herself could be talked into a friendly duelling session - after all, she'd been fairly sporting previously in their end-of-year practical exams, and clearly not afraid to face him. If she declined, well, he had plenty to do; a whole collection of research projects upon which he could readily be working, so it would be no terrible occurrence - It'd just be nice to have something lively to do as well, so he considered it worth asking her.

Knowing from experience that she tended to not ride the Hogwarts Express, Tom surmised that she might live full-time in the castle, or perhaps have a place of her own in Hogsmeade. Yes, she was a very dedicated teacher who had been here a long time, so it would make sense for her to live up here. Of course, she tended to lunch in her office rather than in the Great Hall, so that would be the place to go and find her. He finished up his own dining, and set off immediately to the Defence Against the Dark Arts tower.

"Up to mischief again are we?" came a voice that was not Professor Merrythought's, as Tom reached her office door and found it to be locked.

"Peeves, go away" sighed Tom.

"Ooooooh, how's that for friendliness?" asked the Poltergeist, becoming visible now, hovering upside down in front of Tom's face.

"I don't know what you have in mind, Peeves, but outside Merrythought's office is probably not the best place for it"

"She's not here, left old Peevsie to look after her pad, she has"

"I'm sure she'll be back soon", replied Tom, wishing he were in fact sure about such.

"I wouldn't be so certain if I were you, sneaky snakey", said Peeves, in a sing-song voice, spinning himself around the right way now, the better to show off a wicked grin.

"Why not? Where is she?"

"Nosey, nose, got your..."

*"Reducto!"*

Peeves, caught while by necessity tangible as he predictably made a grab for Tom's nose, became intangible a touch too late, and sailed back through the door into Merrythought's office. He bounced back immediately.

“Ooh, that’s a fun ride”, he said, cackling, “Do it again!”

“You’re not my first choice of sparring partner”, said Tom, and turned to leave, hoping Peeves would not go so far as to push him down the stairs. Instead, the Poltergeist reappeared in front of him, blocking his path.

“Riddle me a riddle, Riddle, and I’ll tell you where the ol’ gal Galatea is if I can’t out-riddle your riddle”, said Peeves, evidently pleased with himself for his sophisticated wordplay.

“Get out of my way”, said Tom, not wanting to get drawn into silly games with Peeves. “Or if you want a riddle, how about this: Moodily I brood, solemnly I chill, silently I rage, hatefully I scorn, easily I put an end to Peeves’ fun. Who am I?”

“Bloody Baronship, that is”, replied Peeves, his cheer no lessened by the mention that Tom had hoped might be a little more persuasive.

“Yes”, said Tom, “Now, do you want me to mention to him that you’re causing trouble for Slytherins going about their business?”

“Come on now, liddle Riddle; I’ll give you another chance, I will - ask me another riddle”

“No”, said Tom, contemplating his options of getting past Peeves against the latter’s will.

“Why, what’s the matter?” asked Peeves, a mischievous grin forming on his face, “Don’t you know any other... Riddles?”

At this joke, Peeves sailed off finally, his laugh echoing behind him, but leaving Tom free to descend - angry at Peeves’ apparent awareness of his family situation, or lack thereof, and also none the wiser about Merrythought’s location.

It was of some consolation that once it became apparent that Merrythought was definitely not present at Hogwarts for the holiday, Jana consented to take up duelling with him in the afternoons by the lake, which nicely broke up Tom’s morning and evening study sessions, right up until the return of everyone else - or rather, almost everyone else - to the castle.

Antonin did not arrive back with the other returning students on the Hogwarts Express; this was no surprise to Tom, who had understood that he had planned to “accidentally” miss the train, in favour of continuing to celebrate Easter in London, what with it still being Easter Sunday by his reckoning, and a day of feasting to be celebrated at home with family, rather than spending the day on a train. Having then missed the Hogwarts Express, through no fault of his own of course, he’d then just have to make do with alternate arrangements, such as the frankly more sensible trip via the Floo Network up to Hogsmeade.

While Tom didn’t blame him, he also didn’t fully understand the interest in a Muggle holiday, but it seemed nevertheless to be an occasion whose traditions were at least selectively observed in the House of the Dolohovi. Antonin’s family had no intentions of visiting the Muggle church, but would still enjoy a rich meal of cheese and egg dishes and special breads. The did not plan to walk about outside at night with candles, which these days would likely get them bombed in central London anyway, but Antonin had explained in detail the machinations of the traditional egg-fighting, in which the best Charmed egg

would emerge victorious, eat its competitors, and finally be Transfigured into a token amulet for Charmer of the winning egg. The exact utility of this token amulet was not clear, but Antonin had spoken of it with much enthusiasm.

Marca, on the other hand, did return with everyone else, despite Antonin's efforts to persuade her to do the same, even suggesting that she could miss the train with him and celebrate Easter in London, if she wasn't going to take the risk of remaining in the Soviet Union. At first, Tom had thought her refusal to do so was the product of an aversion to the risk of getting into trouble, but it turned out that the real issue was simply that she didn't like those parties at which there was, in her words, far too much eating and noise.

Another person who had returned with everyone else, having ridden the Hogwarts Express after all, was Professor Merrythought. Tom caught glimpses of her thoughts here and there, but while she'd clearly been abroad, he never quite got enough from her mind at once to piece together much more than this, and that her activities had probably been fairly undramatic, or else such thoughts would more likely be at the forefront of her mind more often.

"So, I suppose no more duelling for you now?", Tom asked Jana, catching a word with her in their shared Alchemy class.

"Actually, I have an idea about that", she said, "Can you meet me in the library this evening?"

They arranged a time, though Tom knew the most important part already; Jana was - now that everyone was back and it would be more difficult - up for practicing resisting the Imperius Curse.

A good deal later in the day, they discussed the matter, as planned, in the library, their common in-school meeting ground for things best not discussed with so many others around in the Great Hall or in lessons. At least in the library, they could always find some quiet spot.

"So what brought about this change of heart?" Tom asked her.

"It's been in the papers more and more, after it came out about the Yugoslavian Muggle Prince Regent being Imperiused", she said. "And I keep thinking back to last year, the mass murder that got us to go war after all; I know they were Muggles that he got to kill each other, so probably easier targets, but I just want to make really sure that it'll never be me that's used like that. I don't want to ever be a puppet to some Dark Wizard's will, so that means training to resist it, like you say. And Merrythought... Well, she's always telling us we need to be prepared, so this is us being prepared"

"Exactly", said Tom. "Of course she can't openly condone us doing it, but it's absolutely in the spirit of her advice"

"Yeah, probably still best she doesn't know, though", said Jana. "So we'd better do it late at night; we can't risk being seen; there's too many people about now"

"Agreed", said Tom, "I have the invisibility cloak you gave me, but the front entrance gets locked at night time now, so we'll need to fly out from the ramparts if we're going to do it outside, which I would recommend"

“We could meet up in the Astronomy Tower”, suggested Jana, “Then we can fly out just to the near bit of forest, since we’ll be on that side, if you don’t mind the forest instead of the lake”

“I don’t mind the Forest”, said Tom. “Midnight?”

“Midnight”

## Chapter Seventeen

### *Midnight Meeting*

Footsteps made their way up to the top of the Astronomy Tower; Tom crouched under his invisibility cloak, so that its characteristic blur would be beneath the level of the ramparts and less likely to be seen, should the arrival turn out to not be Jana. He cast his mind forth to pre-empt the arrival and assess its identity.

It was indeed just Jana; she gave a glance around the top of the tower, assumed herself to have arrived before Tom, and wandered over to a crenelation to gaze out over the lawn towards the forest.

Tom rose and approached her from behind, opening his cloak and doffing the hood, to avoid startling her such that she might Hex him on sight, or rather, semi-sight.

“Good evening”

Jana whirled around at a great speed, clearly surprised that she hadn't heard his approach - the stones up at the top were quite quiet to walk upon, but the steps they had ascended - her recently, and him previously - had noisy metal grills on them, perhaps to avoid being a slip hazard.

“Oh, it's just you, Tom; you startled me”

“Invisibility cloak”, Tom reminded her.

“I looked around for the blurry bit but didn't see you - obviously - but here we are now, so... Got your broom?”

“Here” said Tom, presenting it. “Where's yours?”

“I was counting on you having yours, because I couldn't sneak out with mine without the Fat Lady seeing - she politely overlooks us sneaking out in the castle from time to time, usually just people meeting boyfriends and girlfriends, all that... but I'm pretty sure she'd have a thing or two to say if I wandered out with a broomstick in the middle of the night”

“If you'd have said, I'd have borrowed someone else's and brought that as well - or better yet reminded you that you can Confund her”, said Tom. “Oh well, we're only going a very short distance in a straight line, so I'm sure we'll cope with sharing”.

“Can I steer?”

“If you must, but like I say, it's a straight line; it's not exactly Quidditch”, said Tom.

“I guess so; I'd definitely rather be the one flying it though, if you don't mind”

“Well, ladies first, then” said Tom, offering the broom to her. She mounted it, and indicated for him to get on behind her, which he did. He wasn't quite sure where to hold on, and took hold of her robes by her hips, having a brief amusing thought that it'd be better if she wore a harness for him to hold onto.

She pulled his hands off her robes, and put them around her waist instead.

“Scoot up”, she said, wiggling backwards into him.

“Careful with your hair, before I lose an eye back here”, complained Tom.

“Yep”, said Jana, “But let's get settled before I lean forwards to head off, shall we?”

Tom let go with one hand, to direct the invisibility cloak over both of them; it was a very close fit, but just about made it. He reconnected his hands around her middle.

“Ready”

Tom surprised himself with how very much more tightly he held on to Jana's midriff once she launched off; he hadn't expected her to hurtle off the Astronomy Tower with quite such vigour, as though it had only been her on the broom.

"You alright?", called Jana.

"Fine. Just don't crash", replied Tom.

"Oh, don't be silly", said Jana, "I could do this with my eyes closed"

"I'd rather you didn't", urged Tom, who had his own eyes closed to avoid being stabbed by Jana's hair.

"It's beautiful out here", said Jana. "Hold on; I'll set us down just at the edge of the Forest"

For the second time, Tom's stomach lurched sickeningly as Jana reduced their altitude very rapidly. When they reached the ground, she stopped as suddenly as if she were by herself, causing them to tumble forwards as Tom was unprepared for the halt and crashed into her from behind, knocking her off the front end of the broom and landing in a heap on the floor, him on top of her. Of course, they were both wrapped in the same invisibility cloak, which limited their movement options.

"Oof!" exclaimed Jana, on impact. "Well, this is cosy" she added, upon recovery. Tom rolled sideways off her, undoing the cloak that bound them, and made an effort to get up without getting dirt on him. Jana did the same only somewhat less carefully, and Tom shook off any loose detritus that had stuck onto the cloak. He folded the garment inside out, for visibility, and sat it on a rock.

"Let's not lose that", he said, putting the broom next to it.

"Right" said Jana. "So, shall we..."

"*Imperio*" said Tom, seizing the initiative. Jana inhaled audibly as the Spell took its effect.

*Kneel*, commanded Tom silently, and Jana dropped to her knees like a doll. He next wanted her to put her hands behind her head, but before he had even formulated this verbally in his mind, she had done it, obeying his mere whim immediately.

*On all fours*, commanded Tom, and again she did it without the slightest hesitation.

*To me*, he added, and she came forwards like a dog, not even looking up at him, just obeying, nothing more nor less.

*Rise*, he concluded, and she promptly did so - now returning his gaze placidly, patiently, subserviently.

Tom disengaged the Spell with a flick of his wand. Jana's breathing changed a second time as she returned to her normal self.

"That was... something", she said. "Felt so strange... peaceful, easy... warn me next time though, will you? I want to try to fight it"

"Consider yourself warned", said Tom, bringing the tip of his wand to within a fraction of an inch of her chest. "*Imperio*"

Again the Spell took immediate effect. Jana's chances of throwing it off now seemed minimal. To test it, Tom commanded her once more:

*Down.*

Jana seemed about to say that she wouldn't, but then realised she had already obeyed and was now once more on her knees. She gave a half-frown, a slightly confused look.

*Up.*

She rose again, with a partial smile forming on her lips.

"I might have gone down by accident", said Jana when Tom lifted his control a second time, "But I stood up again almost right away, that's got to count for something, hasn't it?"

"You stood up again when I commanded you to stand up again", Tom informed her.

"Oh", said Jana. "But it felt like... What if it was just what I wanted to do anyway?"

"I get the impression that this is how the Spell works; it doesn't bludgeon your Will into submission, instead it makes you feel like it's what you wanted to do all along - I can see how that would be much harder to fight"

"You could make me do all kinds of bad things", she said, clearly wrestling internally with whether or not this would be a good idea.

"Meanwhile", said Tom, "Your turn. I need to know if I can resist it better than you can. If I should fail, do not do anything too bad with me, or else I will be most displeased; is that clear?"

"I'll be nice", replied Jana. She drew her wand, and Tom put his back in his wand pocket, to concentrate on defending with his mind alone, rather than try to make it a conventional duel.

"Well then", said Tom. "Have at me".

*"Imperio"*

Tom's lip twitched involuntarily in disgust at the invitation he felt to give in to the Spell. He didn't want to commit the same error as Jana, and mistake a command for a voluntary decision, so he did nothing for the moment, and hoped the command had not been to remain still. Seconds passed.

Perhaps she hadn't given a command yet; he felt the urge to kneel down while he waited for her to give a command, but only got as far as looking at the ground to assess this, before he realised it was probably what she intended him to do.

He moved with his mind to connect to hers, but as he did so he already noted that she was muttering under her breath:

"Kneel"

"I don't think so", replied Tom.

"Alright", said Jana with a frown, "Let me try this again: *Imperio*", she incanted a second time, adding mentally: *walk towards me now.*

Tom shifted his weight, and in so doing now noticed that one foot was now further forwards than the other. Rather than retract it and confirm that this had been a step forwards in error, he left it where it was and maintained his new posture. Jana smiled to observe it, though she lacked the ability to confirm her limited success.

"I think I could get this, with practice", she said.

“And much good the skill would do you in lawful life”, jibed Tom. “We’re practicing these so that we can resist them, remember? I’m supposed to be the rule-breaking one out of the two of us”

“I know, Tom - I wouldn’t really do it; you know that. Resisting, I reckon I could get the hang of that with more practice too. Come on, do me again”, she said, lowering her wand, and standing as though she were bracing herself for being hit by a wave.

“You realize that if the Imperius Curse fails, the next logical recourse will be the Cruciatus Curse, and we’d do well to be prepared for that too”, said Tom, who had deliberately not mentioned this until now, as now she was already somewhat committed, what with already having broken the law.

“The Cruciatus Curse? I’m not so sure... a bit afraid of both sides of that”, said Jana, looking at Tom’s feet.

“Afraid? You’re a Gryffindor” Tom reminded her.

“And that’s why I think I will do it”, said Jana, surprisingly readily, looking back up again. “But it doesn’t mean I don’t get scared, it just means I... do stuff even if it frightens me. Or sometimes precisely because it frightens me and so that’s why I need to do it, to get past that... You know?”

“Not from experience”, said Tom. “But so long as you do it, I don’t mind whether you’re afraid or not”, he added with a smile. “Anyway, I’m not afraid - the Spell is harmless; it causes pain, but any damage is just in the mind, and my mind, well, I think I can take it. So, if you like, you can go first. I need to know for sure that I can resist it or at least weather it, so I really do want you to do it.”

“I don’t know if I can”, said Jana, falteringly.

“Don’t worry about that”, said Tom. “You try with me first, then we can discuss whether you want to chicken out regards being on the receiving end, alright?”

“No, I mean I don’t know if I can do it to you”, said Jana, “I mean, what if something goes wrong, what if I can’t stop it once it gets started, what if...”

*“Imperio”*

Jana stopped mid-sentence and awaited instructions.

“Do it”, commanded Tom out loud. Jana’s wand-arm rose instantly as though it were on a string like a puppet.

*“Crucio”*

There was a flash of searing pain, as though an invisible fire blazed all over his body, which Tom instinctively sought to brush off, as he doubled over and let out a silent cry of agony, followed by a more vocal torrent of profanity. Then the pain vanished as suddenly as it had arrived.

“Tom! I’m sorry, are you alright?” asked Jana, rushing over to him.

Tom ran his hands over his body slightly, instinctively checking for the promised lack of damage.

“I’m fine”, said Tom, when he had done this and caught his breath. “Embarrassingly, you caught me off-guard; I didn’t expect you to do it so quickly”

“Caught me off-guard too”, said Jana, who was obviously no longer under the influence of the Imperius Curse, which had presumably broken either by a resurgence of Jana’s will, or else his own distraction, or a combination of these factors.

“At least you can clearly do this one”, observed Tom.

“Yeah... Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Of course I am; why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, it seemed to hurt a lot”

“It’s supposed to”, said Tom, witheringly.

“I know, I know... But I mean, the way you were hissing, it was... inhuman” said Jana with a shiver.

“Hissing? Ah... Hissing, ignore that”, said Tom, guessing at why what he thought had been a torrent of profanity had sounded only like a hissing noise to Jana, “Funny thing, pain, but I assure you, I’m still human”

“You seem so normal now, like it never happened”

“Well, the pain’s gone, isn’t it? Do it again though, this time I’ll be better prepared”

“Really?”

“Really”

Jana raised her wand uncertainly, backing off a little to give herself space to cast the Curse.

“If you’re sure then... *Crucio*”

Tom was ready for anything this time, but no pain came.

“*Crucio!*” she repeated, a little more forcefully this time. Her wand made a slight crackling noise, but nothing more. She looked at her wand, as though it might be broken.

“You have to mean it”, said Tom. “Don’t doubt yourself, just do it. You could do it the first time; you can do it now”

“*Crucio!*” essayed Jana again, but to no avail. “I’m sorry, I think I really just can’t”, said Jana. “*Imperius* me again if you must, because...”

“*Imperio*” interjected Tom. *Do it again*, he commanded, being more ready for it this time. Jana hesitated a touch more than last time, but still obeyed.

“*Crucio*”, she repeated.

The all-consuming pain returned, and now that he was in it, the previous conversation seemed a world away, a far-off fantasy; the immediacy of the pain was very present, very real. He didn’t coil up this time, though, and stood his ground in the face of it. He let out a long, slow - and this time wordless - hiss. He didn’t fight the pain now, he accepted it, dared it to do its worst. He bathed in it.

“Aaaarrgh!” he cried out finally, clawing and knocking Jana’s wand from her grasp with a wordless, wandless, magic - forgetting his wand in his other hand and simply acting directly, primally, to stop the pain.

“You alright?” asked Jana again, somewhat uselessly.

“Never better”, said Tom, fully recovered now. “Your turn?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I suppose I better had”, said Jana. “Just give me a moment. And... How did you do it? That second time?”

“Just relax”, said Tom. “Don’t try to fight it. Just be, and remember that it can’t hurt you. Well, it can hurt you”, he added with a laugh, “But I mean, it can’t do you any real harm. So just let it hurt, feel the pain, and... just don’t care”

“You’re kidding?”

“I’m not. It’ll be fine though. You’ll see. Ready?”

“No”

“Ready now?” asked Tom, raising his wand, and laughing.

“No! Hold on, just a moment, please”

“Tell me when you’re ready, but also do hurry up about it”, suggested Tom.

“Alright. I’m ready. Do it”, said Jana, looking indeed quite resolute.

“*Crucio*”

Jana hit the ground almost instantly with a shout of pain, as she doubled up like Tom had the first time, but didn’t stop there and now was clearly trying to avoid clawing her own skin off as she lay on the ground in the foetal position. Tom crouched down next to her.

“Yes, it hurts, doesn’t it?” he said with a smile. Jana’s eyes were wide, and she seemed to be trying to say something but wasn’t quite getting the words out, as only noises of pain came forth when she opened her mouth to speak. Tom released the Spell, such that he might get to hear whatever it was she had to say.

She did not immediately speak, but instead lay still a moment. Scrambling up a bit, she threw her arms around Tom where he crouched, nearly knocking him over in the process and causing him to have to put a hand down to stabilize himself. She was either laughing or crying. Tom patted her on the head uncertainly.

“Ready to go again, then?” he asked.

Jana’s very muffled response - for her face was buried into his chest - sounded like a mixture of laughter and tears. Maybe it was.

“Alright”, said Jana after a good while longer than Tom had expected it to take her. “I’ve got to be able to do this, so now’s the time, let’s go”

“Good”, said Tom, who felt he hadn’t really done his best with the last Curse, and was keen to give it a better go. “*Crucio!*”

With this second effort, he directed the Curse through all of her body with the added direction of his own will, rather than merely letting it do its things, which had the desired effect of hindering her from even coming close to coming to terms with the pain that seared through her body in a raging surge that lashed through her nerves rather than merely bathed them in torment.

Tom laughed as Jana hit the ground entirely differently this time, owing to her having withdrawn into the foetal position more quickly than gravity could bring her to the dank earth, where she fell with a thud and a crack of a twig, audible as her face contorted into a silent scream. She made a slight gurgling sound as her eyes bulged. Tom cocked his head as he tried to work out what was going on with her as he slowly built up the pain - her mind was strangely difficult to latch on to. Either her mind was starting to get far away, or his own mind was unwilling to let him go to that place, or rather possibly both of those things.

As her eyes rolled back into her head, it suddenly occurred to Tom that she might be forgetting to breathe. He tried to look carefully, but it was difficult to tell much about her complexion in this light and he didn't really want to illuminate his wand and potentially draw attention to them from afar. He lifted the Curse, and gently prodded her face.

"Jana?"

There being no response, he shook her by the shoulder, and when this failed to have any notable effect, he cast a Reviving Spell.

At this last, she blinked a couple of times - and then vomited impressively, causing Tom to take a quick step back to avoid getting sick on him. Being quite a torrent, it splashed some way from her, missing her robes by good fortune. At least her body was quite animate now, and she spluttered her way onto her hands and knees to throw up again. When she had finished and got as far as merely coughing and clearing her throat, Tom welcomed her back to the land of the living, prompting Jana to look back at him for the first time since the last Curse.

"Please don't do that again", she mumbled, wiping her mouth with a shaking hand.

"Alright", said Tom. "Well, if you do want to practice again, obviously let me know", he suggested.

"Urgh"

"Yes, my thoughts exactly", said Tom, wrinkling his nose at the nauseating smell that had become all too apparent now that the excitements of the moment had passed. "Shall we head back?", he suggested, "Or at least away from this", he added, peering at where Jana had thrown up, then wishing he hadn't, as the smell was stronger there.

"Yeah", she replied, at first failing to stagger to her feet and then succeeding. She still swayed dizzily, and did not appear to be completely with it yet.

Nevertheless, alive and returning to the Castle in one piece, and nobody would be any the wiser.

## Chapter Eighteen

### *Unknown Known*

Not quite ready for walking yet, Jana seated herself somewhat tentatively on a nearby log. She didn't seem to notice the slimy surface, and Tom winced as she sat on it, surely getting greenish guck onto her robes. So much for her miraculous avoidance of getting them messy.

Still, no matter, they could be spruced up before they headed back - Cleaning Charms would work as well out here as anywhere else. He certainly didn't want anyone to be given reason to suspect they'd been in the forest. Or even just that she had, for that matter, since it'd prompt awkward questions that may lead to him despite Jana's best efforts.

She took out her watch, and dropped it on the floor, her hands still shaking. She got off her log to retrieve it, and sure enough, as she stooped it became evident that the backside of her robes was covered in damp greenery now.

"*Scourgify*", said Tom, pointing with his wand. Jana stood up suddenly, if somewhat unsteadily.

"You had rotten tree slime on you", said Tom, by way of explanation. "Turn around again; I'm not finished with it". She did so, and Tom pointed his wand again: "*Tergeo*".

"Thanks", said Jana, weakly. She squinted at her watch in the moonlight, holding it at first one angle and then another, trying to see the time. Evidently it didn't glow like Tom's. He was about to get his own pocketwatch out to check the time himself, when she swore, looking horrorstruck, and nearly dropped her watch a second time, before managing to replace it in her pocket.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom. Surely it couldn't be so crazily late.

"No... One minute..." she replied, getting something else out of another pocket, fumbling with it, and dropping that on the forest floor as well.

"Honestly", said Tom, laughing now, "Gryffindor's star Seeker... Who are you and what have you done with the real Jana Teires?"

Jana however was not laughing, and was now retrieving the dropped object, her oft-carried drink flask, from the slight ditch into which it had fallen leaving her holding only the cap. She shook the flask, as though reluctant to believe it was now emptied of contents after its fall, save perhaps a few drops, which she shook uselessly onto her tongue.

"Gone", she said, looking like she might cry again.

"You can get a drink up at the castle", said Tom, "and if it was some potion, I'm sure you'll cope without for a tiny bit longer".

"No, you don't understand, this potion, it... aaargh!" - she doubled over as though struck in the stomach, or perhaps about to vomit. Tom took a step backwards; Jana again clutched at herself, now all but squatting on the floor, and put out a hand onto the dank earth to steady herself. She looked up at Tom, and seemed about to say something, but did not find the words. From her thoughts, Tom gleaned only that she was unwell, diseased, impure, that something was wrong with her body. He kept his distance.

Had he done something unintended to her with the Cruciatus Curse? Or was this a condition of hers? Was she a werewolf or something?

The answer came a mere instant later, as Jana's hair receded into her skull, finishing just short of disappearing. Tom took one more step backwards, his wand now levelled at her, ready for anything. She looked up at him in horror, her features changing as her face distorted and her hands grew - the thick black lines of dirt remained beneath her fingernails.

The dirty fingers clawed now at her neck; only it was no longer Jana, but someone else in her place that was struggling to breathe. Short tawny hair topped an ugly face, and there was a sound of tearing fabric; Jana's school shirt was too tight for the figure that now replaced hers. Also, her Gryffindor tie was clearly strangling the impostor - it took Tom a moment to realize that this was because the impostor's neck was wider, and not some defensive magic on the part of the tie.

*"Stupefy"* - Tom Stunned the impostor, who stopped trying in vain to remove the tie, and lay limp on the floor. Questioning people works best when they're alive, though, so Tom cut the tie off, while he figured out what to do next. He retrieved Jana's wand, which lay nearby, and looked more closely at the somewhat discoloured face. This was clearly a boy of around Tom's age, give or take a year perhaps, but not a Hogwarts student. His mouth was a little misshapen, and nose slightly crooked. Then Tom realized where he'd seen it before; this was Jana's Boggart, only rather less scarred. He stood up, ready for answers that didn't seem likely to come from an unconscious body.

*"Rennervate"*

The body gasped for air, and then groaned.

"Oh, Tom, you're..." croaked the impostor, but stopped, and cleared his throat. "Tom..." he repeated, and stopped again, with a look first of confusion, and then horror. One hand went to the top of his head as though to check it, and the other to his chest, then down to his groin. He slumped back down onto the ground from which he'd just begun to sit up, before speaking again:

"Oh, just kill me now"

"It'll be my pleasure", said Tom, "but first tell me what you've done with Jana"

"Nothing, or at least I tried", said the boy, nonsensically.

*"Crucio"*

As the boy screamed in pain, Tom glanced in the direction of the lights of Hogwarts Castle, visible through the trees. He considered putting a Silencing Charm on him and relying on getting the information straight from his mind. He released the Cruciatus Curse for a moment.

"Tom, please, no... too much" said the boy.

"Then I'll ask again: where is Jana Teires?"

"I'm here; I'm Jana, please, Polyjuice Potion..." - the boy's thoughts were only on the weak and pained state of his body, which was not useful to Tom.

"I can see you used Polyjuice Potion and I can also see you're not Jana. You're a boy, for a start; and whoever you are, Jana was afraid of you. Now tell me what you've done - or do you need further persuasion?" ask Tom, gesturing with his wand.

"Please, I'm Jana; you've never seen me without Polyjuice Potion before; this is how I look without it"

Tom lowered his wand slightly while he took this in, then raised it again without speaking further yet. The boy's thoughts were now on Jana's body, which also didn't tell him anything.

"Really", said the boy, "ask me anything. Anything I would know".

"Alright, that's a game I can play", said Tom. "What happened when we first met?", he said, closing off his own mind and averting his eyes just slightly, to ward off any possible Legilimency.

"We duelled, you set my hair on fire... Stung my hand, set my hair on fire... The burn gave me a scar; you never saw it though, because it was on this flesh" - he gestured to a shiny patch on his forehead that made his hairline uneven above his left eye.

Tom looked into his mind - or was it really her mind? The thoughts confirmed the story. He wanted to ask about something more secret than their first encounter, though.

"We've duelled for years; what was the first injury you gave to me?", he asked.

"We... I... Have I ever actually... I've never injured you in a duel, not as far as I know anyway... Oh wait, but I bit your lip, at Valentine's Day, and I'm still sorry, and I ruined everything and you were angry and I cried and everyone gave Brandon a hard time because they thought it was because of him but it was because I'd ruined everything with you, and..." - Tom stopped paying attention to the rambling words, and regarded rather the thoughts and mind behind them. It was strange for them to be coming from this body, but it really did appear to be Jana at the fount of it.

"Shut up", said Tom.

"But..."

"Silence", he repeated. "Now, next question: why?"

"Why? Why what?"

"If you are Jana, and you've been taking Polyjuice Potion constantly all the time we've known each other, maintaining that appearance... Why?"

"Oh... Well, this body, it's all wrong for me, isn't it? I'm a girl"

"But this is your own body?"

"By accident of birth! But I hate it, the other one's more me now"

Tom furrowed his brow in contemplation of this.

"So... you're Jana in this body, which you don't like, and the other one you got... Where exactly? Whose body is that? Where did that come from?"

"It's a Muggle's body, I got hair from a wig company. Only need a single hair for a day's supply of potion, so I have more than enough for a lifetime's use"

"A Muggle with hair like that?", asked Tom, skeptically.

"With shortish tatty unevenly cut hair - remember, I bought the hair that was cut off, but when I take the potion, what I get is what's left on her, poor girl. So I spike it, because I can't do much else with it. I'll tell you anything about it... or anything... Talk about my potions... My great-aunt, she'll tell you... Or Healer Tegner, he knows, and Professor Dumbledore, and the Headmaster... Just ask them... Please, it's me"

“Hmm”, said Tom. “I believe you”, he concluded, feeling like was pardoning a condemned convict. There was a long pause.

“Can I get up now?”

Tom nodded, then verbally confirmed “yes” when it became apparent the nod hadn’t been taken as definitive. Jana first took off her obviously constricting shoes with some difficulty, and then struggled to her feet, reaching out for a hand to steady herself, which Tom gave. Perhaps what was strangest was she was now taller than he was, even in her socks.

“You look silly in those clothes now”, observed Tom.

“Thanks. I’m barely in them, in any case”, replied Jana, shuffling uncomfortably, and limping a couple of paces, before stopping. “I’m sorry, very unladylike, but I’m going to have to...” she trailed off, and after some bunching of robes and reaching unsteadily under them, rid herself of her underwear, nearly tripping over in the process and hopping on one foot.

“Jana, what...” began Tom, but was interrupted:

“You try wearing these with... boy bits”

“Thanks; I think I’ll give that a miss”, said Tom.

“Oh Hell... Look at me, seriously”, said Jana, gesturing. A torn blouse with popped-off buttons, missing tie, robes far too short now comically approaching her knees; long socks but no shoes. Mud everywhere. And a boyish body, with features to rival some of those that Tom had seen down at the docks in London.

“Yeah, you do look like quite a state” confirmed Tom. “Rather you than me, having to sneak back in looking like that”

“Balls, I won’t be able to get in”, said Jana, looking panicked.

“Why not? You’ve not forgotten the password again, have you? You can just Confund the painting”

“No, it’s not that, it’s the stairs to my dorm, remember... What if they don’t let me up looking like this?”

“Do they judge by appearances?”, asked Tom.

“I have no idea; I’ve never had a problem before... Tom, what should I do?”

“Well, let’s look at the options. You can just go and chance it, or you can go wild - or wilder than you already are, anyway - and live in the forest. I think some werewolves do that”

Jana looked around her, into the darkness.

“It’s not a full moon tonight”, said Tom. “But they’ll be out there, in human form. I recommend just chancing it up at the castle, and worst case scenario is that you’ll have some explaining to do - wait, no, that really wouldn’t do” he corrected himself, as he realized that this would also mean explaining how she got into the state she was in. Even if she agreed to lie for him, he didn’t trust Dumbledore to be unable to extract the truth from her.

“What then?”

“Dungeons” said Tom, thinking out loud, “You could brew more potion there, but no, that won’t work because of the Lacewing Flies; you don’t want to be camping out for twenty-one days”

“And I’d need my hair”, said Jana.

“Well, or another girl’s hair, just to get you up the stairs to yours”, observed Tom.

“Hospital Wing!” offered Jana.

“Aha, good idea, you can hide there. Nobody will think it’s odd if you’re there for three weeks”, said Tom, without the slightest trace of irony - after all, Jana was a well-known regular at the Hospital Wing. “You said Healer Tegner already knows?”

“Of course he knows; he’s always known, but the point is that he has spare potion for me; I’d just forgotten”

“Oh! Well, to the Hospital Wing, then, without further ado”

“Yep”

“Wait, let’s gather up your things”, said Tom.

“Oh yeah, I’d forgotten - sorry, my head’s really not screwed back on yet” said Jana, looking around. She collected her shoes - she had already pocketed her girly underwear - and Tom repaired her tie.

“My wand, I can’t find it!” noted Jana, somewhat alarmed, looking around her at the shadowy forest floor.

“I have it”, said Tom, taking it out of his wand-pocket, and hesitating only a second before returning it to her.

“Thanks”

Tom summoned the broom and invisibility cloak to him. He slung on the cloak, and hesitated a moment.

“You’re bigger now”, he said, “I don’t think this will cover us both entirely, but it’s better than nothing. Suggest I steer this time though? You still look pretty shaky”.

“Yeah, probably a good idea”, replied Jana, taking hold of the back end of the broom, still fully visible, and groping to find the bottom of the invisibility cloak, to pull it over herself.

“Stop that!” objected Tom. “Grab my backside again and I will leave you in the forest”

“Sorry”, said Jana, giggling despite herself - a strange sound with her different voice. “Honestly didn’t mean to; trying to get this cloak over me, and, well, it’s hard to see where it ends”

“Alright, you under it now?”, asked Tom testily, annoyed at being touched with dirty hands, and wishing he’d thought to blast her with a couple more Cleaning Charms before letting her touch him.

“About as under as I’m going to get, I think”

“Hold on tightly then; if you fall off, I’m not taking responsibility” said Tom, kicking off from the ground as Jana gave him a squeeze. “Stop fidgeting”, he added.

“Sorry, it’s just... Uncomfortable... How do you boys manage it?”

“It’s not comfortable for me either, you know”, said Tom, looking up to the mercifully approaching Astronomy Tower. Upon arrival, he landed more gracefully than he had

anticipated under the circumstances, and staggered forwards off the broom, pulling the invisibility cloak with him, and taking it off. Jana, meanwhile, was rummaging between her legs with a pained expression, rearranging herself.

"I don't fancy us both huddling under this cloak while walking through the castle", said Tom, "So I suggest you borrow it, as you're, well, not quite presentable at the moment".

"Thanks"

"Just one thing first", said Tom, who had had a thought about his own safety, and come to a decision - "*Obliviate*"

Jana swayed slightly as the spell hit her, and Tom recalled the memory of imperiousing and torturing her, switched to her perspective, as he imagined it in any case, and drained that memory of colour (of which there was not much already, being night-time) and form and substance, as they had in Charms class. He brought the memory down to a tiny blurry grey point, and vanished it, before releasing her from the spell.

"Did you... Confund me?" asked Jana, dazed.

"No. Memory Charm"

"Huh? What did I miss?" she asked, clearly trying in vain to recall. Obviously she would not be able to find what was missing, by virtue of it being missing.

"We practiced harmless but forbidden Curses on each other as per our agreement", said Tom, "But now that it's done, it's better if you don't remember actually doing it, since there are people in the castle who could see that memory if you still had it and dwelled on it in their presence"

"See my memories? I didn't know that... Oh, alright... But wait, it wasn't much of a helpful practice for me, if I can't remember it, was it?"

"No", said Tom, "But that can't be helped now. In the original plan, we didn't have to go and disturb Tegner in the middle of the night, and draw attention to our activities"

"That's true", conceded Jana. "What about your memory though? Should I...?"

"Thanks, I'll pass on you tinkering with my mind in your current state", said Tom. "But don't worry; I'm better at keeping my mind closed than you are"

"What are we going to tell Healer Tegner? Will you come with me?"

"Yes, I'll come with you", said Tom, who preferred to manage the situation himself rather than leave it to the fortunes of Jana's ability to lie smoothly, or lack thereof. "And... I don't think we can avoid him knowing we were out of bounds, but he doesn't usually get people into trouble unnecessarily, does he?"

"No, loads of people get hurt breaking rules, and I guess he wants them to trust him enough to go to him to get patched up, rather than try to fix it themselves and make things worse"

"Right, so, cover story... duelling?"

"Well, that is what we're usually doing, and you've plenty of memories to draw from", said Tom. "So yes. But what if he suspects... he does ask questions and might notice that you, or we, are hiding something", mused Tom out loud.

"I'm sorry about all this", said Jana

“Shut up, never mind that; I’m thinking”, said Tom. He looked back at her. “We need a second layer of cover story”, he said. “A cover story we don’t mention when asked, but is there in our minds to be found if he or someone else probes for it”

“What?”, asked Jana, confused. “You know what, never mind, just tell me what to say and do. You’re the Slytherin here; all this cloak-and-dagger stuff is supposed to be your thing”

“It is, it is”, said Tom slowly. “Jana, I can’t believe I’m asking you to do this, but please - without mentioning a word of it to anyone - vividly imagine that we had a romantic encounter in the forest”

“Erm... Alright then, since you want me to”, she said hesitantly. “So it’s a cover story just in my head? In case someone who can read minds looks there?”

“You’ve got it”, said Tom. “Now, imagine it; it’s got to be clear and real to you”

“Alright”, said Jana, momentarily at a loss - Tom had expected this part to come all too easily to her. “But wait, wouldn’t you need to have the same memory?”, she asked.

“Don’t worry; if you’re seeing it, I’ll see it”, said Tom.

“Oh, alright... Wait, what?”, said Jana, shocked upon realising the implications of this last statement.

“I can see into most people’s minds quite easily”, confirmed Tom.

“Then... How could you doubt it was me?”

“Your thoughts were confusing at first, but they did confirm your story”

“But how long... You can read my mind, and you really didn’t know about...” - Jana gestured to her male form.

“It would appear that you just don’t think about it that much”, said Tom. “It’s not like I monitor your thoughts around the clock; I just see snippets here and there”

“Like what?”

“More than I care to list right now, but nothing of drastic importance”, said Tom.

“Anyway, come on, romance, imagine it”

“Right” said Jana. “It’s a bit weird, knowing you’re watching”

“Just do it”

“Can you see this?” asked Jana, imagining kissing him.

“Yes, but you’re supposed to be imagining such things in the forest”

“Oh yeah, sorry”, she said. “Alright, here goes...”

It was not long before Jana’s attention was brought uncomfortably back into the present, her currently male body being too hard to ignore any longer.

“I’m sorry, I just...” she trailed off, adjusting her robes slightly. “Can I have that cloak now, please?”

“Here”, said Tom, handing it to her. She opened it upside down, turned it around, and put it on, becoming a slight haze in the moonlight, rather than a clearly discernible person.

“How do I look?”

“It’s an improvement”, said Tom.



## Chapter Nineteen

### *Back to the Castle*

They silently made their way on foot down into the castle itself, arriving without incident to the Hospital Wing, aided somewhat by it not being very far away; for once, the place being up on the top floor of the castle worked in their favour.

Tom pushed open the door, which was unlocked. There did not seem to be anyone around; of course Healer Tegner was in fact a person with his own life outside of hours, and not actually a part of the furnishings here. Tom dinged the bell, as he had done upon his first visit here.

“Please do not ring this bell again” said the bell’s tinkly voice once more.

“What now?” said Jana, lifting the hood of the cloak to become somewhat more visible while talking.

“Now we wait, it would seem”, he replied.

“What if nobody comes?”

“Somebody will come eventually, even if it’s in the morning”, yawned Tom.

“You’ll stay here all night with me?”, asked Jana.

“Hopefully not - Tegner’s probably on his way already - but if necessary, yes. Let’s see if we can get into the main ward; I don’t like waiting rooms”.

He tried the doors into the larger room that he knew lay behind them, but they were locked.

“*Alohomora*” produced no effect; clearly they were protected against that. “*Reducto*” fared better, and blasted one of the double doors off its hinges, sending it clattering to the floor some distance the other side of the doorway.

“Tom!” exclaimed Jana, following him through nevertheless.

“Always the tone of surprise”, said Tom. “*Reparo*”

The door replaced itself back in the doorway behind them, the hinges resetting themselves.

“Oh”, said Jana. “We could get in trouble though, being here”

Tom gave a cold laugh, and lay on one of the ward beds.

“We are already in trouble”, he said, relaxing with his hands behind his head, “And will be relying on Tegner’s good graces, coupled with my ability to talk believable rubbish, and you collecting well-earned pity”

“I don’t want pity”, said Jana resentfully. She sat down on the bed next to where Tom was lying.

“Well then, you’ll be glad to know that I have no pity at all”, said Tom with a reassuring smile.

“Does none of this matter to you?”, asked Jana. Her facial expressions were strangely familiar, even when her face was not.

“Well, I’d rather be in my own bed going to sleep, and I’d rather not have to talk my way out of trouble, if that’s what you mean”

“No, it isn’t what I meant, although I am sorry about that - I meant this, me, Polyjuice, my, uh... secret”

“Your quirks and medical concerns are hardly anything to do with to me - aside from the immediate inconvenience they’re posing right now”

“Right”, said Jana, thoughtfully. “I know it’s a lot to ask, and I’m not really in a position to be asking for anything, but... Could you please keep it quiet, not tell anyone? I don’t want people to change how they think of me”

“Well obviously I’m going to talk about it with Tegner”, said Tom. “Remind me who else already knows?”

“At Hogwarts, just Dumbledore and the Headmaster. Oh, and Potifer of course, he’s a House Elf. Outside of Hogwarts, my family”

“Not Slughorn? Not Merrythought?”, asked Tom, ignoring Jana’s pained tone at the mention of her family in this context.

“No, why would they?”

“Well, Slughorn is the Potions master, might have helped with something, I don’t know. And Merrythought, well, there’s the matter of your Boggart, if nothing else, never mind that she carries around a Sneakoscope that should detect people in disguises and whatnot”

“Huh. I wonder why I never set that off”, mused Jana. “Maybe it understands me better than my family, and gets that it’s actually the more honest me, not some charade. How depressing is that, if a trinket can grasp that and my family can’t?”

“Stupid Muggles; what can you expect?”, said Tom, dismissively. “Anyway, why does a House Elf know?”

“Oh, he wakes me up during the night to make sure I get my potion and don’t transform in my sleep”, said Jana.

“You never get a night’s sleep without being woken up by a House Elf during it? Rather you than me”

“I take other potions for the restfulness, so it’s alright. Didn’t you notice I’m more awake than you are right now?”

“I didn’t, but then, I’m quite tired”, said Tom. “So nobody else in your dorm knows? Not even Clemence? I thought you two were joined at the hip when you’re not with me”

“No, she doesn’t know”, said Jana, ruefully. “Do you think I should tell her?”

“No idea. I barely know the girl. She seems to like you though”

“But that’s the thing though, she likes me as I am, not like this. She really doesn’t have any boy friends, and...” - here Jana was interrupted by the arrival through the double doors of Healer Tegner, looking like he had perhaps been not quite running, but certainly travelling at a speedy pace to arrive here in the time they had been waiting, which was surely still under five minutes.

“What happened here?” he asked, without preamble, as Tom sat up and got off the bed, and he, Tegner, took in the sight of Jana’s current condition.

“Potion”, said Jana, “I need my spare Polyjuice Potion, sorry, I ran out in a stupid situation”

“I see”, said Tegner. “And you?” he asked of Tom.

“I’m fine; I’m just here as moral support”, said Tom.

“Moral support? I see”, said Tegner. “Are you both well otherwise?”

“Yes”, they both replied, as Jana stood up, and her legs nearly buckled under her.

“You sure?” asked Tegner.

“Yep”, said Jana, “Sorry, we were duelling, know we shouldn’t have been”

“I’m struggling here”, said Tegner. “Are you two friends, or enemies?”

“Friends”, they replied in unison.

“She got banned from duelling club”, said Tom. “So we were duelling outside, to keep up her practice”

“A word, if I may”, said Tegner, speaking to Jana, and indicating to his office. She went with him, a look of concern on all three of their faces, each for a different reason. In Tegner’s office, however, no longer audible to Tom but perfectly observable by mind alone, it transpired that Tegner simply wanted to check that Tom’s presence was not in any fashion problematic; Jana assured him of course that it was not.

“You two”, said Tegner upon having opened the door to his office again, and now visiting a store cupboard, presumably to find the spare Polyjuice Potion, “...have no need of enemies, with friends like each other. After the lightning incident in the Great Hall, I had hoped you might actually follow Professor Merrythought’s advice - ah, here we are” he added, upon retrieving a stoppered bottle and handing it to Jana. “You put the hair in already, I think?” he checked.

Jana unstoppered the bottle and smelled it.

“Yep. Well, here goes. Behold, the marvellous metamorphosing Jana Teires”, she said, taking a large mouthful and then urgently looking for somewhere to put the bottle. Tegner took it off her.

As with her transformation the other way, the two most immediately noticeable things were the change in height and hair, though it was not Jana’s spikes that arrived, so much as limply hanging roughly hewn hair that partially obscured her face. As she shrunk back to her more usual Jana-sized body, the invisibility cloak that she had left open but still loosely draped around her now fell down, no longer held up by her shoulders that were back to their normal more diminutive dimensions. Tom wanted to retrieve it, but also wanted to stay clear of her remaining transformation.

“Oh, it’s good to be back”, said Jana when she was indeed fully returned to her usual form. She pushed her hair out of her eyes, and then felt various parts of herself with her hands, as though to make sure.

“Would you perhaps like some privacy?” suggested Tegner.

“What? Oh, no, I was just checking... And where did my shoes go? Ah, there they are...” - she sat next to where Tom was now stood, and put on her shoes.

“Jana, you’re erm, falling out of your blouse”, observed Tegner. “Riddle, be a gentleman” he added, with a shooing gesture. Tom glared at Tegner; he had no particular interest in being a, well, Peeping Tom, and was irked by the insinuation.

“Huh?” said Jana, “Oh, yeah, sorry... I seem to be missing a couple of buttons, and I must have forgotten my bra in the forest”

“The forest?” repeated Tegner. Jana froze.

“I mean, at the lakefront, where it meets the forest”

“You lost your bra... while duelling?” enquired Tegner.

“It snapped when I transformed” replied Jana irritably, her annoyance helping what was in fact the truth to sound more credible.

“I see”, said Tegner. “Well, I do hope both of you have enough sense to keep well clear of the Forbidden Forest. Especially you, Riddle, after your own incident in the forest”

It was Tom’s turn to look confused for an instant, before realising Tegner was referring to the spider incident, of which he had been the victim, and not the unicorn incident or the werewolf incident, of which he had more memorably been the perpetrator. He closed his mind to such thoughts as he shifted his gaze.

“Yes, I will”, said Tom, momentarily searching for the correct polite form of address for Healer Tegner and not finding it. He wasn’t a “Professor”, was he a “Sir”? “Healer” sounded odd. Who knew. Tegner didn’t seem concerned about that aspect, though.

“As for your... duelling activities”, said Tegner with some hesitation, “I strongly recommend you desist. Of course I have no power to stop you from rule-breaking and thus getting into far worse trouble than you have tonight, but I daresay a word to Professor Merrythought would suffice to really cramp your style. Hopefully that will not be necessary?”

“Yes, hopefully” agreed Jana with a nod. “I mean, certainly. Of course.” Tom gave her a withering look, and Tegner sighed.

“On a more immediate topic”, he said, “you seem about ready to head back, will you be taking this potion with you, since you ran out?”

“No”, said Jana, “You keep it here; I have plenty back in the Tower, I just couldn’t get to it because of, well, how I looked”

“The Fat Lady wouldn’t let you in?” asked Tegner with a frown.

“No, it’s not that”, said Jana, “But my stock of potion is locked in my trunk in my dorm, and we have these stairs that are alarmed and... boys can’t go up them, and that body... I didn’t have this body...”

“You’ve never had a problem with the stairs before?”

“No”

“Then I expect you’d have been fine tonight”, said Tegner. “Polyjuice Potion won’t change how those stairs see someone”

“You sure?”, asked Jana.

“Rather sure”, said Tegner. “When I was a student... Well, let’s just say that you’ll need to be better prepared than just Polyjuice Potion if you want to sneak a boy up those stairs - not that I recommend trying. Anyway, right now, I suggest we all head back to our respective sleeping quarters - unless there’s anything else you need here?”

They shook their heads, and Tom picked up his broom and slung the invisibility cloak over one shoulder as they headed for the door. There was obviously no point in wearing it just yet, nobody would challenge them while they were with Tegner.

“Well, this is where I leave you”, he said at a small junction of staircases. “Who knows what possessed them to put the Hospital Wing at the top of so many stairs”

“That would be Helga Hufflepuff”, said Tom, who had himself wondered the same previously, but had learned the reason from one of the books that he bought last year. “Hufflepuff argued that those of House Gryffindor would be more likely to need medical

attention more often and more urgently than the other Houses, so the Hospital Wing was put nearest to them”

“Ha!” laughed Tegner, “That sounds about right. In any case, I’ll bid you goodnight now, and urge you to go directly back to your own Houses without getting into further trouble along the way”

They assured him that they would, and bade him goodnight in return.

“What a night!” expressed Jana, when Tegner had left and the two of them now walked alone down the shadowy and somewhat draughty corridor that led to Gryffindor Tower.

“Not exactly as I expected it”, agreed Tom, “But it definitely could have gone worse”

“How?” asked Jana. “How could it possibly have gone worse?”

“Well, we got into no trouble despite breaking at least half a dozen school rules, not to mention any more severe infractions”, he replied, opting to indeed not mention any more severe infractions. After all, the walls quite literally had ears, in the sense that there were portraits dotted intermittently along their route, and that was even without reckoning on potential hazards such as Peeves, or any of the ghosts.

Jana made as though to take hold of Tom’s hand, but just bumped her own awkwardly against him as he had his hands full already with his broom in one hand, and his invisibility cloak in the other.

“Are you alright?”, she asked.

“What? Of course I’m alright. Bit tired, but I’ll live. Why?”

They came to a halt in front of the portrait that guarded the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room.

“Just... All this. Me. My secret. Bit of a surprise maybe?”

“Well, yes, you certainly succeeded in surprising me. Congratulations”

“It doesn’t bother you?”, she asked. Tom reflected on this.

“It does bother me”, he replied slowly and thoughtfully. “But that’s not your problem”, he added. “Goodnight, Jana”

“Wait, no, it is my problem”, said Jana urgently as Tom turned to go. He stopped and turned back to her. He’d hear her out, so long as she could get to the point quickly.

“How?”, he asked.

“Well... of course it’s my problem if you have a problem with me”, she said. “What can I do to... Can I... I know you must feel like I’ve been an awful friend to not tell you, but...”

“Jana, it’s not about you”, said Tom impatiently. “I do not care about your potions usage as it does not affect me. I do however confess to being somewhat vexed that I failed to notice what you’ve been doing. But that’s not a matter of consequence to you. Forget it”.

“So you’re not angry at me or upset or anything?”

“No”, said Tom, “But if you keep asking me, I’m going to throw myself off this staircase in a minute”, he said, peering seven floors down the wide gap between the staircases. “And fortunately I have a broom, so that would actually be quite safe”, he added, contemplating it.

“Sorry”, said Jana, with a slight giggle, but then took on a more serious tone again: “And you won’t tell anyone? I don’t want people to change how they think of me”

Tom rolled his eyes.

“I’m hardly going to gossip about... what we’ve been up to”, he said.

“Thanks; I owe you, Tom. You’re such a good person, you know”

Tom wasn’t sure what constituted a good person, but stood there with the broom in one hand and the invisibility cloak in the other, while Jana hugged him. He sincerely hoped her hands were cleaner now after two transformations.

“You don’t like me touching you?”, she asked, as he shook her off.

“I’m tired; you’re dirty. Go and wash. I want to go to bed”

“Right. Yeah. Goodnight”, replied Jana, a little deflated but conceding to depart.

“Veracity”, she said to the portrait, which swung aside. “And Tom, I’m sorry about... Well, goodnight” she concluded, disappearing through the portrait-hole.

Tom put on the invisibility cloak, but remained where he was for the moment, following Jana with his mind. He was curious to see how she approached the stairs, which she did with some trepidation but no problems. Upon arriving to the girls’ dormitory, she was accosted by Valerie, who lay awake in her own bed, the curtains of the four-poster not drawn.

“Jana, what happened to you?”

“Long story; I’m fine though; go to sleep, Val”

“How come your hair’s down; did you have a shower somewhere else?”

“No, but I need one now”

“Have you been seeing a boy? Is it Riddle?”

“Yes, but not like that. We were duelling. Don’t tell anyone, or I’ll be in trouble”

“Oh... Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, Val”, said Jana, departing now for what would probably be the bathroom. “I won’t be long; see you soon”.

Tom considered keeping an eye on where her thoughts would go once she was alone in the shower and had time to think properly about things, but as it turned out, her thought-stream upon commencing her shower included a conscious decision to put off trying to figure things out until morning, so Tom soon abandoned that effort, and disconnected from her mind, as it rather simply dwelled on the evening’s experiences.

He looked down the stairwell again, and mounted the footbar of the broom. Keeping the broom vertical, he lifted up and over the stone bannister, and descended straight downwards in the space between the staircases. A strange sensation, but a lot quicker than taking all the stairs.

Down on the ground floor, Tom’s journey went without interruption, even when he passed three younger Hufflepuff students who certainly should not have been up and about so late either - one of them clearly noticed him gliding by, as the broom was not entirely covered, but must have mistaken him for a bat or a ghost, as he didn’t even mention it to his comrades.

*"Praxis"*, said Tom, dismounting as he reached the Slytherin Common Room entrance. The door slid open, and Tom went in, shedding his invisibility cloak as the barrier shut behind him.

"Good evening, Tom", came Marca's voice from a chair some way into the Common Room.

Tom raised a hand in greeting, but otherwise ignored her as he made his way to the boys' dormitory. He had no intention of fielding questions and practicing Occlumency at this time.

## Chapter Twenty

### *The Beginning*

“Are you coming to breakfast, Tom?”

“You go on”, said Tom; “I’ll meet you down in the Great Hall; save me a place”

“Right-oh”, said Tiernan, dashing off. Tom, meanwhile, worked to make sure he had the remaining parts of his Wideye Potion prepared and ready, the very last part of which he’d finish off in time for taking it before their second lesson of the day. Ideally he’d be able to take it before their first lesson of the day, but that just wasn’t going to happen - he’d started it on to brew just after two in the morning, and that meant it wasn’t going to be ready until just after ten o’clock. So instead, he was just going to have to suffer through the first lesson - Defence Against the Dark Arts, of all things - and then enjoy the wakefulness-promoting effects of the Wideye Potion thereafter.

“*Serpensortia*”

Perhaps because he was tired, the snake that he conjured was some sort of boa, rather than the more threatening venomous snake he had intended. Oh well, it would do.

“*Look, here’s a nice warm stove for you*”, said Tom to the snake, indicating to his portable cauldron-stove. “*Enjoy its heat, but don’t let anyone else approach until I get back*”

“*It’s a deal*”, returned the boa, encircling the equipment lazily - not looking like the very most attentive of guardians, but at least it’d be able to report if someone did tamper with the thing.

Content that his brew would now look after itself adequately in his absence, and that he had the remaining ingredients ready to add with no fuss between lessons, Tom set off to go to breakfast. He’d just made it as far as the main Common Room door, when Marca emerged from the girls’ dorm.

“Good morning”, she said, quickening her pace to catch up with him.

“Morning”, said Tom, “Not like you to be running late”

“I went to bed only recently”, she explained. “You might recall I was still awake when you returned from your nocturnal activity”

“I recall”, said Tom.

“Was it anything that will probably make news all around the school, such as your previous nocturnal activities?”

“I certainly hope not”, said Tom. “I was practicing illegal Curses”

“That will surely make news”, observed Marca, “Who was receiving these Curses? And which Curses?”

“It won’t”, Tom reaffirmed, “Or at least should not. As for which”, he added, noting that they were still in the section of corridor without portraits, and that Peeves was unlikely to be down in the dungeons, as he never was, “the Imperius and Cruciatu Curses”

“You are truly insane”, said Marca.

“Come now Marca, what was it you said yourself about the importance of a balanced education?”

“Preferably safe things”

“No harm done”, shrugged Tom with a smile.

“Nevertheless, it is very dangerous”

“Jana and I have done lots of Curses before; she’s a tough girl”, said Tom. “I have tested and verified this extensively”

“I mean for you. It is a liability”

“She won’t tell anyone”

“Her mind is so closed as mine?”

“No, but I erased the memory in question. Consider it testament to my confidence in your mind that I allow you knowledge of it”

“I think you like to... show off”, suggested Marca as an alternative explanation.

“Rather, I like to give you a short simple answer so that you stop asking questions before we get to where there are more people to overhear. But I’ll grant it’s true that there’s a strange paradox in performing feats of... the kind of magic that isn’t taught here; one wants acclaim and recognition, but without the less fortunate consequences of people knowing about such”

“You push borders”, said Marca, “and it will cause much trouble for you if you do not find borders to draw in your actions”

“I don’t do well at keeping within limits”, said Tom, with a smile. “Still, if I can Disapparate and Apparate at need in the Great Hall, I could maybe spring myself from Azkaban if needs be”, he joked.

“Well, either you will eventually receive an opportunity to test that theory, or alternately you can exercise a little more self-restraint, to avoid it in the first place”

“You’re such a nag”

“A nag? It is... a horse?” asked Marca, uncertainly.

“Also a person who complains and criticises too much”, said Tom. “I don’t know why we call it that. Tiernan might know”.

“Perhaps it has to do with nargles”, suggested Marca thoughtfully, as they made the final ascent into the Great Hall. “Or perhaps more likely with nagaika”

“Nagaika?”

“Nagaika”, repeated Marca, conjuring from her wand a vicious-looking whip-like implement, resembling a short snake with a flattened metal end. A couple of first-year Ravenclaws exiting the Hall dived out of the way to avoid her.

“That looks like fun”, observed Tom.

“It is a question of perspective”, said Marca, disappearing it again.

“Tiernan”, said Tom, as they took their seats at the Slytherin table, “Why is a nag a nag?”

“Come again?”

“A nag, not like a horse but like Marca; do you know why it’s called that?”

“Hmmm... No” said Tiernan. “Let’s think; naggles, snaggle, snag, nagle, nargle, naga, nagini?”

“What are these things?”, asked Tom.

“Words”, said Tiernan, unhelpfully. “Magical things, in the latter cases; nargles are mythical creatures, naga and nagini are mythical snake things, but I don’t see any relation

unless it's about biting, carping... yes that'll be it, of course, nagging is like gnawing, and as an activity it's attacking and eating away at a person"

"Not at the person", objected Marca, "At things around the person. Get rid of those things, and it is like removing the extra stone from around a statue. It makes the form.

"Aha", said Tom. "Eating away the excess rubbish, like a maggot"

"Not precisely the example I would choose", said Marca.

Jana did not seek out Tom's company over the course of the week, but did not seem too terribly out of sorts either - or if she did, it was not too focussed around Tom, and if anything she busied herself rather more than usual in her schoolwork. When her thoughts did stray to the events of Monday night, naturally they flitted around the section that Tom had erased from her memory, and slid rather more readily to the events immediately afterwards.

Tom did notice one useful recurring thought in her mind, and that was the idea that she needed to find a way to overcome once and for all the limitations of her body situation, as she no longer had so much confidence in her current method, which she had used with such trust so far, to such an extent that she had come to take it for granted, no bigger deal than a hair care potion. While this approach had resulted in almost three years nearly without incident, it had become a cause of concern for her, and now she wanted to do better, to put her limitations in the past.

In short, a very Slytherin ideal from an otherwise very Gryffindor girl, and Tom could readily understand the will to mastery of one's own self and one's allotted place in life, and to Hell with any expectations of settling for less.

Tom hardly needed companionship or approval in his own quest to overcome his own limitations - specifically, his chief human weakness, the body's readiness to die - but he wouldn't say no to allies, others who could pitch in to the race to secure immortality before it was too late, and a Potioneer who'd been known to improve on even Slughorn's recipes could hardly be anything other than an asset in that regard. And not just her - Tom now knew that Tegner was at least open-minded to the notion of supporting the modification of one's body even outside the ranges of what was generally considered normal.

Today, though, Tegner would be engaged in the rather more prosaic pursuit of ensuring Jana and thirteen other young Quidditch players were not scuppered beyond repair in the quest for glory in the final match of this year's Quidditch Cup.

The match was between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, but the close standings in the Cup meant that Slytherin could also win. If Jana caught the Snitch and with it won the game, Gryffindor would come out the clear winners, having won every match this year. If Fame caught the Snitch and with it won the game, things would get very complicated, as this would result in a three-way tie on game outcomes, and the overall victor could be any House but Hufflepuff, and would be based which teams had scored what against which other teams.

Owing to widespread confusion about this, the assembled crowds had the exact machinations of the complex tie-break system explained to them first by Professor Vassy,

the usual Quidditch referee, and then by Professor Cicada. By the time the game got to start, Tom was none the wiser regards the actual base rules behind the tie-breaks, but it was clear that Ravenclaw would have to win this game for Slytherin to be in with a chance (as otherwise Gryffindor would win everything), but the score would have to be very close, such that Slytherin's victory over Ravenclaw earlier in the season would trump what whatever excess Ravenclaw accrued against Gryffindor today, which would nevertheless need to be a greater excess than Gryffindor had achieved over Slytherin earlier in the season.

What with a need for one team to catch the Snitch and the other to accrue many goals first, arguments about exactly who or what they should be cheering for, if anyone or anything, became sufficiently heated that hardly anyone from Tom's immediate vicinity saw it when Fame caught the Snitch around ten minutes into play, winning both the game and the Quidditch Cup for Ravenclaw, very decisively indeed.

This turn of events was not without its benefits to Tom, at least, as Jana was not nearly so hated amongst Slytherins as she would have been had she won every game this year, and with it the Quidditch Cup for Gryffindor. This meant that Tom being seen talking with her alone again in one of the library's quiet annexes was viewed as an oddity that probably had some sensible reason, as opposed to being considered the highest of treasons. This suited Tom well, because he wanted to do exactly what Healer Tegner had warned him sternly not to do, and bother Jana with all manner of questions that had struck him since the recent events.

"So you can take nearly any damage to your body, and just drink your potion, and be right as rain because you'll revert back to how you should be looking?"

"Looking right as rain isn't always the same as being right as rain, you know", Jana pointed out. "Remember when I got hit by that Bludger in first year; my injuries still needed treating; the potion would only have covered it up. But I can always look like I'm alright on the surface, which is... nice, I suppose; certainly a comfort".

"Aren't you rather depending on that Muggle, then?" asked Tom, with some measure of distaste.

"To a degree - I mean, I don't need anything physical from her, like I say, I have enough hairs to last a lifetime"

"Really? How many is that?", he asked. "Mind you, I suppose it depends on the lifetime in question"

"I only need one in each day's potion flask that lasts me through the day, taking a glug hourly - so I've enough for far more than a human lifetime"

"Hmm", said Tom, taking this in. "But meanwhile, if her appearance changes, yours does too?"

"Things that happen to her body, happen to mine... more or less"

"More, or less?"

"Well, less, I guess. The point is that changes that happen to her do happen to me; I've got taller, for instance - no, really, I have", she added, when Tom gave her a skeptical

look - "Also grown more, er, outwards" she said, gesturing to her chest, "And my hair's not always exactly the same length; it grows a bit then goes shorter again".

"So if I visited your Muggle and cut her face, the injury would show up on yours?"

"Uhm... Delightful idea, but... I don't know. I don't think so. I've never acquired any injuries from her, no cuts or bruises or burns or anything, not so much as a scraped knee. So either she's several worlds more careful than I am...."

"Which is quite plausible, all things considered", interrupted Tom.

"...or little things like that just don't get reproduced by the potion"

"But the haircuts she has..."

"Show up, yes, even though you'd think they'd be more trivial to the body than actual injuries. My theory is that it has to do with the person having a more long term look or appearance, so the haircuts fit into that but little injuries don't - but that's just my best guess, I definitely could be wrong. I tried to look up more information, but there just isn't much to go off - people haven't experimented much, and the ones that have usually get carted off for veering into the Dark Arts"

"Well, it's a pity if someone found out but the knowledge has been lost for that reason", observed Tom. "Then again, I suppose it's not too surprising if people aren't volunteering to lop bits of them off and see what effect it has on someone who now looks like them... I wonder if your Muggle loses a leg, if you'll just wake up one morning and have to hop to classes and hope nobody notices", mused Tom.

"Peg-leg Jana, Quidditch-oddity extraordinaire... but in reality it's a serious issue, I mean, she's not going to live forever"

"Are you?", asked Tom, as by now he had learned most Witches and Wizards tended to expect to die despite their being a plethora of ways to at least forestall that fate, such that an indefinite postponement should be possible for even a mediocre practitioner of magic, let alone the possibility of a great sorcerer proofing himself against death completely.

"Going to live forever? Of course not, nobody does, even in our world, but I'll be rather stymied if she dies before I do"

"I suppose that's why you constantly rush headlong into danger, in the hopes you can beat her to it?" joked Tom, who was nevertheless pleased that Jana, despite being a Mudblood, did consider the magical world her world - even if she seemed just as resigned to death as the common throng.

"Well, I hope to live a long and happy life; I've just ended up with hobbies that occasionally conflict with that", she conceded.

"How do you plan to have a long and happy life, then?", asked Tom, interested to hear her proposed strategy.

"I don't know", said Jana. "Start by trying to do well at school, train hard at Quidditch and who knows, maybe I could become a professional player - if not, I guess I'll probably become a Potioneer of some kind, or maybe just get married and..."

"How will these things extend your life?", asked Tom. "The Potioneering I can see at least being contributory, but aside from that..."

"I thought you asked me what I planned to do in life?"

“No, I asked you how you were going to go about acquiring the long and happy life you mentioned”

“Ah, I think we got crossed wires... Well it’s more about the happy part than the long part, really, though long would be nice”

“Happiness is a curious and elusive beast”, mused Tom, who had little understanding of such but considered it some places down his list of priorities, “but your happiness will be rather cut short if you don’t fix the problem of your imminent death”

“You what?”

“As it stands, you’re going to die, yes?” prompted Tom, astonished that he was having to have this conversation. “Not necessarily right now this instant, but at some point, could be in sixty years time if some accident or incident doesn’t get you first”

“Well, yes”

“So surely if you extend that time by whatever means, you’ll have more time in which to seek the happiness you crave”

“I hope it doesn’t take me sixty years to find happiness”, objected Jana.

“If you find it tomorrow, would you want to die the day after tomorrow?”

“Hopefully not”, replied Jana, “That would put a bit of a downer on my happiness”

“So whenever your death occurs, it would be better later than sooner, and better never at all”

“But it’s not like we get to choose...”

“Are you a Witch or not? Dippet is three hundred odd years old. Merrythought’s over half that. Nicholas Flamel, six hundred. A mind like yours put to the task, Jana, and you could get to be their age and still have your full youthful vigour. It’s only a matter of solving the problems between you and it, one by one. You want a more permanent solution to your body problem, I think?”

“Yes, of course”

“So find it; find a permanent solution, not one that will wither and die”

“That’s a tall order, Tom”

“And you’re a short girl, I know” said Tom, not resisting to crack a joke at the expense of her height. “But you can do it, Jana. Think on it; that’s all I ask of you”.

Jana’s mind raced to the task of wondering whether it was possible. Tom would not push her, not yet. For now, the idea could play on her mind; that would be enough. If he tried to force her hand already, she’d get distracted by the upcoming school exams, and then lose all momentum during summer, and consider it a thing of the past by next year; something she tried and failed. All in all, he’d rather it be nothing but a daydream for her now, a spark that could be kindled into a blazing furnace of industry later.

Indeed April faded into May, and then it wasn’t long before exam time came - which went smoothly enough, without presenting much challenge to Tom who was now some way ahead of all classes, even his weakest, that still being Herbology. As Professor Diggory had become a little unreasonably biased against Slytherins this year, Tom had had cause to make extra certain to stay on top of his subject, for pride’s sake as much as anything else.

While he was not entirely sure that Messrs Rosier, Nott, Mulciber, and others in the year above were necessarily forgiven by Diggory for any possible transgressions they may or not have perpetrated, Tom himself did not seem to have been marked unfairly at all, judging from his good grade next to their rather more questionable ones.

The usual unspoken friendly competition between Tom and Marca had come out with her slightly on top, overall, though Tom put this down mostly to the fact that much of his learning this year had been about things well above and beyond the curriculum, more so than the previous year. Of course he worked extra learning into his answers or practical presentations where appropriate, but there was only so much mileage that could be got out of this, and Marca's greater focus on the things that would actually score well paid off for her.

Still, Tom's grades were not to be sniffed at, something that Slughorn was happy to note in what would be the final Slug Club dinner of the year, ostensibly in celebration of exam results.

"And of course I had to give you full marks for your answer to the question about the uses of *minyak kelapa* - you quite clearly got the idea with that one, I can tell you!"

"What did you put?" asked Abraxas; "I spent a good twenty minutes jotting down all the uses I could think of, before I just had to move on to another question"

"Ah, yes", said Tom, "I do admit to a little time-saving strategy on that one"

"What did you put?" echoed Jana.

"Well, the question asked what *minyak kelapa* can be used for... It seemed a little broad to me, to say the least, so asked a question in reply: what can't *minyak kelapa* be used for?"

"A fine answer, and definitely an attitude that will take you far in life, even if not quite enough to surpass Miss Teires here when it comes to actual score overall - life's not all about the numbers, is it?" he laughed.

"Surely", said Marca, "Examinations as a measure of ability are important to demonstrate aptitude in life"

"Aptitude in life isn't about performance in exams though", argued Hufflepuff Rastus Warren. "I mean, cleverer people usually have less friends"

"Fewer friends", Marca corrected him, automatically, having recently learned this nuance herself.

"And this is exactly why!", proclaimed Warren in exasperation, gesturing to Marca.

Discussions amongst Slughorn and the older students, especially those who would now be leaving Hogwarts to go out into the wider world, revolved a lot around their intentions when it came to the state of affairs in the world and their place in it. Some, like Marius Shacklebolt, were intending to enlist immediately to assist in the conflict, and had only to settle down on a more specific role. Others, like Violet, intended to keep out of harm's way and avoid committing to any potentially losing side.

Some of the younger students being inspired by notions of excitement and glory, talk turned to what would happen here at Hogwarts if the war came this far, and the castle became besieged, as castles are wont to do.

“What would you do, Sir? Would you fight in a battle if it came to it?”, asked Brandon.

“Well, I suppose my first priority would be keeping you lot out of trouble”, said Slughorn, “Or failing that, keeping you in trouble in the right places, as it seems some of you I’d struggle to keep from the fray!” he observed, clearly having no ethical qualms about using child soldiers.

“Well obviously students would help, Gryffindors at least”, Shackbolt stated flatly, as though staying out of the conflict were out of the question.

“Then after that”, said Slughorn, “I suppose I’d try to draw on my not inconsiderable resources to get help, before I got to busying myself with the invaders”

“Have you ever killed anyone before, Sir?”, asked Brandon.

“My dear boy, I’m a schoolteacher, not a soldier; I’ve certainly never killed anybody and I certainly hope to never be in such a situation. Let us all hope that war doesn’t come this far; war makes killers out of all kinds of people - well, killers or corpses, anyway”, he concluded, looking suitably ill-at-ease with the thought.

“Or both”, offered Pinkstone helpfully.

“Is it true that Grindelwald’s using inferii?”, asked Shackbolt.

“That have been no confirmed reports; in all likelihood the claims are just propaganda, Marius”.

It was clear to Tom that Slughorn was more hoping that the reports weren’t true, rather than believing that Grindelwald was not really using the animated corpses of his fallen enemies. Obviously, if Grindelwald was anything close to being sane, thought Tom, it would only make sense to not let the dead go to waste. After all, what else were they good for? Animated corpses were clumsy warriors of low quality, from what he had understood from Merrythought’s teachings on them, but there was a place in war for disposable hordes to wear down the ranks.

After all, every tool available in war should be used - and any who abstain from doing so due to high-minded noble pretentiousness would surely lose, by virtue of so hobbling themselves with their moralizing weaknesses. Tom would certainly not invite weakness, and he could not envision Grindelwald doing so either.

When the time came for the traditional End-of-year Feast, it wasn’t without predictable sermonizing from Headmaster Dippet on the importance of keeping their heads down, and especially in the case of those now moving on from Hogwarts, not rushing off to get themselves killed and thus waste seven years of schooling.

These were sentiments with which Tom privately agreed, but it seemed quite pointless to lecture them on the matter - fence-sitters were few and far between, and most of those concerned were already either going to get involved in the conflict or avoid it.

Tom watched Dumbledore studiously for any reactions, but today the man might have been modelling Marca, based on his stony impassivity. There he was, the Head of Gryffindor House, sending off a contingent of young Gryffindors to war - while he on the other hand had ignored pleas for help from the Minister of Magic himself.

Diggory, meanwhile, had his own kind of stoicism, but in his case it was largely a pitiable hope that those to whom he was now bidding farewell would be able to weather the war, endure, and live to happier times on the other side of it - as though there would ever truly be safety and peace, without a strong magical ruler to maintain such. The squabbling International Confederation of Wizards couldn't do it, and wouldn't do it even if they could. Such safety and peace would require a firmer and surer hand. It could be Grindelwald, it could be Tom, but it needed to happen. In a way Tom hoped Grindelwald would fail just so that he could do it himself - but he also wasn't going to complain if Grindelwald did it for him; he was sure there'd be a good place for him in such a regime, and he could assemble everything he needed from within it.

Vassy's mind was turbulent and her thoughts were difficult to catch; her students were mostly amongst the happiest in the Great Hall; Ravenclaw had won both the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup this year, coming out on top while Slytherin and Hufflepuff distracted themselves with each other too much. And yet it was tempered with a kind of pain that kept causing Tom to lose his grip on her mind, as often occurred for him when people were experiencing feelings that he didn't know how to process. It wasn't that Tom was devoid of feelings of his own - he had his rage, always there to be unleashed at will, and sometimes requiring him to keep it in check behind his own personal façade, but other things, like the feelings that meant Vassy had to try to stop herself from crying now, were strange and alien.

Slughorn was another matter entirely.

"How do you think Slughorn really feels about the war, and Grindelwald's cause, and all that?" asked Emlyn the next morning, on the train home. While they weren't in a private compartment, they were at the back of a carriage, with a suitable cushion of known Slytherins between them and any eavesdroppers, so Tom answered directly and to the point:

"It disturbs him deeply. He has his comfortable world, his web of contacts, everything arranged the way he wants it. A regime change threatens all that. He'll adapt if needs be, of course; he's an excellent Slytherin. But he'd rather stick to his comforts, so he mostly wishes Grindelwald would just fizzle out and disappear"

"I think he's one of the few of us who'd stand to lose something meaningful", mused Abraxas. "For most of us it'd be a vast improvement"

"Of course", said Tom.

"The Ministry of Magic is weak", said Abraxas. "I mean, my family has half of the Ministry in its pocket - you know, the Golden Rule: he with the gold makes the rules. So in a way it benefits us to keep that. But there's only so much that can be done by us loyal Pureblood families, nudging here and there. We might lose a strong position over our country's politics if Grindelwald wins the war, but... in a way, it'd be worth it, as his politics would benefit us all far more than our current influence can achieve without a complete overhaul. I know which side my family will be on if it comes to it"

There were murmurs of assent from those around.

"Well then", said Tom, "We need to be ready when the time does come - all of us, together"

“What, literally us?” asked Emlyn.

“Yes, literally us”, replied Tom. “Hogwarts is a castle, and it’s a stronghold of magic, and there’s a wealth of power within - of its own, and also because that’s where the strongest and most important of British Wizards will rally if it comes to it. So if the war comes to Britain, rest assured, the important battle will be for Hogwarts; not for the Ministry of Magic”

“So what then?” asked Belinda. “You’re saying... Be ready to help Grindelwald take it?”

“Be ready to be able to strike whatever decisive blow is needed at the time”, said Tom.

“So we train duelling, we keep abreast of politics?”

“Yes, Belinda, but more than that, we keep to each other. Like Halloween; organized, efficient, doing what we want because nobody can stop us. Disciplined, able to make hard strikes where it counts and then disappear again”

“Whose discipline, yours?”, challenged Abraxas, but Tom was fairly sure that anyone else present would not need to ask that question. He turned to Belinda first, to back him up, as she had already pledged such and was in any case easy to prod into any fight.

“If I lead you into battle, will you follow, Belinda?”

“Just say the word; you know it”

“How about you, Tiernan?”

“Of course; it goes without saying”

“Antonin, what do you think of my leadership for such operations?”

“It is without fault. You lead us into conflict and out of it again; we accomplish the objectives and could not do it so well without you”

“Marca?”

“I have no wish to engage in battle or other dangerous activities without need”, she said, “but if there is need and if it is to be done - with or without me - then I cannot deny, that you are a powerful leader and will accomplish the necessary”.

“Emlyn?”

“I’m just sorry you didn’t include me in the last one”, said Emlyn - who was ill-disciplined and a lousy duellist, but his verbal support as a respected Pureblood Wizard was more useful here than his actual presence in a fight or other such activity.

“Shall we go ask Nott, Rosier, and Mulciber what they think?” offered Tom, gesturing to the seats nearest in the carriage that backed on to the area in which they themselves were sitting.

“No”, said Abraxas, “You’ve made your point. And there’s definitely something about you; whatever happened to your parents, you’re obviously of good blood, from how much of a natural you are stuff, and you’re... indomitable. I don’t toady like some do, but I do respect you. I don’t join suicide missions, but if you have the popular support of our House, then I’ll be glad to add my wand to what power you muster”

“Suicide is the opposite of my mission”, said Tom. “All I most crave is safety and security for Wizardkind, protecting our own in the face of so many traitors to such”

“That, I can definitely support”, nodded Abraxas, to much agreement from the other others around.

Here Tom sat, surrounded by youthful Wizards and Witches pledging to fight for him upon his call, in the face of quite possibly actual armies. And there were more who would do so, and with them, when pushed to it, their families. They had the will already; he just needed to furnish them with the tools, the opportunities, and the direction - and that he would do. He would live up to the promise of protecting the Wizarding world from the creeping threats against it, and by any means necessary he'd gradually shift that towards wiping those threats out, permanently.

It might mean a masquerade of merely living up to their expectations for a while, but it wouldn't be long before he could break free of that, and they'd truly understand once they saw what really could be done, and they'd be yet more glad to be on his side than they were now. This could really be done.