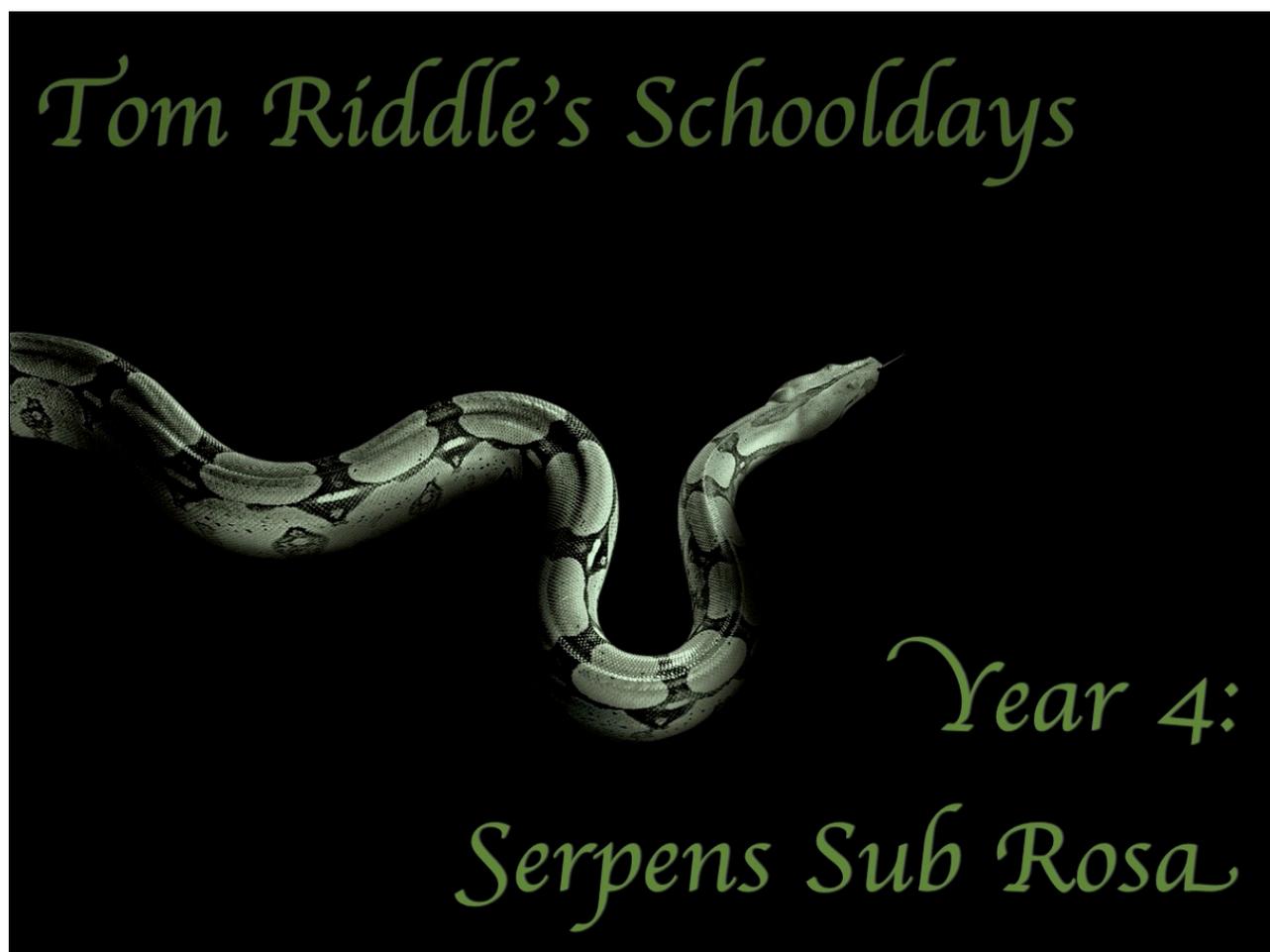


Tom Riddle's Schooldays

Year Four: Serpens Sub Rosa

by David Styles



Chapter One

Fame and Fortune

“Bludgering Hell, it’s you!” exclaimed the distorted voice of the masked and robed figure that had just rounded the corner of the corridor.

Reducto. Stupefy. Tom’s spells hit the Wizard directly on, first knocking him backwards, crashing through an ornate wooden table that stood to the side of the hallway and onto the plush carpet, surrounded by the thousand shards of the decorative urn that had been on the table.

“*Reparo... reparo*” muttered a voice just behind Tom, and the table and urn reassembled themselves, leaving the body on the floor where it fell. “Sorry”, the voice added, as Tom turned to give a reproachful look that was destined to remain unseen behind his own mask.

“Come on”, said Tom. “No, wait”, he continued, and magically swatted his companion aside just in time for an unfriendly Curse to go sailing past between them. *Protego* - Tom blocked the next spell that arrived straight after that, and returned fire with a couple of Blasting Curses, causing the assailant to dive for cover around the corner at the other end of this stretch of hallway. Tom’s companion groaned.

“Was that...?” he began, but Tom held up a hand, and he fell silent.

“It’s alright”, called out Tom, “You can come out now; it’s over”.

The assailant’s masked face appeared around the corner, and Tom hit it with a Stunning Spell.

“Idiot”, muttered Tom.

“Safe?” asked Tom’s companion.

“Safer”, replied Tom.

“So that’s Eaves and Vespa down, I got what’s-his-name, er, Lucifer already, Miss Marble’s still out there, which frankly worries me the most, and...”

“Quiet. Hide”

“Which way?” came the panicked reply.

“Back. Here” - they retreated back the way they came as per Tom’s direction.

“Hmm. No, I think they’re ours”, he added, “But we don’t want mistakes. Still, I daresay we can risk...”

Tom stepped out, and awaited the newcomers who were taking a little longer than he anticipated to arrive, but now that he thought about it, they were probably checking the bodies in the hallway. He heard their muffled voices; their thoughts were clearer than their spoken words. Then they rounded the corner, coming face to face with Tom.

“*Stupefy*” essayed one,

Expelliarmus! was the other’s silent effort,

Protego was Tom’s ready reply, dismissing the Spells with casual ease even at such short range.

“Oh, it’s you. We...” began one of the new arrivals, but was interrupted -

“Behind you!” exclaimed her companion. Tom turned, just in time to catch a Stunning Spell straight in the face. His mask, crafted of one five-hundredth part Titanium melded with the extremely rare and tricky Seventy-Seventh Element, robbed the Spell of its intended function, but the power was sufficient to knock Tom off his feet regardless, the back of his head cracking sharply into the mask of the Witch now behind him, knocking her down too. As Tom hit the floor, awkwardly due to the Witch partially beneath him, the Wizard with whom he had hidden was now also Cursed successfully and fell on top of him.

The new assailant Stunned the last of the four still on their feet, Disarmed and Stunned the Witch that Tom had knocked into as she tried to pull herself free of the pile of bodies, and then stood motionless while looking down at Tom.

Tom would have been an easy target amidst the tangle of limbs, but the few seconds time it had taken the assailant to Stun the others gave him chance to fight back, by fighting for physical control of the assailant's wand-arm. Not via the arm-owner's mind, which was quite inaccessible, but via more direct magical power, gripping the arm itself. He tried to keep that grip without losing concentration, while working to free his own wand-hand.

Suddenly, the attacker grabbed her wand with her other, unhindered hand, and there was an instantaneous flash of red.

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Tom awoke, lying on a bed. He was on top of the sheets, and fully clothed. His hand went instinctively to his wand-pocket.

"On the bedside table", said Marca, whom Tom had not noticed sitting in the armchair in the corner of the room. Tom sat up.

"Oh... Marvellous" he grumbled tetchily, as he remembered how he came to be here. "How long?"

"Not many minutes", said Marca dismissively.

"What are we doing here?"

"I give you a pardon. Here, you have captured the flag", she said simply, tossing a large sapphire over to him. He caught it.

"Why? Why are you betraying your team to allow mine to win?"

"To allow yours to win", she replied. "It is necessary that you remain as close to flawless as you can, in their eyes, if you will be the face of leadership. You must inspire confidence"

"A sound logic", agreed Tom. "Jolly good. How did you come by this? Wasn't it with..."

"Abraxas, yes, but he is too relaxed. I took it from him almost immediately, to keep it safe, without him noticing. But as things went, it is better if you have it now"

"How to you propose I say I came by this?"

"I propose, that you do not", replied Marca. "Leave it a mystery and allow imagination to happen. They will assume, that you have powerful magic that they do not"

"I do have powerful magic that they do not, Marca"

"Yes, well, they will assume you have more of it, which is not a bad thing".

"True enough. Has the win been declared already? Is everyone else waiting for us somewhere?"

"No, it has only been a few minutes, remember. The others are in a little mountain where I left them, not far away in the corridor"

"Let's get to that then, shall we?" suggested Tom.

Once out in the corridor, Tom summoned Mable the House Elf, and gave it the agreed-upon instruction to now do the rounds of visiting all the assembled Masked Legions present (waking them where necessary), to announce the win, whereupon they would assemble in the Savernake Room. The Savernake Room was a mostly square room with the exception of bay curve to the outer wall, not unlike the shape of the Lake Window in the Slytherin Common Room at Hogwarts - only here there was no huge window and no lake, just four leaded windows, three portraits, and two suits of armour, which mostly stood against that wall, but had a tendency to wander at night sometimes, when they didn't expect anyone would miss them. Right now, however, the straightened themselves up a bit upon noticing people re-entering the room.

The room's most notable feature was a table, round and broad like Slughorn's fancy dining table, but this one seemed to be carved from a single tree, which much have been

truly gargantuan, as there was more than ample room around it for all twelve of them currently staying at Fengrey Hall, while Tiernan's parents were in London for a few days.

When they had all returned and taken their places around the table, Tom spoke first:

"My first question is to Abraxas", he began.

"Shouldn't we be using our code-names?", Belinda interrupted.

"Not necessary here, Belinda", said Tom. "They are for masked activities, training for such, and written communications that may be intercepted. We're all friends here".

Sat around the large round table of heavy marble, the assembled Slytherin students reacted to this statement each in their own way. The general response was to smile and nod, though the sentiments behind the nods and smiles were varied; from Abraxas, who had a rather practical understanding of "friendship" even by Slytherin standards, to Antonin, who was mostly keen to not be left out of any such arrangement, to the about-to-be fifth-year trouble-makers, largely seeing this as an extension of their usual status as agents provocateurs and upsetters of the status quo, to Tiernan, who seemed the most positively enthused and was playing the part of half right-hand-man, half charming host; he had readily offered for this meeting to be held here at Fengrey Hall, the Lestrange family residence.

Then there was Marca, who neither smiled nor nodded. Tom did not feel she was fully committed to this, and indeed she had suggested so herself, but for now he'd rather have her at his side than not. Nobody would be perturbed by her aloof manner; everyone knew that she'd look just as impassive in almost any scenario.

"Abraxas", Tom recommenced, "How did you lose the flag?"

"I don't know", answered Abraxas, honestly enough. "I had it, and then I didn't. Did you get it from my pocket, or did it fall out somewhere?"

"It was taken directly from your pocket", said Tom.

"How? It had an Anti-Summoning Jinx on it; have you found a way to get past that?"

"Oh, I have", said Tom. "And old and powerful force that you may have forgotten"

"I'm all ears"

"I'm sure. Now an open question, to everyone, why did my team win, and Abraxas' team lose?"

"You are a good leader", offered Antonin, immediately.

"You cheated", offered Belinda.

"Do enlighten us, cheated by what means?", asked Tom.

"You told me the game was over and that it was safe to come out, then Cursed me when my guard was down"

"Tell me, had the win been announced by the agreed-upon method?"

"No, but..."

"Did you think it would be a good idea to do what you're told the leader of the opposing team?"

"No, well yes, but..."

"War is a game of information as much as anything else, and in war people play tricks with that information, surely you must realize this?"

"I do"

"Good", said Tom. "Any other suggestions as to why my team won and Abraxas' team did not?"

"It had you on it", said Tiernan. "Marca took out three of us like it was nothing, but obviously you bested her"

"Again I drew upon that old and powerful force that it appears has been unobserved by some", said Tom.

"Are you going to tell us what it is?", asked Abraxas.

“Let’s see what else comes to light first, shall we?” suggested Tom. “Emlyn, when you encountered me, the most skilled duellist of my team, what was your immediate, most innate and instinctive response? Was it to strike pre-emptively as quickly as possible, perhaps? Or maybe to prioritize your defences, and be ready to deflect the Curses I would surely send your way?”

“Yeah, pretty much”, agreed Emlyn.

“Really? Remind me, which Spell did you use?”

“I didn’t, I didn’t have time”, admitted Emlyn.

“You didn’t have time”, repeated Tom. “No time to raise your wand, no time to speak, is that right?”

“Yeah, well, I was surprised”

“Indeed. In a battlefield environment, you were surprised to meet an enemy”

“At that particular moment”, said Emlyn, defensively.

“You see, I thought you did have time to speak”, said Tom, “I thought you greeted me with the words *Bludgering Hell, it’s you!* when we met”

“Oh, yeah”, said Emlyn, “I did”

“That’s four words; think how many Spells you could have cast in that time. So wasteful. I suggest that you train to make sure that if you must panic, you at least find it within you to cast some manner of Spell”, said Tom, scathingly.

“I will”, said Emlyn, “But you’d have blocked it anyway; I’ve never beaten you in a duel yet”

“Others have”, said Tom. “I am not invincible. Not yet, anyway. If others can, then you can too. Belinda!”

“Yes?”

“At your leisure, and please, not right now, I want you to help Emlyn out, by Hexing him at random times, will you do that for him?”

“Absolutely”

“Good”, said Tom. “Emlyn, you may recall that Belinda’s wand is ill-suited to casting Spells silently. You will always have warning, no matter how slight, and time to cast a Shield Charm. Until you master this very basic response, you are a liability and cannot be used for actual masked operations”

There was silence for a moment, and Lucretia raised a hand. Tom raised an eyebrow expectantly.

“Marca attacked four of us at once and downed three of us more quickly than even you could stop her; how can this be?”

“I didn’t see her coming”, said Tom.

“I came quietly while you were too distracted”, said Marca. Emlyn sniggered, but stopped instantly as both Tom and Marca glanced in his direction.

“But you always know when people are coming”, objected Tiernan, “You always know when I’m coming, anyway, even if I’m behind you”

“Calm down everyone, you know what he meant” said Tom impatiently. “I am indeed more aware than most”, he said, “and a great deal more aware than some”, he added, with a nod to Emlyn. “However, stealth and surprise is not to be underestimated”

The discussion continued a good while, as various parties blamed each other for any errors, and weak links in the chain were gradually identified. Certainly Marca’s gesture had been well-placed, as her own reputation as a highly skilled duellist now lent yet further credence to Tom’s ability to lead a team to success even against the diminutive terror that was Marca Zelyonaya.

The fact that Tom had lost most of his team in the process was chiefly overlooked in favour of focus on the outcome, or else being pinned firmly on the diverse inadequacies of individual members of the team. Which was, of course the most useful perspective, in Tom’s opinion. After all, problems identified can be eliminated.

A weakness of Tom's that he wanted to eliminate was his current inability to Apparate, with the exception of the one time he had done so accidentally in order to avoid being burned to a crisp. After the others had retired to their beds, Tom stood on the rough grass of the moor, just outside the anti-Apparition Wards of Fengrey Hall, under the stars of a clear sky, with Tiernan. The house loomed large, a few hundred yards away.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?", asked Tiernan.

"Could be terrible; that's why you're here", replied Tom.

"So if you splinch yourself... You realize I have no healing skills worth a bouncing bean?"

"I realize. However, you can get Mable, whom I remember to have at least some such knowledge and abilities, and who can at the very least, I presume, transport me to St. Mungo's if necessary, correct?"

"Yeah, I... guess so..." said Tiernan uncertainly. He had clearly never been taken anywhere by the House Elf, but if an Elf could transport luggage, it could probably transport Tom's rather slender form without complication. "You're sure you don't want to wait, though? I mean, my dad could... would probably..."

A look from Tom silenced him. Tom liked to do things on his own terms.

"I'm going to aim for the other side of this stream", said Tom, indicating across the small valley.

"Alright. Do you want me to..." Tiernan trailed off, not quite sure what to offer to do.

"Just stay here and don't do anything", instructed Tom, giving him what he thought to be the easiest task he had ever assigned him. "...and be quiet", he added, pre-emptively.

Tiernan seemed about to reply with some acknowledgement of this instruction, but thought better of it.

Tom had little conscious knowledge of how to Apparate, and had not found books about it in any of the little libraries that he'd found so far in Fengrey Hall. Evidently it was more of an oral tradition in the Lestrange Family. Of course he could without doubt find a manual in Flourish and Blott's, but as he'd done it already without, it seemed to him almost an insult to his abilities to buy a book to learn to do something he could clearly already do. So, he'd buy a manual if necessary, but he'd much rather do it himself, here and now.

Focussing on his intended destination and doing his best to ignore Tiernan's look of being on tenterhooks watching him, Tom summoned all his will to recreate what he did when he Apparated in the Great Hall just a few months back.

He flung himself at his destination, and immediately after doing so realized that this was not going to go well for him. Unprepared for failure, because he had allowed himself to think only of his incumbent success, he was sufficiently caught off-guard that he did not manage to perform any saving Spell, and instead careened into the little valley, hitting the ground awkwardly and rolling to near the bottom before he skidded to a halt, slightly short of the stream that babbled gently in the darkness.

"Are you alright?" called Tiernan.

"Never speak of..." began Tom, but had a better idea: "*Obliviate*"

Tiernan's body rocked slightly as Tom's Charm hit it, and Tom undid the memory of his fall, as he clambered back up to the top. Tom winced as he felt dirt on his hands and a distinct dampness on his knees and backside, but fortunately it would be too dark for Tiernan to see that, because Tom couldn't clean it off while he was still holding the Memory Charm on Tiernan. He released the Charm.

Tiernan looked around, confused.

"Oh, there you are", he said. "Sorry, you were saying?"

"Just stay put and don't do anything unless I'm injured", replied Tom with a smile. "And be quiet".

Tom's second attempt was more conservative, and also more successful. Rather than flinging himself into the valley as he had (foolishly, he now concluded) done last time, he opted to create that feeling of movement by turning sharply on the spot, since then if he failed, at least he'd still be where he was.

Gathering all his will again, he all but snarled as he turned, all his focus on the opposite bank, ignoring Tiernan, and gloriously landed on the other side; he looked back where he'd come from, grinning, and then found himself face-to-face with Tiernan. Tom stepped back and teetered on the spot, such that Tiernan automatically grabbed him to steady him, bringing them back together. Tiernan smiled.

"You're pretty great", he said.

"Not perfect yet, but I'll get there", assessed Tom, disentangling himself from Tiernan.

"What do you want to do now?"

"First, let's just..." began Tom, and Apparated back across the to other side, much more smoothly this time, and then back again, this time intentionally and without arriving an inch away from Tiernan.

"Yep, I do believe you have it", enthused Tiernan.

"Now, I want to try..." said Tom, trailing off as he physically took hold of Tiernan, and Apparated across to the other side of the stream with him, stumbling slightly upon arrival; it was more clumsy with another person in tow.

"Warn me next time", breathed Tiernan, smiling nonetheless.

"Consider yourself warned", said Tom, and took them back to the other side. "Will you try?" he asked.

"No, I really can't", said Tiernan, shaking his head.

"Try", said Tom, with a smile.

"Really? Now?"

"Obviously"

"I don't know what to do though"

"Just do what I did", said Tom. After all, it seemed to Tom to be more a matter of feeling, principle, power, and will, than any very technical thing.

"Alright, I'll try", said Tiernan uncertainly. He looked across the little valley, and back at Tom, and back across the valley. "Right", he said, and took a breath, and a couple more, and then shook his legs out a bit, as though limbering up for some physical feat.

"Stop doing all that and just go", said Tom, "Now"

Tiernan launched himself off, and plummeted mundanely into the stream, where he lay for a moment before picking himself up.

"I don't think...", he said as he climbed back up to where Tom stood, "...I can do this just yet"

"We'll get you there yet", laughed Tom.

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"Mercury's sweaty sandals, here's some news", said Tiernan, reading the front page headline, upon the Daily Prophet's arrival to the breakfast table in the Throckmorton Room. "Shock Death: Hogwarts' most promising young Quidditch Seeker killed in Muggle bombing"

Those nearest Tiernan craned to try to see the headline and the article beneath it; further down the table, people stood up. Belinda scalded herself with her tea, and put the cup down a little too quickly, spilling it further.

"What?" she demanded, while tending to her scalded hand, "Lies! Why are they lying about me?"

"I don't think it's about you, Belinda", said Tiernan, his eyes scanning through the article. "Yep, here we go", he confirmed, then reading from the article:

**SHOCK DEATH:
HOGWARTS' MOST PROMISING
YOUNG QUIDDITCH SEEKER KILLED
IN MUGGLE BOMBING**

It's easy to think the Muggle War doesn't affect us magical folk, but not everybody has an all-magical family, and many struggle to look out for their Muggle relatives, friends, and neighbours. Last night, it was a matter of a much-loved young Witch being in the wrong place at the wrong time, while trying to "bridge the gap" between Muggles and Wizardkind, as many have lately argued we should do, despite all the sound arguments to the contrary presented regularly by the Daily Prophet (see page 9 for a special editorial for the confused or Confunded).

"Teires is dead", enthused Belinda, "Tell me it's Teires". Tom, meanwhile, had already got the answer directly from Tiernan's mind. Tiernan continued reading:

"Owls delivering messages of condolence have been met with the remains of an empty house, as it appears the entire family left the place during the bombing raid. Ossapheme Fame, only 15 years old, was at her family home in Everton where her mother, talented Witch Helen Fame, was entertaining the Muggle neighbours for dinner when the air-raid sirens (a Muggle technology for raising a public alarm, which works by electrictrickery) sounded. The house was of course perfectly protected by defensive Charms, but rather than break the Statute of Secrecy by revealing this to the Muggles — which we remind our readers is legal to do in an emergency — she fatefully opted for her and her daughter to go with them to the nearby air-raid shelter (an unprotected hole in the ground, where Muggles gather to hide from bombs). It would appear they were killed in the street on the way to this dubious place of semi-safety.

The mother and daughter are survived, probably, by husband and father Aris Fame, a Greek national whose whereabouts are currently unknown, but our sources suggest he is in some way involved in the war effort."

Tiernan folded down the paper, and put it on the table, where it was immediately picked up by Abraxas.

"Then there's more about the importance of surviving, Statute of Secrecy be damned if necessary"

"Well, if it's Fame, that's good too", said Belinda. "I mean, Ravenclaw's going to be lost without her on the pitch"

"More to the point", said Tom, "This highlights the importance of protecting our own during these times, and not playing at living like Muggles"

"Hear hear", said Tiernan, to murmurs of agreement from around the table. This was, of course, why they were all here.

"We should", noted Abraxas, "be able to use this actively in some fashion"

"There will of course be outrage, and it will of course be forgotten", observed Tom.

"So", said Tiernan, "We need to be able to act swiftly, anything we're going to do about this".

"Not too swiftly - it's not like it'll go without mention when we get back to Hogwarts. So we don't necessarily need to act during Summer"

"But what's the plan?", asked Belinda. "Who do we strike at for this?"

"Whom", replied Marca. "And, I do not think, that violence is the correct course of action here, but propaganda"

"Go on", said Abraxas.

"This thing happened because they were trying to behave like Muggles. We cannot openly criticize them for this, because one does not criticize the popular dead, not without problems. So instead, we criticize what lead them to take this idealistic but foolish position".

"The Statute of Secrecy"

"Not just that, but the conflicting ideas contained in it"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they want us to keep secret from the Muggles, but also to treat the Muggles as though they are of equal worth. If a Witch or Wizard is to treat Muggles as though they are of equal worth, then they will feel duty-bound to protect them also. But the reality is, the way to protect them from themselves would be to do as Grindelwald advises and have Open Rule for the Greater Good- but without murdering them without necessity, because that is not a very good protection"

"So, we advertise that any who really want harmony between Wizardkind and Muggles should really support doing that with Open Rule", agreed Abraxas.

"After all, it's the only honest way to do it, too", chimed in Tiernan. "Without all this sneaking around".

"There we have it", said Tom. "But they'll reject it, of course, just because Grindelwald says it. So instead it must be posed as a question: what would we need to be able to do to be able to live in harmony alongside the Muggles, without deception and dishonesty?"

"I don't want to live in harmony with Muggles", piped up Belinda.

"Nor do I", laughed Tom, "But the point is we won't have to. Those of us who wish to rule them can rule them. Those of us who wish to mind our own business can mind our own business. Muggle-Repellant Charms will still work, you know. In fact it should be perfectly possible to rule them without coming into much contact with them"

"So we gain power and freedom from cowering around in the shadows", filled in Abraxas, "without any downside that I can see".

"Exactly"

"Well, alright then. So, what's the plan?"

"Make Tom's question the question everyone is asking", said Tiernan.

"How?"

"Does anyone's family have good contacts in the Daily Prophet?", asked Tom.

"Yes, of course", replied Abraxas.

"Do you feel up to writing a eulogy, Abraxas?"

"To what end?", asked the latter.

"To her end", of course, smiled Tom. "Just one angle of many from which we can approach it. A well-written heartfelt eulogy from a friend at Hogwarts should get people talking a little longer"

"What do you want me to write?"

"Find anything good you can say about her, and say it. Express your great respect for her, how terrible her loss is, how tragic and needless, and how she — or rather, her mother — was misled by misinterpreting the application of the Statute of Secrecy, how if only it had been made clearer that we can and should use our magic in situations where the need is great..."

"Where life is in danger", corrected Abraxas.

"Where the need is great", repeated Tom. "You see, if we say *where the need is great*, they'll read it as an artistic rendering of *where life is in danger*, and let it slide without editing, since it's such a personal piece. But by allowing it to be published, they'll have

acknowledged the slightly moved boundary, and it'll start to seep into the public mind that magic can and should be used where the need is great"

"Alright", agreed Abraxas, nodding slowly. "I follow that".

"I can't believe we're supposed to be singing the praises of this stuck up—" began Belinda

"Quidditch", said Tom, shushing her. "Good point, good idea, thank you, Belinda"

"What?" asked Belinda, confused now.

"You mentioned singing; Quidditch chants are very catchy, people hear them and remember them. So let's honour the fallen Fame with a new chant, shall we?"

Belinda looked to be highly conflicted by this suggestion.

"If it helps", added Tom, "Remember that you can use this to remind Ravenclaw players of their loss, during at least the first game of the season, if not the others"

"If we're doing it for tactical advantage, why wouldn't we do it for all their games? I mean, we want them to lose against everyone; they're usually our strongest rival. Maybe we could let them win against Gryffindor", she concluded, her brow furrowed in thought; the thought in question being that while Gryffindor had yet to win the Quidditch Cup during these past years at school, to accomplish this feat-of-exclusion had required several hospitalizations, a faulty Snitch (or so she believed; Tom of course was privately aware that it hadn't been the Snitch's flesh memory that was faulty that time; the fault had been with Jana's flesh), and very close tie-breaks.

"Well, by all means you can", agreed Tom, "But the school might ban it if they think it in poor taste"

"So we might have just one shot at it?"

"Correct. Consider though that if you make it largely focussed on how good she was and what a shame it is they don't have her any more, you could well get some of the other Houses joining in too, in solidarity"

"Ha! How heart-warming", interjected Walburga. "Consider us on it like a newly-Charmed Comet".

"Any more ideas for this... Operation Ozzy, or whatever you want to call it?" asked Antonin.

"Well don't let me hog all the glory", said Tom with a smile. "Anyone else with good ideas to bring to the table?"

"What is the correct method of changing laws in this country?", asked Marca.

"I have no idea", admitted Tom. "Anyone?"

"No clue here", confessed Tiernan. "We make sure the Ministry overlooks any little rule-breaking that we might engage in, but as for actually changing the rules in question..."

"Make a donation and a suggestion at the same time", said Abraxas, simply.

"Simple bribery?", asked Tom.

"It's never called that, of course", answered Abraxas. "And the donation is never to the Ministry itself as discretionary funds, because then it'd be very difficult to defend it as anything other than a bribe. Instead, something ostentatious is paid for, usually something that will benefit the public and that nobody can criticise."

"And a favour asked in return?"

"Not as such. It's enough that the smallest suggestion be made. *I wonder, Minister, have you ever considered...* — that's enough to get the job done. He knows which side his bread's buttered on, and which families he needs to keep sweet"

"Very well", said Tom. "Could you pursue that avenue?"

"Wait... What change exactly do you want? Laws are rather specific, you know"

"A slackening of the rules regards the non-use of magic around Muggles. In essence, exactly the change we discussed when speaking of the eulogy... For a start, anyway"

"I can't promise anything, and obviously I'll need to go through my parents. I can comfortably tell you now that they'll be on board as far as the idea goes, but they'll only go for it if they think it can be done — don't forget that because it's a donation to some unrelated thing, not a bribe, the donation isn't conditional, and they'll have to pay up regardless of whether the change they want made gets made or not"

"I'm sure you'll do your best", smiled Tom.

"Also, if I'm poking for this, the eulogy would be better coming from someone else, to avoid the obvious immediate vested interest if we're going to use that wording. I can still make sure it gets published, but someone else will need to pen it and sign it; it's just that we can only have the Malfoy name on one thing or the other, but not both. Otherwise it would compromise both"

"Agreed. Any volunteers?"

There was a moment of resounding silence and stillness, before Tiernan half-raised a hand.

"Sure, I can do it, if it needs doing"

"Good show", said Tom, "And... these are our Hogwarts supply letters, are they, by the looks of it?" he noted, as some at the table had now begun opening theirs, after the initial surprise of the newspaper headline which had, of course, been far more eye-catching than what would surely be mostly a list of schoolbooks for the coming year.

Not that it would be so necessary to have the lists in hand this year; Tiernan's mother had arranged for representatives of shops such as Flourish and Blott's and Madam Malkin's to come over and furnish school supplies to the assembled boys and girls, all charged to their own families' accounts, of course. Naturally, Tom did not have an account, but did have what should be enough gold with him to pay for his necessary wares, he hoped.

None of that would need to be addressed until that afternoon at the earliest, however, and for the time being there was a final free morning before Tiernan's parents were due to return, and shop representatives due to visit. Tom had plans for profitable use of this time, though they were admittedly delayed a little by waiting for the remaining sleepyheads to get up and breakfast. This only strengthened Tom's resolve to follow through on an idea he had for their last little training session of the summer.

Chapter Two

The Farnham Room

The Farnham Room where they now gathered was an airy attic room, large enough to accommodate the assembled Slytherins, without anybody needing to be so close to the sides as to need to incline their heads on account of the slanty ceiling. The rain outside beat down upon the slated roof, and upon the windows that were spaced unevenly along it.

“When it comes to engaging Witches and Wizards who do not share our views and need to be reminded of the precariousness of their position”, began Tom, “we need a little more than our standard duelling arsenal. I’m talking, of course, about the so-called Unforgivable Curses”.

Belinda smiled broadly like she had won some manner of prize, and Morgan and Octavian exchanged grins.

“Now, we’re going to have little to no need of the Killing Curse in our harmless little exploits aimed at... nudging people in a more useful direction than they might perhaps choose of their own accord, but the other two, we should be able to employ quite liberally; I daresay I don’t need to explain how or why”

Those around him nodded, but not without a few looks of consternation amongst them, including Abraxas.

“Isn’t that going to attract rather a little more attention than we’d like? Or at least, the wrong sort of attention from the wrong people? The Ministry monitors for things like that”

“It does, yes”, said Tom. “However, at Hogwarts, there is too much magic in the place overall for the Ministry to be able to discern what spells are being used - it only appears on their charts as on big glowing mass of magic - as you’ll remember from *Ab Schola Condita* and other works that address this issue. I’m sure you’ll be aware it caused quite some concern when the Ministry of Magic first set up the modern incarnation of its Magic Monitoring Office, and tried to place the onus on Headmaster Black to arrange a better view for them; it just couldn’t be done, not that Black was especially keen to have Ministry Officials snooping at Hogwarts anyway”

“What about here, though?” asked Emlyn.

“If, as it seems, you’re suggesting we all practice the other two Unforgivable Curses here and now”, said Milton, “do you have anything set up to stop the Ministry from seeing a mass of Imperius Curses and Cruciatus Curses, and wondering what the wittering whasset is going on at Tiernan’s house?”

“If I may?” responded Tiernan, half-raising his hand as though in class.

“You may”, smiled Tom.

“We have a special exemption from the M.M.O., for services rendered to the Ministry”, said Tiernan. “My grandfather used to developed experimental Charms for them”, he explained, “and got special exemption for the house in return, and we still have it, even though he died long ago now”

“Nobody cared when I used a Killing Curse here last year to get rid of an adder in the cellar”, noted Tom. “And Tiernan’s father was about to do the same when it bit him, so obviously it’s not a problem”

“You’re sure?” asked Abraxas. “We have it at Malfoy Manor just the same, but we have to, well, make sure it’s maintained and that they don’t let it lapse”

He spoke as though it were a matter of bureaucracy, and that the Ministry would never deliberately intrude on his family’s privacy, but it was obvious from his thoughts that this privacy was upheld at the cost of regular “charitable donations” to various causes, and was unofficially contingent on the constancy of such.

“Quite sure”, said Tiernan, with a nod.

“Wait, you mean quite sure as in completely sure, or quite sure as in rather sure, but not entirely?”

“Err...” replied Tiernan, hesitantly.

“Well, that answers that”, said Abraxas, irritably. “Riddle, I don’t think this is going to be a good idea”.

Tom’s mind raced for a way to test the house’s defences. If the house did not still have exemption from Ministry oversight, then he quite possibly couldn’t get away with doing an Imperius Curse or a Cruciatu Curse without exceptionally good reason. It would be as well to check again to ensure that Spells here would go unnoticed; he couldn’t conjure a snake and claim it was anything other than a deliberately arranged killing, if it turned out the Ministry was now paying attention - but Brega could bring him something to kill as a pest. If nothing bad happened as a result, then practicing the other two would surely be safe.

“Mable!” called Tom. With a crack, the House Elf appeared a second later. It looked around, expectantly, awaiting an order of drinks or snacks or such. “Mable, go find my owl and tell him I want him here, now”

“Mable can bring him for you directly, Master Tom Sir”, offered the Elf.

“You can try”, said Tom, with a half-laugh. “If you fail to do that, deliver my message and impress upon him that I want him here promptly”

Mable the House Elf bowed, and vanished.

“My owl will be able to bring us some snake or rat or something that we can kill and see if it causes any problem”, explained Tom to the others, as they awaited Mable’s return. “He’ll bring something, we’ll kill it, then have a break while we wait and see if we get any attention from the Ministry, and if we don’t, we can go ahead with our plans”, he concluded.

“Alright”, consented Abraxas with a sigh, “but if this goes badly, it’s going to be bloody expensive to put right”

Tom smiled, at the implicit assurance that things would be put right by the old families’ money if they were to go wrong.

With a crack, Mable reappeared, looking somewhat chastened.

“Mable regrets to inform that Master Tom’s owl escaped. Mable was able to shout after the owl, but Mable does not know if he understood the instruction”

Tom opened a window with a flick of his wand. The House Elf cringed, clearly unsure as to whether it was to be punished for its failure. Tom, meanwhile, did not dismiss the Elf, as if Brega didn’t arrive soon, he’d send Mabel to go get something directly. Come to think of it, he probably should have sent the Elf first. Oh well.

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!” - Brega flapped into the room, causing the window to bang shut noisily after him, as he knocked it off the latch while passing through. “Hahaha-hoo!”, he added, upon seeing Mable.

“Mable, go make yourself useful somewhere”, said Tom. The House Elf didn’t hesitate to vanish. “Brega, bring me some small animal, alive, as soon as possible; whatever you can find most quickly; I’m not fussy”

Brega lifted off and made straight for the now closed window, fighting briefly with the latch mechanism before Tom opened it for him, and let him out. The owl disappeared out of sight.

“He could be gone for a long time”, noted Antonin. “We should arrange lunch, I think”

“He’ll be gone a few minutes; ten or fifteen minutes at most”, countered Tom. “There are plenty of things on these moors, and he’s a good hunter”

While it was clear that not all present shared Tom’s optimism, and Antonin’s suggestion prompted an increasingly lively discussion of the idea of lunch, especially amongst those who had risen (and thus breakfasted) much earlier than the lazier

latecomers, Brega returned before the argument had reached any consensus, which immediately took all attention back to him.

It took a moment to work out what the slightly bloodied creature was that Brega bore in his talons, but it became more obvious when Brega let go and it started flapping around, that it was a small Scopsie owl. Brega recaptured it and pecked at it some more, before letting it go again.

"That's my owl!" exclaimed Lucretia, taking out her wand; Tom readied himself to protect Brega if necessary.

"Brega-hahaha-hoo!" sung Brega, proudly.

"You're sure it's yours?", asked Tom, as Lucretia knelt down and scooped up the injured bird onto her lap.

"Of course I'm sure", said Lucretia, "This is Olga, my owl, and now look at the state of her after your bird's pecked her half to death"

"But you live in London, don't you?", asked Tom, frowning.

"What has that to do with anything?", asked Lucretia, looking up from the owl in confusion.

"Well, I would have thought you'd have an owl that could do the long journey between London and Hogwarts"

"I didn't choose her", said Lucretia, "She was a present from my Aunt Cordelia, so I could hardly not use her; that'd be rude. I just use the long distance service when it's called for; Tiernan, do you have Dittany?"

"Who?" asked Tiernan.

"Dittany, for healing cuts, stopping bleeding, and all that. Quickly"

"I don't know", replied Tiernan, looking to Tom as though he might know better what was in Tiernan's own house.

"So if something unfortunate were to happen to this owl", noted Tom, ignoring that and indicating Olga, "You'd get a free pass on getting a new better owl, without offending your aunt?"

"Well yes, but that's beside the point" argued Lucretia, looking more annoyed now as the blood spread from her hands to her clothing. "Will you please help me with this owl?"

"I know just the Spell", said Tom, levelling his wand at it.

"What... no!"

"Perhaps you'd prefer to do it yourself?", suggested Tom.

"No, I... This is my owl..."

"Come on, cuz", said Walburga, soothingly. "The bird's done for. Might as well end it quickly"

"I can't"

"Want me to do it for you, cuz?" Walburga offered. Lucretia sighed, and looked somewhat deflated.

"Maybe if you put Olga down off your lap onto the floor", suggested Tom. "You don't want Walburga to miss and end up without a cousin"

"To end up without a cousin", said Walburga, looking up at Tom, "I'd need to miss and kill at least half the people here, for a start. But yes, probably best not to do it on Lucretia's lap... Come on, here... *Avada kedavra*"

Walburga consoled Lucretia, while Tom discussed logistics with Tiernan.

"So how long would an owl usually take to get here with something from the Ministry?"

"Well, for here they dispatch from the Plymouth Owl Office", said Tiernan, "So, fifteen minutes, maybe twenty?"

"Right, then. Shall we see about those sandwiches, and if we haven't heard anything in half an hour, get going?"

“Sounds good to me”, said Tiernan, and a number of others nodded or murmured their agreement.

When half an hour (and two large platters of sandwiches) had gone by without incident, Tom called the room to order.

“So, let us begin with our starting point”, he said once he had everyone’s attention. “Who here has already cast an Imperius Curse?”

Nobody indicated that they had done so.

“Cruciatus Curse?”, he asked. Walburga and Belinda both raised their hands, prompting some raised eyebrows.

“What?” objected Belinda. “House Elf discipline”

“Same” said Walburga. “Can’t mollycoddle them, you know”

Apparently everyone else could, but Tom at least could readily see the merits of the more firm approach. Letting them off easily for small offences would only encourage the commission of larger offences, and that was obviously to be discouraged.

“Alright”, he said. “Let’s begin gently with the Imperius Curse”

“What if one Killing Curse doesn’t flag up at the Ministry, but a score of Imperius Curses do?”, queried Abraxas.

“Then we say, and truthfully so, that we only wanted to be prepared in the case of the wars catching up with us; even if not to use these Curses, but to know how to handle them when cast upon us”, replied Tom, echoing the rationale he had used with Jana last year at Hogwarts. It was well-received more readily here.

“That’s true”, agreed Morgan Rosier, “They can hardly complain at us wanting to be prepared, after news like this morning’s”

Granted, Fame’s death had been the result of the Muggle war, not the Wizarding one, but still, this too garnered nods of assent around the room.

“But they are Unforgiveable”, observed Antonin. “Does this not mean that our reason does not matter?”

“There’s the War Clause”, said Milton Mulciber. “In times of war, any use of those Curses is subject to case-by-case examination, so as long as we’re clearly doing it for training and by agreement, not randomly torturing people and all that, we’ll be fine”

After a small amount of further discussion, there was no more active dissent, and Tom directed everyone to pair up.

“Are you pairing up as well?”, asked Lucretia. “There’s an odd number without you”

“There will not be”, said Marca, “I will spectate only”

Tom had mixed feelings about this; her not taking part might encourage others to sit out too, especially when they came to the Cruciatus Curse. On the other hand, it was quite likely that Marca would be nigh impossible to Imperius, and it occurred to Tom that she and the Cruciatus Curse might actually go very badly together, come to think of it.

For simplicity of knowing when success had occurred, and also to stop people from doing anything too bad to each other (that could come later, after all), Tom had everyone endeavour to Imperius their practice partner to kneel, taking turns.

Some got this almost immediately; others took more tries. Many had their task made easier or more difficult by who their partner was. From the sidelines, it was interesting to see a hierarchy of Will unfolding, of exactly who could most naturally dominate whom. Abraxas was perhaps at the top end of this scale; Emlyn was perhaps at the bottom of it.

“Change practice partners”, Tom directed the group. Upon them doing so, it further underlined what he’d already observed, albeit with the addition that some people were more naturally inclined to obey certain people than others, their general level of Will notwithstanding. Closer friends were more likely to fall to each other’s Spells, for instance, and attraction seemed to play its part too. But it wasn’t all going to be so pleasant.

“We’re running short of time”, Tom observed, “So let’s get in some practice of the Cruciatus Curse, before Tiernan’s parents get back. If you’ve yet to master the Imperius Curse, well, I suggest you borrow a friend and practice when we get back to Hogwarts. I recommend the Forbidden Forest as a good spot to do so without bringing such practices unnecessarily to the attention of others”

A few glances were exchanged; a mixture of acknowledgements of this idea, along with a small amount of consternation from some, that they would now be moving to the painful Curse.

“Pair up again”, said Tom, “and make it someone you haven’t practiced with already in this little session today”.

He added this last, because people had so far naturally paired up as much as possible according to their smaller friendship groups-within-the-group, and now it’d be better for them to avoid those people, to avoid them having problems like Jana had at first, and being reticent to torture their friends. Privy to their thoughts, Tom noted those who quietly wished they could excuse themselves as Marca already had, but who did not now wish to lose face, having committed this far.

Indeed, with the exception of those two who had already practiced the Cruciatus Curse on House Elves, it took a little while longer to get going with this one.

“Remember, you have to mean it”, said Tom. “Find a reason to really want to hurt your partner, even if it’s just because you really, really care about being able to do it”

Before long, the room was ringing with occasional shouts and even screams; Marca had left the room to go somewhere else to avoid the noise after being unsuccessful in adequately blocking the sound from her ears, and Tom cast a few judicious Silencing Charms where necessary.

The training session was interrupted by Mable appearing, who then looked quite alarmed at what was going on.

“What is it?” asked Tiernan, turning his attention from failing to hurt Octavian.

“Sirs told Mable to tell you when Master and Mistress LeStrange return to Fengrey Hall”, said Mable, “And they is now here”.

“Well, it seems it’s time to call it a day”, said Tom. “Mable, do not speak of any of our activities that you may have witnessed in this room”

“If my parents ask”, added Tiernan, “Tell them about anything except for this. That way you can give them an answer without causing trouble for me. Got it?”

“Yes Master Tiernan Sir”, nodded the Elf, but not without a tone of worry.

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Down in the Clackmannan Room, Tiernan and Tom greeted Tiernan’s parents in advance of the rest coming down, some of whom needed longer than others to make themselves presentable, and some of whom were content to loiter with those taking longer.

“You’re back early”, noted Tiernan, when the obligatory greetings were out of the way.

“Yes, we had expected to stop longer after lunch”, said Lothair, “but Reginald Borgin was there, and you know how tiresome he can get”

“I suppose you’ve managed well enough without us?” asked Victoria LeStrange with a smile.

“Yes, yeah, fine... delightful. Everybody’s just great. No problems” replied Tiernan amiably, and as innocently as possible.

“You look exhausted dear, been up late partying, have you?”

“Erm, I...”

“Well, he hasn’t burned the house down”, laughed Lothair, “so I’m sure all’s well and good”

As the others made their way down in ones and twos and threes, the greetings and in polite interrogations took up much of the next half an hour or more, and Marca managed to get off the hook completely, as Madame Malkin, the young Witch from the robe shop in Diagon Alley, arrived to do measurings for the new school year's school robes.

The fittings took a good while, what with the number of people present to be fitted, and were interrupted periodically by deliveries of books, potions supplies, and the like from other traders with whom almost everyone already had family accounts.

At the Lestranges' insistence, accounts were also made for those few who did not have such already, including Tom, whose family name was obviously new to each trader who heard it, irking him increasingly each time this occurred.

Reflecting on this in his room that night when everyone had retired, Tom thought to himself that he wanted to create a world in which nobody would ever again "I don't know that name" when his was mentioned. It had become increasingly clear that either his father had never been at Hogwarts, or he had lied about his name, or changed his name, or they had got it wrong at the orphanage.

Wherever the break in that chain was, one thing was certain: the name "Riddle" was not the name of any magical family of which there was record. The only place Tom had been able to find mentions of the name "Riddle", other than those pertaining to him, were in the Muggle archives in London, and he most certainly did not wish to be associated with Muggles of the same name, whether he was related to them or not (and he hoped not).

To cleans himself of that association, after thinking long and hard on the matter, he resolved to make a new name. Not a nom-de-plume alone, though he would use it from now on in correspondance, but a name that would come to be more him than "Tom Marvolo Riddle".

He liked the sound and meaning of the name he had used previously in some correspondance, but had had to abandon, "Volodymyr Belovol", but obviously would not be using that.

He liked the feel and meaning of the codename in use for him during masked operations, Baal, but much less so the sound of that. He wanted something that conveyed the nobility aspect, but sounded better spoken.

On the other hand, if he finally traced his blood to its Wizarding origins, it would be good to still have some connection to that in his name, just not so overt that it is there for all to see in the meanwhile. No, he'd need a connection that'd only be seen when pointed out.

He wrote out various elements, "Volodymyr Belovol", "Baal", and "Tom Marvolo Riddle".

He scrapped "Baal", and wrote in the words "King", "Emperor", and "Lord". Then he erased the former two, since they were too tied to geographic concepts, and without a kingdom or empire at his command, lost their meaning.

He looked at the words "Lord Volodymyr Belovol", and "Tom Marvolo Riddle". His eyes were drawn to the repetition of "volo", and he started looking at how a name might be made combining elements from each name. "Volodymyr", looking backwards at it, had "Rydl", and he could get to "Ryddle" if he borrowed from the other words.

Using his wand now to pull the letters apart from each other on the page, he began idly swapping things around. The "T" of Tom was the most conspicuous by its absence on the other side, so he tried with it as "Volodymyrt", half-remembering meanings of fragments of words from names and Charms and things he had learned in his Glyphs and Tongues lessons, he remembered about the power of the M-R-T triad.

He frowned. Now there were too many Ys, in fact, there were none on the other side. He took them all out. "Volodmrt". Didn't exactly roll off the tongue. He moved one of the Os. "Voldomort", wait, that had too many Os now. But no, there were three on the other side; that was fine.

And so he continued, until finally, on the one side he had “Tom Marvolo Riddle”, and on the other, a rendering that was meaningful, powerful, and pleasing. He flicked the words up into the air, over-scoring the shadowy letters with a ghostly white glow now, such that he could better look at them in the semi-darkness of the room:

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

Chapter Three

New Blood

On Platform Nine and Three Quarters, Lucretia's younger brother Orion had been engaged in conversation by a new first-year-to-be, and was now going through the traditional ritual of figuring out the newcomer's background, though it didn't look promising, as the boy was worse-dressed than even Tom had been on his first day.

"What's your name?", Orion asked the boy.

"Paul Weaver". Like Smith and Potter, the name probably had some Muggle descent - although as magic was also a thing that could be woven, not just textiles, it wasn't absolutely certain, and then there was also the Night Terror Weaver, with which Tom had become acquainted last year as a result of the then-fourth-years' shenanigans.

"What Houses were your parents in?", asked Orion, pointedly

"Oh, they were nothing to do with all this", said Weaver.

"Muggles?" double-checked Orion, with a tone of distaste.

"Yeah. Problem?" demanded Weaver, stepping closer to Orion in an effort to intimidate him, despite being smaller and obviously knowing negligible magic.

"Well let's just say we're not accustomed to your kind in our House", laughed Orion. He had no fear, of course. He was Orion Black, with half a dozen relatives on the platform, let alone other Slytherins. And that was without consideration of the difference in relative size and likely power making either a physical or magical attack unlikely to succeed even if Orion didn't have such convincing back-up.

Weaver was clearly rankled, but not hot-headed; not out for a fight for fighting's sake.

"I heard people talking about Slytherin, saying it prides itself on being the best House. If that's the case, I want in. What've I got to do?"

Tom smiled, as the boy reminded him of him at that age, and then dropped the smile instantly as he realized this was a Mudblood reminding him of him.

Alphard, Orion's older brother, joined the conversation:

"You'd have to be ambitious, cunning, ruthless, pragmatic, and determined enough to get into our House despite your dirty Muggle blood", he said.

"Watch me", said Weaver, coldly.

"Oh, we will", smiled Orion, without kindness. The conversation was interrupted by the whistling-and-hooting approach of the Hogwarts Express; the assembled schoolchildren took to readying their luggage and jostling for position to get the best seats.

"Some Mudblood, eh?" joked Tiernan, as he, Tom, and a collection of their usual companions gravitated towards the carriage that would be next to Slughorn's private compartment. It made sense, as half of them would be invited into the latter anyway.

"Quite", said Tom. "Where do you think he'll be Sorted, Tiernan?"

"Got to be Gryffindor", he replied. "Plucky little one; obviously not got the blood for Slytherin, and probably not the brains for Ravenclaw. Can't see him going to Hufflepuff. You?"

"Probably Gryffindor, as you say", said Tom. "He clearly has many of the qualities for Slytherin, but that Hat could never put him with us, not with how Slytherin himself felt about Mudbloods"

"He thought, that they were dangerous", chimed in Marca. "It is not known that he found them equally contemptible as we in more enlightened times find them to be". Tom and Antonin stopped in their tracks to address this distinctly minority assessment of Salazar Slytherin's Blood politics. Marca, however, boarded the train without looking back — evidently under the impression that the boys in her immediate vicinity had taken a "ladies first" approach to boarding.

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When they finally arrived up to Hogwarts, the Great Hall was decked in sombre tones of dark blue, clearly an effort to present a look between funerary black and a nod to Fame's Ravenclaw colours. There was a hush as everyone filed in to take their seats, and await the Sorting of the new first-years.

Dippet strode in after everyone else was already in place. He took his time to smarten up his robes, not concerning himself with the hundreds of people currently waiting for him, and finally spoke:

"To our new arrivals, welcome to Hogwarts. At this point in the evening, we traditionally Sort you into your Houses before giving any start of term notices, and finishing with the start-of-term feast. Today we will be honouring this tradition, and also honouring our fallen dead in these terrible wars"

Dumbledore took on his usual role of Hatter, and began by placing the Sorting Hat ceremoniously on the stool that appeared to serve only this function.

The Sorting Hat's song was a little less cheery than its norm:

*We can all pull together
My brim's near torn in two
I'm just very old leather
But the same could happen to you*

*In times of war and strife
It's easy to lose one's way
Hardship, tears, and loss of life
Wanting to hide away*

*But we must reach out
And try to help each other
This wise old hat, have no doubt
Knows you must help your brother*

*Gryffindors brave may rush to save
Those weaker all around them
Hufflepuffs may say "Enough!"
And help those where they've found them*

*Ravenclaws might take a pause
Lend their minds to the big picture
Even Slytherin, the beast within
Can add their talents to the mixture*

*The Founders themselves
Found themselves divided
We must be better, we must resolve
To not be so blindsided*

*So honour your House in its truest form
Don't let its noble values get distorted
Make this cold world more warm
And live up to how you are Sorted*

Finally, the Sorting Hat shut its brim-hole.

“*Even Slytherin?*” muttered Tiernan to the backdrop of applause. “I swear that hat doesn’t like us”

“I think we should give it a reason. I’m seriously going to set that hat on fire one day”, replied Tom, prompting smirks from more than one nearby Slytherin.

“Burke, Huntley” was Sorted to Slytherin in but an instant - expectedly so, as the Burkes were an old Pureblood family, not popularly held in quite such esteem as for example the Lestranges, Malfoys, or Blacks, but nevertheless the Burke family was one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, on paper at the very least, and their ideals certainly lived up to that, making it quite unsurprising that young Huntley Burke had evidently grown to be a Slytherin.

“Clay, Pomona” was not difficult to sort into Hufflepuff, like her fourth-year brother Marvin. At least in this case it wasn’t merely the Hat being lazy and sorting families into the same House - she clearly was as much a Hufflepuff as he.

Eventually the Hat had only one left to Sort, that being “Weaver, Paul”, from the train.

Hmm, thought the Hat, talking in Weaver’s head but quite accessible there to Tom, *you do have a lot of determination, don’t you?*

— *Yeah I do*, thought Weaver, *Let me show them.*

— *Could be Hufflepuff, all that determination, a hardy one you are.... not that you’re lacking bravery...*

— *I can be the best, I can do it and don’t you dare doubt me.*

— *Slytherin pride and self-belief, and not a drop of blood behind it, well this is a pretty conundrum, a thirst to prove yourself, yes, and your rise would be all the greater for having come from so low a starting place...*

— *Don’t deny me this.. I can do it... I will do it...*

— *Hufflepuff would support you better, yet Slytherin could lift you higher, what to do, what do to indeed*

— *I don’t need support; I need a chance, Hogwarts is my chance, one chance, and I want the best step up I can find. I deserve this!*

— *All I can give you is what you deserve, and it’ll be a very hard time in...*

“Slytherin!” the Hat called out, to audible gasps and murmurs from a good number of those who knew of him from the station or the train, and had spent this whole time assuming the Sorting Hat was deciding between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, or at the very least, not Slytherin.

There was the usual obligatory applause, albeit somewhat more stifled and in some cases non-existent amongst those Slytherins who had already met the boy. He made his way over to the Slytherin table with a cocky gait and a smirk; taking a place at the table, those to each side shifted uneasily away from him.

“Now before we dine, it is my sad duty to announce that during summer, Hogwarts lost one of our own, an innocent casualty in the ongoing strife that has claimed so many lives of late. It is with a heavy heart and deep personal grief that I ask you to join me in remembering Ossapheme Fame”

There was a bang, and colourful party streamers erupted — hooting and tooting as they shot through the air — from the tip of Belinda’s wand, which she had been holding balanced on the table, point upwards. She looked as shocked as any.

“Sorry”, she mouthed. “That never happens!”, she added, muttering “I didn’t even say anything” as the bright ribbons of paper fluttered down onto the heads of those around her, and were subsequently brushed off - with some measure of annoyance from those who had been thusly adorned.

Up at the Staff table, Merrythought looked murderous, Vassy looked repulsed, and Slughorn cringed. Dumbledore's reaction was perhaps most interesting; he glared at Belinda with a mixture of ire and something that Tom couldn't quite decide upon.... was it pain? Anguish? Pity? Tom wasn't good at recognising a lot of emotions, and being consistently unable to access Dumbledore's mind directly did not help. Tom's curiosity was, however, interrupted by Dippet continuing:

"Ossapheme Fame will be known to most of you especially for her prowess on the Quidditch pitch, where her skills both as Seeker and as Captain brought renown to Ravenclaw House"

There was a distinctly more positive murmuring in response to this from the Ravenclaw table than from the other tables, though of course nobody could deny her being well-known for this, especially with her having had a catchy Quidditch chant to her name, not to mention her Quidditch career having been mentioned before her name in the Daily Prophet obituary. However, it was not something that the other three Houses had generally considered to be a pleasing trait — though admittedly, many did respect her for it, at least.

"It may not be known to so many of you that Ossapheme Fame was also a skilled duellist, though it's true that she was not a regular at the Inter-House Duelling Club, preferring to keep her limbs intact for the Quidditch Cup, and appearing in duels only after Ravenclaw's final game of each season"

Tom had in fact noticed this, but would not have expected her cowardice to be lauded so; and in any case, she was hardly the only one to appear just in time to make a mad dash effort to rack up a few extra House Points towards the end of each school year. Tom and the other regulars invariably looked forward to these late-year additions, since they were easy pickings, ill-accustomed to the Duelling Club and each duellist's individual style, personal repertoire of Spells, and such. Granted, Ozzy didn't tend to fare badly, as Tom recalled, which actually did suggest she'd probably have been a force to be reckoned with, had she actually put more effort in to duelling, and shown up all year round. Tom looked forward to the new season's duelling starting, as Dippet droned on:

"Her dedication to her House was well known, but Ossapheme Fame was a popular Witch with many friends who will miss her in all Houses"

Well, perhaps a loose sense of the word "popular", anyway, thought Tom. From exchanged glances and occasional hushed words around the Hall, it was clear that some others thought likewise.

"To those who might wonder how best to honour our fallen friend, I will say to you this: live those values that she herself held so highly, of academic and sporting pursuits alike; do your best in all your schoolwork, OWL and NEWT students, push for those extra grades"

Well, it seemed everyone had something to use Ozzy's death for, and Dippet was no exception, apparently.

"But let us not forget the very human aspect at play here; Ossapheme Fame was a dear friend to many, and it is very important that while we grieve, we do not let our sorrow turn to anger, and blame the Muggles for this tragedy"

Blame the Muggles for this tragedy, repeated Tiernan under his breath, next to Tom, who smiled.

"The Muggle and Magical communities each face grave dangers at present, and neither is lesser than the other, as both present very real existential threats, and of course both are inextricably intertwined. In the one, Gellert Grindelwald seeks to tear down all that which we hold dear, the harmony that we have enjoyed these many years, and replace it with a mire of Dark Magic, and the false supremacy of the few over the many. In the other, Muggles echo this ideology without understanding, without seeing the big picture"

Tom nodded, thoughtfully; Dippet was at least correct in this last part: the Muggles were of course very much in the dark, and would need to taught their place — and they would, in time.

“Even now, Ossapheme’s father continues to do his part for the downfall of Grindelwald and the restoration of the peace that will bring solace to many. So let us honour her memory, do the best we can for our school that she loved, and help to create the better times that we seek to see in the wake of this terrible war”

It was thus with a more sombre atmosphere than usual they all began their welcome feast, though it did not take long for spirits to recover throughout much of the Hall; a particularly joyous spirit was Peeves, who even perked the Ravenclaws up a bit, albeit by angering them more than cheering them.

As for the Slytherins, when the feast was over and they re-entered the Common Room, Orion Black was arguing with Paul Weaver, and a small crowd of onlookers had accumulated.

“It doesn’t change anything”, said Orion, “even a Muggle can have ambition, you still hardly belong here”

“The Sorting Hat seems to think otherwise”, countered Weaver.

“Well it’s got to put you somewhere, hasn’t it?”, said Orion. “The Hat judges us on our qualities, and if yours are few, then it’s going to be rather limited”

“Where would you have put me then, if you know me so well?” challenged Weaver.

“On the train home, filth” spat Orion.

“Hate to break it to you, knobhead, but this is my home now until the holidays, and there’s nothing you can do about it”

“We’ll see about that” smirked Orion.

“Oh yeah? Think you have more say than the Headmaster?”

Given that Orion was a Black, thought Tom, there was actually every chance that his sprawling and powerful family could buy or bully the Headmaster, who was after all a reclusive academic. Orion, it seemed, had a similar view.

“You know nothing”, he said. “You know absolutely nothing of this world, how it all works. Who we are. Which families can crush others like insects. Which families you don’t want to provoke”

“Families, is it?” sneered Weaver. “Going to run to Mummy?”

There were several bangs and flashes, and Weaver lay groaning on the floor, his robes smoking slightly. He had been hit by at least three Curses, possibly more, and certainly everyone present now had their wands drawn, except for Weaver.

“Don’t” said Tom, holding up a hand to stop Walburga from demonstrating her ability to use the Cruciatus Curse. “Not worth that trouble”, he said. Of course, he knew that Hogwarts had so much magic present that individual Spells could not be traced by the Ministry — he himself had cast a number of Cruciatus Curses in the castle and its grounds, after all — but casting an Unforgiveable Curse on a first-year who would be sure to report who had done it, in front of a score of witnesses who could be interrogated with Veritaserum or Legilimency or both? That would be a incredibly bad idea.

Walburga barely restrained herself, and Orion and Lucretia looked full of hate and contempt in equal measure. Alphard Black, who had been behind some others, pushed through to join them. Others around looked shocked, or stony-faced, or vicariously angered. The Black family was respected perhaps as much as any family could be, even by those who were not direct blood relatives.

“I think he’s learned his lesson for now”, said Tom, “and if he needs reminding, well, reminders can be arranged, don’t you think?” he added with a smile.

“He cannot... insult the House of Black like that and get away with it”, said Walburga, “Our family, all our families...”

“What say you, Mudblood?” asked Tom, nudging him with his foot to prompt an apology.

“They were... they were right”, croaked Weaver. “You’re all a bunch of in-bred loonies”

This time it was Tom who Cursed him first, with a Stunning Spell, before anyone else could do anything that would land them in Azkaban.

“I want him out of here”, said Walburga, trembling with rage.

“Out of this school”, said Orion, firmly.

“Out of this plane of existence”, furthered Lucretia, with a look of disgust. Alphard put his hand on her shoulder in solidarity.

Tom conjured chains onto the downed Mudblood, and magically lifted him into the air.

“Do we have a dustbin or something in here?”

“We do now” laughed an older student, Conjuring one large enough.

“Jolly good”, said Tom, dumping him in, head first. “Someone get the door; we can put this in the corridor. No need to clutter up our living space with rubbish, after all”, he joked. There were murmurs of agreement, and the atmosphere was a lot lighter after this was done. If anything, it united them together in one spirit, and there was almost a party feeling to the place now.

The next day, they learned that Weaver had been released from his bonds early in the morning, by a House Elf on its cleaning round. Not being sure which dormitory was his, and certainly not wanting to try to get in someone else’s bed, he’d gone to sleep on a sofa in one of the annexes, until he was woken up by the first wave of activity in the Common Room, that being first-years being got up to go get breakfast before receiving a formal welcome from Slughorn.

As far as anyone knew, nobody mentioned anything to Slughorn about the previous night’s kerfuffle, and Slughorn was hardly going to think it strange that a poor Mudblood looked scruffier than his usual students of much better background; it was only to be expected, after all. Slughorn would be no doubt disappointed too, of course, and would surely be quite keen to be rid of him too; they had the reputation of Slytherin House to upkeep, and it was not the House of scruffy Muggle-spawn layabouts.

Chapter Four

A Healer's Apprenticeship

The first lesson of the new term was Defence against the Dark Arts, and the door to Professor Merrythought's office flung itself open as she entered the room. She flicked it shut behind her with a gesture of her wand, while the class jumped to their feet, as she insisted they do upon her arrival to the classroom. They were but a few seconds into the class, and already she did not look pleased.

"Under what circumstances can a Witch or Wizard of any age use magic legally in the presence of a Muggle or Muggles?" she demanded.

There was nobody in the room who did not immediately raise a hand to indicate they knew the answer.

"Bagnold!" she snapped.

"Magic can be used in front of Muggles in exceptional circumstances, including situations when the life of the Witch or Wizard is threatened, or the lives of other Witches, Wizards and Muggles are threatened"

"Good", replied Merrythought, no less curtly, and without distributing any House Points for the answer. "And what if you're uncertain whether the situation qualifies?"

Not everybody's hand went up this time.

"Keenhaven"

"Use as little magic as possible, as discreetly as possible?"

"I'm looking for a better answer. Zelyonaya?"

"Survive first. Worry about legal defence later if necessary"

"Good. Muggles' memories can be modified if appropriate. It's a pain but it can be done. On the other hand, no Healer will be able to bring you back from the dead. How will you defend yourself against Muggle bombs, Renard?"

"Shield Charm, Professor, or Freezing Charm if there's time"

"Good. Make sure you can cast these quickly and silently - there'll be no time to speak the incantation in full; you should be able to cast a Shield Charm in an instant's thought by now. If you can't, practice. Jabez!"

"*tego!*" retorted Belinda, starting silently but speaking verbally the latter part of the Shield Charm spell, just in time to deflect some manner of Hex from Merrythought.

"Do better, Jabez. You finally had this in hand last year; you've let it slip over summer"

"Yes Professor; sorry Professor, I will", answered Belinda, narrowly avoiding tagging another "professor" on the end out of nerves.

"The quickest way to get out of a tight spot is by Disapparition. For now you're all under age, even with the War Waiver bringing the age down to sixteen. But that's no reason to be unprepared. Who here can already Apparate? Don't be shy, you're not in trouble"

Only Tom and Abraxas raised their hands.

"Riddle, yes, of course, after your incident last year breaking the castle's Anti-Apparition Jinx. Can you control it now?"

"So far so good, Professor, but I've only done line-of-sight, not big distances"

"Good start. Don't Splinch yourself. Malfoy, what's your control like?"

"It's good, Professor. My mother started teaching me soon after we went to war, just in case"

"Good to hear. Don't shout about it, though, as some would consider it a breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. I don't, because as far as I'm concerned, your lives are all constantly under threat at present, so any practice of life-saving techniques should be considered legal. However, they're commonly not, so on your own heads be it for now. You've been warned."

So, here was perhaps the strictest teacher in the school, bluntly telling them to break the law but without getting caught. She clearly had her priorities sorted out, something that Tom appreciated, even if that appreciation was not shared by everyone in the class, as she now pushed everyone more than ever to do better than they previously thought possible. This would push some to greatness, definitely, but right now it was also pushing some to near breaking point.

Their first Transfiguration class of the term was of a very different feel yet in a similar vein, quite clearly focussed on providing practical defensive skills — in this case, Transfigurational.

Dumbledore's demeanour was, of course, most unlike that of Professor Merrythought, and as such was rife with his usual whimsical eccentricities fronting an undertone of seriousness.

"You will no doubt be able to appreciate", he said, "that if you are close enough to see one of these Muggle devices and Transfigure it, then you are close enough to be killed by it. For this reason, the Spells I am teaching you will always be permissible, and I urge you to use them at the very first opportunity"

On his desk was a German Muggle bomb, the size of a large dog, and the class eyed it warily. Tom's hand remained on his wand.

"Now, who can suggest what the inherent dangers might be in attempting to Transfigure such a device? Yes, Miss Brown?"

"It could explode and kill us all, Sir" said Ursula Brown, with a tone that conveyed her fear of such.

"Yes, it could", agreed Dumbledore calmly, "Though you need not fear any such fate while I am here"

As usual, his arrogance was overwhelming, and it seemed he was putting their lives at risk for it.

"Would anybody like to tell me how we can minimize that risk? Emlyn?"

"Put a Freezing Charm on it, Sir", suggested Emlyn.

"Right you are, but in this class, we will looking to Transfiguration for our answers"

Well, that was delightful. They were to risk their lives with dangerous Transfiguration efforts when a Spell that Tom learned when he was eleven would suffice safely and surely.

"Miss Zelyonaya", prompted Dumbledore.

"Perhaps to process the Transfiguration in such a way as will remove the igniting mechanism on the way, but I don't know how that mechanism works"

"Very good", praised Dumbledore. "And perhaps as close as you will get to the answer — which is, I think you will find, quite brilliant"

Dumbledore went on to explain his own solution to the problem, which was rather more complex than those offered by the class, and involved the first movement of the Transfiguration being directed at turning the whole bomb into something soft and wet, such that it could not ignite mid-Transfiguration.

With a swish of his wand, he Transfigured the bomb into a fish of around equal size, which flopped down unpleasantly and thankfully did not explode.

By the end of the lesson, the classroom stank of fish but nobody had been killed; only one fish exploded, and that one did so harmlessly enough, showering Meredith Keenhaven in fish-guts but otherwise, no harm done.

"Very glad to get out of that classroom", said Tiernan as they left, trying to smell his robes to see if the scent had lingered.

"I wonder, how he comes to have such a bomb in his possession", said Antonin, pensively. "The others for us he copied, of course, but the first one he must have received from somewhere"

"In fairness", noted Tom, "The German Muggles have been quite generous with them, delivering to a good few cities over summer. I expect he just half-inched one on the way"

"Half-inch?"

"Half-inched, pinched, stole"

"Specially for the class, you mean?"

"For the class, for personal use, who knows. He loves to meddle with things", said Tom, "and so I doubt this would be any different".

Happily, Dumbledore did not assign them homework on this task, preferring instead to return to the same topic in their next few Transfiguration lessons. Unpleasant in class, but it was at least a small mercy that would keep their Common Room free from smelling of fish, and free of life-threatening explosions.

The next Monday morning, breakfast yielded the delivery of an unexpected invitation; a copy of it had been sent to Tom and another to Marca, but not other Slytherins, as it seemed. It arrived by the regular internal owl post, and was from Healer Tegner. It read, in Tom's case:

Tom Riddle,

This year I will be running a Healer's Apprenticeship scheme, whereby a few select students may benefit from an opportunity to learn more about the Healing profession, and get practical hands-on experience of such, both up at Hogwarts and down at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, subject to Floo Network availability.

Even if you are not considering a Healer's profession at this time, the programme I am planning will furnish you with many transferrable skills and give you a valuable glimpse into Wizarding working life.

The programme will be extra-curricular, meaning that it will not replace any of your existing lessons; it will be conducted chiefly at weekends and in the evenings, if accepted. It will also be free of charge.

I urge you to not be put off by any potential clash with Quidditch or duelling, as obviously I myself will also always be present at Quidditch and duelling in my usual role.

This invitation has been sent to a handful of select fourth-years, chosen for your high performance in relevant academic subject areas.

The first session will be Saturday the 13th, meeting at 10am in the Hospital Wing. Please reply as soon as possible by return owl, indicating your intention to attend.

Well wishes,

Salvo Tegner, DipH SchC OoH

Healer, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

"Will you attend this?", asked Marca.

"Definitely", replied Tom without hesitation. He would be very glad to have extra access to Magical medical knowledge and abilities, not to mention its plausibility as a perfectly well-grounded career option that he might pursue.

“Do you think to become a Healer?”, Marca asked.

“Yes; it’d be a good career”, said Tom, “Or maybe, but even if not, knowledge is power, and naturally I’m all in favour of keeping myself alive — and others around me, if I wish it”

“It would suit your skills, I think”, suggested Marca.

“Clearly Tegner thinks so too”, said Tom. “How about you? You’ll be taking him up on the offer as well, I suppose?”

“At least as a matter of trial”, said Marca, non-committally. “Then I will continue, if it seems to be truly educational. I will discontinue, if it seems to be that we are used for free labour and little benefit”

“A fair idea”, agreed Tom.

Saturday morning thus saw a small number of fourth-years of various Houses gathered up in the Hospital Wing. Present were Tom and Marca from Slytherin, Jana from Gryffindor, Evangeline Brocklehurst from Hufflepuff, and three Ravenclaws: Raymond Pierce, Elvira Highcastle, and Lana Renard.

Tom wondered how many (if any) had been invited and declined to take part, but that was more a matter of idle curiosity than any particularly important matter. For now, he paid attention to Tegner’s discussion of the more pressing practicalities:

“Firstly, I’ll need you to all be wearing white robes like myself, and any other on-duty Healer or nursing staff. It not only makes us recognizable so we can be sought out when needed in a busy working environment, but it also shows up any blood or other bodily substances that may get on you. This serves the dual function of helping you to know when your robes need disinfecting, and also reassuring patients that our robes fluttering around them are in fact clean”

“Are these for us then?”, asked Tom, indicating to the robes folded neatly on the bed nearest to him; more robes lay on other beds in a like manner.

“Yep, they should be approximately the right size, and you can always adjust them yourselves if they’re a little on the large or small side, depending on your own personal proportions. Please change quickly, as we’ve a schedule to keep. And that’s it, yes, that little cord-pull there to operate the curtains”

Some minutes later, all had emerged in their clean new white robes, far from all the same size by now. On the chest of each was an emblem consisting of a bone and a wand.

“This emblem here is that of St. Mungo’s, where we’ll be this morning. The specific version you’re wearing indicates that you are trainees — that is why your emblem is an outline and mine is filled in — not that it’s likely many would mistake you for fully trained staff at your age, of course. Now, let’s quickly go over the rules, and we’ll be on our way”

Tom would rather have started by learning what they’ll be doing, but had more success in looking at ease with this pace of development than some of the others.

“First rule: do not touch, perform magic upon, or otherwise interfere with anyone or anything unless told to do so by a member of staff”

Well, that was fairly comprehensive.

“Second rule: anything you see and do while working with patients is private and confidential, and is not to be discussed idly or with others outside of the professional environment”

Again, simple enough. Tom smiled at the notion of people and their dearly cherished illusions of privacy. Marca did not.

“That’s it, I have only those two rules for you”, said Tegner with a smile. “More rules, and you’ll just start to forget them. Two rules, and you can keep them in mind. Break them, however, and you will not only be off this course, but may also be barred permanently from ever pursuing a career in this field, depending on the severity of the breach. In our profession we have extremely high standards; do not try your luck. A hospital is not a place

for immature schoolchildren in any capacity besides perhaps as patients. You're here because you already meet very high academic standards in the most critical subjects, but your behaviour will also have to be up to par. I am aware that not all of you have always had a perfect record of following rules", he added, without naming names, and momentarily looking out of the window while he said it, "but now", he continued, looking back at them, "is the chance to impress me with your ability to hold yourself to the very highest standards of behaviour, in keeping with the best traditions of the Healer's profession".

Tegner walked over to where the fireplace was at the end of the ward, and picked up a brass bucket.

"We're in luck that the Floo Network is up and running properly at present; it's been on and off of late, due to a combination of the Muggle bombings and Grindelwald's attacks on British infrastructure essential to the Ministry", he said, in a tone Tom gathered was to be considered reassuring. "The destination to announce, by the way, is *St. Mungo's, Front Lobby*"

One by one, the seven apprentices passed through the fire. It was Tom's first time travelling by Floo Powder, though he was of course quite familiar with the process in theory at least, by now. When it came to his turn, he took a handful of the glittering powder, and cast it into the fireplace.

"St. Mungo's, Front Lobby", he declared, and the flames flared up green one more time as Tom stepped into them.

This was not, he now learned, going to be his new favourite form of transport. He had a sense of speeding through brick tunnels and chimneys without any control, spinning at corners here and there, until he finally found himself cast out into what promised to indeed be the front lobby of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Almost tripping over himself as he stepped out, he felt a little dizzy for a moment.

Turning around, he found Marca had already stepped out behind him, and if she was experiencing any ill effects, she wasn't showing them. She looked at him, and looked away, her eyes flitting around the new environment.

Behind her, Healer Tegner stepped forth from the Floo Grate, the last of their company to arrive, bringing up the rear.

"All here? Good. Please follow me, and do stay together. If you do get lost or separated though, just go back to the Welcome Witch there, and she can make an announcement"

Tom could just imagine it now, "Tom Riddle has got lost and is in the front lobby, would someone please come and collect him". No, he would most certainly make sure to pay attention to what he was supposed to be doing and where and with whom.

"This way, through here" said Tegner, ushering them through a door labelled "War Ward - Triage and Treatment".

Through the door was large ward, several times larger than the one at Hogwarts, and most of the beds were occupied, or had their curtains drawn, or both. Tom was having difficulty finding the minds of a good number of the patients, no matter whether they were behind curtains or not. Tegner led the apprentices through another door, however, and soon they found themselves in a small and uninspiring lounge-like room, with a couple of dilapidated-looking sofas, some dead potted plants, and an aquarium containing a number of eight-legged frog-like creatures, that slowly changed colour as they swam about.

"This is the staff room", said Tegner, "where Healers come to take a break and collect themselves... or at least, that's the theory", he added with a smile. "In practice, it's not uncommon to keep going for the entirety of one's working day; after all, a patient is often not in a position to wait on a Healer's leisure"

"But you have time for us?" asked Evangeline Brocklehurst, "Not complaining, of course, but..."

“You are my job, Miss Brocklehurst”, replied Tegner. “As such, while I can and do help out down here at St. Mungo’s, I will always be available at Hogwarts if called upon, though I confess I’d like to get you trained up a little to be able to handle some of the more minor complaints that arise up at the castle, such that I don’t have to abandon someone in serious need of attention down here to attend to the results of a miscalculated Tickling Charm up at the the castle... Again.”

“Surely you wouldn’t anyway, would you? Let someone die here, I mean, to do something little somewhere else?”

“Right now, as we speak, people are getting rushed in to St. Mungo’s from three continents while the Floo Network is up, and others are Apparated in at other times. War is raging across half the world, and this is Britain’s largest hospital facility. At this very moment, someone somewhere in the hospital is dying, more likely several someones. Yet here I am, talking to you instead of running to them, and it’s important that you understand why, if ever you hope to be a Healer”

His words carried a graver weight than his usual direct yet soft and reassuring manner, and it was clear that the other apprentices felt it. Well, apart from Marca, who at least looked quite unaffected by this shift in tone.

“Now”, continued Tegner, “I know I cannot be everywhere at once. I know that I have limits as to what I can do with my time. So, I allot time for saving lives, time for training you to save lives, time for attending events at the castle where I’m likely to be needed even if usually for more minor things than here, time for eating, time for sleeping, time for stopping to smell the roses, time for curling up with a book and a brandy. The world has to go on without us sometimes. The Healer who cannot grasp that, who tries to spend thirty-six hours a day performing complex life-saving Charms and diagnosing conditions where one potion might cure the patient and another similar potion might kill them... Well, that Healer’s going to burn out very quickly, at best, or worse, commit truly disastrous errors. So, today I’ll be lending a hand here and there, but by and large, today I’m here for you”

And indeed he was, as he spent the morning showing them around the various activities going on at St. Mungo’s, explaining all manner of goings-on, from Curse-damaged patients straight from combat, to more mundane problems, including Floo-related injuries and the reversals of badly made potions.

During the afternoon he explained to them more of the jobs they themselves would be doing over the course of their Apprenticeship, and everyone had a go with some of them along the way, from applying poultices to measuring correct potions dosages, all under the watchful eye of Healer Tegner for now, but with the implication that they’d soon be doing things very much like some of the fully trained auxiliary staff, if not the actual Healers any time soon — though Tegner did note that they should pay as close attention as possible to the things that he and other Healers were doing, so as to maximize their educational experience, and also increase their chances of getting to do some of the more exciting things, a prospect that certainly appealed to Tom and some of the others present, if not everybody.

Back at Hogwarts, life was pretty quick of pace for Tom over the next few weeks, as between lessons and homework, Healer’s Apprenticeship sessions and duelling, there was not a lot of free time for other things.

For some, of course, the new Quidditch season was quite a thing, with Quidditch trials to replace team members who had moved on. Walburga replaced Violet Selwyn as Captain, but being a Beater would obviously not be replacing her as Keeper; a fifth-year boy named Liam Wardgarren took that spot.

Preparations notwithstanding, Slytherin got off to a terrible start by losing to Gryffindor in their first match, something that a good number of Slytherins felt called for

strong and decisive action both on and off the pitch. One result of this was Jana acquiring an unofficial guard of Gryffindors when going about; such closing of ranks was common when a certain player seemed to be more of a target than usual.

Today, returning somewhat early from the Great Hall, having eaten quickly in the hopes of having a little extra time to go about his actuating his plans for the evening, Tom paused as he reached the section of corridor wall that would lead to the Common Room. Something was going on inside; something prompting a lot of conflict and fear; he could tell that much, but he had never yet been able to properly connect to any mind on the opposite side of this wall, and tonight was no exception, so he drew his wand and spoke the password. The wall slid open, revealing a most uncommon scene.

Chapter Five

Parpallugas

“Tom! Keep your eyes open!” exhorted Belinda as he entered the Common Room. She was standing near the middle of the room, slightly crouched as though ready for action, with her wand drawn. A couple of other Slytherins from other years were at the edges of the room, with their backs to the walls, their wands also drawn.

“If you see it, keep looking at it, and try to stun it!” advised Morgan Rosier.

“And tell us where it is”, added Octavian Nott, near to him.

“What are we looking for?” asked Tom, wand in hand.

“Not we. You. We’ve all used up our chances. You only get one”

“What are you talking about?”

“Belinda thought it would be a good idea to...”

“It’s not my fault!” objected Belinda, “You distracted me and let it get away”

“There’s a Parpalluga in the room”, explained Milton Mulciber quickly, “Blink and you’ll miss it. I mean literally”, he added, in response to Tom’s raised eyebrow indicating that this had not been very informative yet. “They have a special kind of invisibility: you can see it, but only once”

“So when you see it, keep it in your line of sight or you’ll never see it again”, summarized Morgan.

Tom frowned.

“What does it look like?” he asked, prompting a variety of answers.

“Sort of person-sized... ugly...”

“Long face, and ears”

“Big teeth”

“Long fingers, skinny arms, weird feet”

“I’m not seeing it”, said Tom, wondering if this was a practical joke, but getting the image of it from their minds, suggesting it probably wasn’t. Then it hit him.

Knocked to the floor by the thing crashing into his shoulders from behind, he got a glimpse of it, and then it was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

“Can you see it?” asked Belinda urgently.

“Not any more”, replied Tom.

“Great”

The Common Room door opened again, and Tom wheeled around, pointing his wand at the source of the movement, out of instinct as much as anything else. It was Paul Weaver.

Imperio, he cast, rather than risk a failure to follow instructions.

“Keep your eyes open; don’t even blink”, said Tom, “and back up against the wall”, he added, as the boy did so. “Now, stay still there, and tell us if you see anything non-human in the room. If you see it, tell us where it is and what it’s doing, and don’t take your eyes off it”.

Weaver looked shocked, but that might have been a result of the now-constant wideness of his eyes, as he backed up against the wall as ordered.

“Anything unusual in this corner here?” asked Tom, indicating

“Nothing out of the ordinary”, returned Weaver. Tom took up a post there with his own back to the corner.

They waited. A lamp fell over and broke, but nobody reacted quickly enough to blindly stun the beast that must have knocked it. Weaver piped up.

“There’s a thing behind the settee near the noticeboard. It’s scratching its head. It’s carrying on towards...” he continued his narration, but Tom was already connected with his mind and could now see the Parpalluga again, albeit from Weaver’s view, which wasn’t going to make aiming easy from his own position.

"Stun it", ordered Tom. Weaver raised his wand.

"*Stupefy... Stupefy... Stupefy...* I missed and it's gone in the third-year boys' dormitory", reported the infuriatingly incompetent Mudblood. He would pay for his failure later. Or maybe sooner than that, thought Tom, as he had an idea.

"Run to the doorway it went to, and then block the doorway", he ordered. The boy ran to the doorway as instructed, and then instead of blocking it with his body as Tom had meant, he summoned a nearby coffee table, and then clumsily stood it up in the doorway instead.

"Clever boy; now brace it", ordered Tom. Octavian and Morgan took up the post with him, which was just as well, as the barricade shuddered under the force of what must have been the Parpalluga ramming it from the other side.

"Hold on, nearly done", said Milton, running the tip of his wand along where the coffee table met the floor and the doorframe on one side - on the other side, there was a slight gap of maybe half an inch, and he didn't approach that.

"Argh, Glentaggart's Gutterspike, exclaimed Morgan, clutching first at his hand and then at his eye, before rolling onto his back in pain, abandoning the door. Evidently, the Parpalluga had slashed him with its claws through the gap, but of course nobody had seen it.

"There, that should hold now, unless it breaks the table", said Milton. "Contingent Sticking Charm"

"These tables had Unbreakable Charms cast on them long before we got here", said Walburga. "Alright, now what?"

"Now what, I've lost a bloody eye here", cried Morgan, as though everyone was missing the most important thing in the situation.

"Shut up", said Tom. "Let me see", he added, making a mental note to focus more on his bedside manner when apprenticing for Tegner. "No, when I say let me see, that means you need to move your hand", he advised. "*Stupefy*", he concluded, as Morgan was just getting in the way of his own treatment here.

"Ooh, that looks nasty", observed Octavian, as Morgan's hand fell away from the wound.

"*Aguamenti*" said Tom, rinsing the blood away. More appeared, of course, but the stream of water was sufficient to keep the wound visible; a blood-stained cut ran partway across the white of the eye.

"That is one unhappy eyeball", opined Lucretia.

"I've seen worse", murmured Tom, allowing himself a smile. "Somebody else do the water a moment; I need my wand free. Mulciber, that means you, do the water for me", he clarified, as nobody was taking the initiative.

"With my own wand, you mean?", asked Milton.

"No, with Belinda's; yes, with your own wand, you idiot", he snapped, lest Milton take him at his word and try with Belinda's, which would probably have been disastrous. Normally Milton Mulciber was the brains of the Mulciber-Rosier-Nott trio, but apparently he wasn't so quick in a crisis.

A new stream of water established, Tom ended his own and cast a quick Basic Healing Charm, at the bleeding stopped almost immediately.

"Good", said Tom, "Rinse his hand now", he instructed, lifting the injured hand. "Hold this, Octavian", he added.

"I don't want it" objected Octavian, avoiding contact with the messy limb.

"I said hold it", repeated Tom.

"Alright, I'm holding it" Octavian conceded, knowing full well that it would go badly for him if he did not; Tom was a strong ally and not a fun enemy.

Tom cast the same Basic Healing Charm again, this time though it left a little flap of skin where the edges of the wound had not quite met. He pondered what to do with this,

and did not like having to ponder this while being watched by quite so many people, not to mention with a captive Parpalluga subjugation still on the to do list before too many more people came back to the Common Room. Walburga offered a suggestion:

“Oh, he can trim that off later; he’ll be fine”

“No, I think we can do better than that”, said Tom, taking the hand in his own and relieving Octavian in the process. Holding it carefully, he ran his wand down the unwanted skin-flap; he made no verbal incantation, but with his mind treated it as a Transfiguration project; almost a pity Dumbledore couldn’t see him working on this, and he reshaped the flesh into its proper form. “There, good as new”, he concluded. “Now, to deal with our guest”

“How did you do that, though?” asked Lucretia.

“The tidying up of the finger?”, asked Tom. “I just put Transfiguration principles into practice; expected it’d work, and happily it did, saving me some embarrassment and saving our dear friend Mr. Rosier a scar. But now, as I say, let’s turn our attentions to our guest”

“It is still in there, right?”, asked Octavian. “It hasn’t banged for a bit”

“Must be”, said Milton, “No other way out of there, is there?”

“Definitely nobody else in there with it?”

“Nah, we’d have heard them”, observed Belinda.

“We need it to come back”, thought Tom out loud. “We need bait. Mudblood, go and offer your fingers in the gap”, he instructed to Weaver, who promptly obeyed.

“What the...” began Lucretia, and her surprise was echoed in the faces of the others who looked on incredulously. It only just now occurred to Tom that nobody else knew he had Imperiused the boy, and it further only just now occurred to Tom that he’d maintained that control despite the distractions of tending to the injured member of their gang. That was good.

“Wait, is he... Oh come on Tom, that’s ridiculous” said Lucretia, catching on.

“Would you rather offer your own hand?” suggested Tom.

“What are you doing?”

Weaver opened his mouth in surprise. His eyes, teary already from not blinking, streamed yet more. Crimson blood appeared on his hand and formed a strange shape in the air.

Cassiculus, incanted Tom, Transfiguring the table that was stuck in the doorway.

“What? We need that to stay there!” exclaimed Milton, raising his wand. Tom magically swiped him aside with a gesture of his hand, he did not want to lose concentration on what he was doing, and directed the newly created giant cobweb speedily into the dormitory, taking the Parpalluga with it. The thing thrashed about on the floor, its outline visible again thanks to the cobwebs.

“*Incarcerus*” added Belinda, and thicker cords wrapped around it, binding it more tightly. It wriggled less.

“Whew” expressed Milton.

“Now”, said Tom, “You had a plan with this thing, Belinda?”

“Yeah, I thought we could set it on Mudbloods, you know, help them to realize they’re out of their depth here and the magical world isn’t the place for them”

“Well, you sure showed them”, said Tom with a cold laugh. “That reminds me though... Weaver!”

The boy, who was still standing in the doorway holding out his hand, now dripping blood, turned to face him.

Episkey, “There, still in one piece. You can blink again now, by the way. You’re dripping your dirty blood on our carpet though; clean it up”

The Mudblood set to this task without a word besides the spoken Cleaning Charms.

“So, I suppose you’re planning to gift-wrap this and send it to the next Mudblood on your list, are you?”

“Actually not far off that, I was thinking we could do like we did with the Night Terror Weavers last year, and put it in a Snitch. After Shrinking it, obviously”

“What good would a tiny Parpalluga do up in the air in a Quidditch practice? You might as well send a mouse for all the bite will be worth”

“Wait”, interrupted Milton, “What if we only shrink it temporarily? With a potion that’ll wear off at the right time?”

“That’s an improvement, but I think we’d need to make it able to fly, too, and that might be a push”, observed Tom. “There’s a lot that can go wrong with trying to make flying creatures — wings are more complicated than a Levitation Charm, and it’s not like we can let it loose to trial them”

“So we deliver the Snitch to the Common Room, not to the Quidditch Pitch, then it won’t have to fly”

“It’ll be Halloween in a few weeks”, said Tom, “How about a little Halloween fun and games again?”

This suggestion was well-received, albeit with some confusion.

“What, masks and cloaks again?” asked Belinda.

“*Stupefy*”, replied Tom, Stunning not Belinda but Weaver, who had finished his cleaning and was patiently awaiting further instructions. He crumpled. “No”, said Tom; I was thinking we could have rather a more public spectacle this time.

“But we need masks for public spectacles, don’t we?”

“In this case, only those we wear every day”, smiled Tom.

“Huh?”

“Ha, well, alright, that some of us wear every day. I must admit you are rather more forthright, and that has its place too”.

“So... masks or no masks?” asked Belinda, preferring to stick with practical concerns over Tom’s philosophizing.

“No literal masks”, Tom confirmed. I have an idea, and I shall require a little help, that will wreak havoc on the Mudblood population of the castle while keeping our faces out of trouble without the need for covering them”

“Go on”, prompted Octavian. “In fact, let’s wake up Morgan, if we’re going to have a heads-together session”, he added, pausing for a moment in case of any objection, and when none was forthcoming, he performed the appropriate Counter-Curse.

“Woden’s monocle!”, croaked Morgan, recovering. “Where is it now?”, he asked, his hand going unnecessarily to his eye, which was of course now good as new, and then to his wand, which lay untouched on the floor.

“It’s in here”, said Tom, “Come join us”.

“So, we have a plan for our newfound friend here”, said Octavian, indicating to the well-bound Parpalluga, “Riddle, you were saying?”

“We can set the Parpallugas on the Mudbloods at Halloween by having them strategically placed in the Great Hall for the Halloween Feast, with Shrinking Solution administered such that they revert to their normal size well-timed to burst forth from something... eggs, pockets, pumpkins, I don’t know”

“Wait, we have more than one Parpalluga?” objected Morgan. “What did I miss?”

“Pardon, I am getting ahead of myself”, replied Tom. “Belinda, where did you get this fellow from, and can you get more of them?”

“Definitely can’t get more where I got that one from”, said Belinda, her eyes widening at the prospect.

“Then we shall multiply this one at the last minute. I understand that multiplying living magical creatures is on the OWL syllabus and that Professor Vassy intends to teach us later this year, which probably means you learned this last year, am I correct?”

“Yeah, but it’s bludgering well difficult”, said Morgan.

“And the copies will die quickly”, added Lucretia.

“A few hours maybe, tops”, clarified Walburga.

“Can you perform the Spell or not?”, asked Tom. “Because if not, I’ll need to turn my attentions to mastering it before... Friday after next, I think?”

“We can do it”

“Good. Incidentally, if a Parpalluga consumes a Shrinking Solution, and *then* is copied by means of the aforementioned Charm, what will be the resultant condition of the copy? Will it be small, and stay small? Will it be large? Will it be small, and revert to large later like the other?”

Nobody offered an answer.

“Funnily enough, Vassy didn’t teach us that”, offered Octavian.

“Slughorn might know”, thought Lucretia out loud.

“Yeah, but that’ll not exactly cast us in innocent light after Parpallugas start bursting out of Mudbloods’ pockets”, objected Milton.

“Come on, Slughorn wouldn’t dob us in” suggested Morgan. “Would he?”

“I think he’s a rather understanding teacher, when it comes to such jolly japes”, said Tom measuredly, “And would turn a blind eye if he could. However, it’ll be a lot easier for him to turn a blind eye if he doesn’t know about it.

“What’s the plan, then?”

“I suggest we conduct our own research and, if necessary, experiments, so that we know for sure we can definitely cause a number of potion-shrunk Parpallugas to grow suddenly back to their normal size at the same time”.

The experiments in question ended up being conducted mostly by Tom, Lucretia, and Milton, which started quite a few rumours when they had more than once emerged together from a dormitory in which they had magically sealed themselves, often looking somewhat flustered, and decidedly like they’d been doing something quite physical.

Their hard work paid off, though, because by the time Halloween came around, they had one tiny Parpalluga for each Mudblood in school, and Octavian had succeeded in Memory Charming a House Elf to “remember” that a certain stack of cauldron cakes were to be served one each to that list of students, by special order of Headmaster Dippet.

Up in the Great Hall, the Mudbloods were now in for the Halloween surprise of a lifetime; they thought this was all about pumpkin juice and licorice bats, chocolate frogs and backdraught bubblegum, but they were about to be reminded of the dangers inherent to studying magic.

As Slytherin had only one Mudblood in the entire House, naturally he got the only Slytherin-table Parpalluga. As it burst from its cauldron cake, Paul Weaver froze, perhaps in shock, before leaping to his feet. The Parpalluga sized him up, face to face with him now. Tom wondered if the creature would bite the boy’s face, as Weaver seemed paralysed with fear.

Then the beast let out a wild squealing cry, showering the Mudblood with flecks of saliva - and blood. It made a moment’s fumbling effort to move the boy’s hand with its claws, then dropped to lie on the table, convulsing, knocking the remaining food in that section onto the floor.

Weaver, meanwhile, contemplated the bloody knife in his hand, and stuck it back into the Parpalluga’s neck, for lack of a better place to put it. He drew his wand, finally, and looked around the Great Hall for more Parpallugas - which, of course, all vanished from his sight when for one reason or another his view was broken by all the hubbub in the room, making his interference with them unlikely.

Suddenly, everyone in the Great Hall, including Tom, froze in position. From the food that was being sent sailing into the air along the Gryffindor table, it seemed at least one of the Parpallugas was still active, but it wasn't attacking anyone as such.

"Stop that, Peeves", called the sharp voice of Professor Merrythought. The cascade of food ceased, and Peeves became visible. He looked around the Hall; it seemed he had stopped not so much out of obedience but curiosity, surprised at everyone suddenly standing still. Or rather, everyone apart from the teachers, who were still mobile, having been behind the point of origin of her Spell.

Merrythought spoke more quietly in a conspiratorial aside to Dumbledore, who nodded, and the pair of them descended upon the main part of the Great Hall, while the rest of the staff left them to it, glad to keep out of the mess. The students, for their part, had little choice but to be patient in the matter. Tom endeavoured to slowly break the Freezing Charm's hold on him, focussing all his will first on just moving his fingertip, and he'd take it from there, gradually freeing more and more of his body; this was a methodology he'd used before to some good effect when breaking other similar Charms and Curses. One thing was clear though, he wasn't going anywhere quickly.

Healer Tegner came down to the House tables too, as he made his way around the Hall checking for injuries, of which there were quite a few minor slashes and the like, from Parpallugas catching those nearest to them with their claws upon first bursting forth. Tom was pleased to note that these were mostly Mudbloods, and entertained to see that Jana's first reaction had been to grab the wrist of her Parpalluga, though she must have blinked since accessing her mind, she could no longer see it, only feel it.

Professors Merrythought and Dumbledore stalked the aisles between the House tables identifying with some difficulty where the Parpallugas were. Dumbledore fired Curses here and there, mostly hitting nothing, and occasionally capturing a Parpalluga; it seemed he was using the Incarcerus Curse, and it simply had no effect when hitting the tables or the walls. Merrythought did not cast any Curses; perhaps she needed more concentration to maintain a Freezing Charm holding quite so many Beings at once; every child in the castle and a good number of Parpallugas.

Of course, what they didn't know was exactly how many Parpallugas there were, and it took a few tries of releasing and then re-establishing the Freezing Charm — resetting Tom's progress at breaking it, much to his annoyance — to get them all.

Even Weaver's obviously dead Parpalluga (easy to find, with blood over a fair portion of it) was Incarcerated, just in case. Peeves contented himself with thoughtfully delivering cakes and the like directly to the faces of many of those Freeze Charmed, while cackling about how he wouldn't want the poor pupils to starve to death while the teachers were busy hunting things they could no longer see — something that also prompted him to improvise a ditty or two about their eyesight failing them in their old age. A funny notion, since Peeves was of course far, far older than either of them. Tom wondered whether Peeves could see the creatures himself, but had never yet been able to access (or even detect) the Poltergeist's mind, and tonight was no exception.

"Be silent and be seated", Merrythought called out sharply through the Great Hall, when a final test of dropping the Freezing Charm suggested that all Parpallugas were now captured. "If anybody would like to do the right thing and take responsibility for the ridiculously stupid act of bringing these creatures into the Great Hall, now would be an excellent opportunity to at least earn my respect with your honesty"

Tom felt absolutely no urge to earn Merrythought's respect in that particular way at this moment in time. From the lack of volunteers, it was thankfully clear that nobody else did either.

"I am disappointed. Next, if anybody would like to do the right thing and convey any information they may have as to who did this thing, then now would be a good time for that. Do not fear the rebuke of your peers, because the whole school is going to be

punished unless the culprit or culprits can be identified. To this end, anyone sharing such information will be saving the vast majority of the school a vast amount of trouble, and will as such should win the favours of most, I should think”

Still nobody came forward, though a good number of minds and eyes went to common offenders; some Slytherins stole surreptitious glances at the Nott-Rosier-Mulciber trio, for instance, and they weren't alone; some from other Houses and Professor Merrythought herself also looked their way; rather more openly in her case and with a steely expression that Tom was quite glad was not directed at him.

Across at the Gryffindor table, Rubeus Hagrid attracted attention to himself by quite vocally denying what must have been quieter suspicions aired by one or more of those near him. Visions from some of the minds near the giant boy told a vivid tale of havoc being wrought recently in Gryffindor Tower, as a result of him smuggling a Niffler into the castle from who-knew-where; naturally it had then gone through everybody's things in their absence, causing much damage and making Hagrid quite unpopular.

Merrythought paced the aisles some more, stopping to look into the eyes of some along the way, her cold inner fire burning as she did so. As far as Tom could tell, she was no Legilimens, or at the very least not without using a Spell for such, but it must have been very intimidating for those she stopped by. She did not stop by him. She did stop by the fifth-year boys that had been involved in it, but they didn't yield anything.

“If nobody comes forward, the entire school will be placed in detention forthwith, all extra-curricular activities suspended, including Quidditch, and every evening will be spent here, silently, each day writing a new essay on the value of honesty”

This raised a couple of eyebrows up at the staff table, but Merrythought was not challenged in her self-appointed role as chief giver of discipline.

“Now, with this in mind, does anybody have anything they wish to say”

There was a grave silence, broken by a loud fart. Again Hagrid protested his innocence, interrupted by a much longer, wetter-sounding fart, in turn followed by Peeves' cackling laughter; he had been the source of the noise. How did he even make that sound, Tom wondered to himself, but Merrythought had a more pressing line of enquiry.

“Have you something to say for yourself, Peeves? Was this your doing?”

“Why?”, asked Peeves slyly, “What'll you do to me if it was? Put me in detention? Shall I fetch you a cane?”, he laughed.

“Shall we fetch the Bloody Baron, perhaps?”, Merrythought offered in turn. “You know, with the Bloody Baron on your coattails and the entire school in a state of mind-numbing collective boredom in detention, with no fun pursuits, no chance for your hijinks, just how much do you think you're going to enjoy the coming days, weeks, months if necessary? I should think that if you know something about who did this, you'd do well to say so”

“Forgetting the contract, are we?” challenged Peeves with a grin.

“The contract, as you know full well, only provides for the presence during school-time of children at Hogwarts; it does not speak for the conditions under which they will be kept; the rest of the contract provides only for your privileges, not theirs. I assure you I will make this castle as entertaining as a tomb if needs be”

Peeves sailed to and fro awhile, as though pacing, muttering to himself.

“Won't tell you who it was if you don't say please”, he returned. Merrythought frowned, and paused for thought herself.

“And if I were to say please?”

“Then I'll give you a name”

“The name of the one or ones to blame for this, specifically”, Merrythought clarified, wise to Peeves' tricks after her many years in the castle.

“Alright”, said Peeves with an impish grin, eager to hear the strict old Witch entreat him politely.

“Then you will *please* me by telling me who is to blame”, said Merrythought sharply, but emphasizing the word please, to indicate she had upheld her part of the bargain.

“Oh fine then, you can blame old Peevsie” said Peeves, doing a somersault. “Now what, merry merry Merrythought?”

“All students will return immediately to their Houses” replied Merrythought loudly.

Chapter Six

Connections

Peeves may have got them off the hook for the time being, but Tom would be very surprised if Merrythought didn't try to interrogate the Poltergeist further. Peeves would probably find this funny and frustrate her for a good while, but he might well put the blame back on the students in time. Tom only hoped Peeves didn't know who had actually done it; he could well have been invisible at any place or time, and the only half-reassurance that he had not been so was that he had not shown himself, something he could generally not resist doing. Fortunately, Peeves was rarely down in the Dungeons, so almost certainly missed everything.

Still, when it was ascertained that the Parpallugas came out of cauldron cakes, the House Elves would be questioned, and one of them would "remember" an order coming from Dippet about the affair, with a list of students, who were entirely coincidentally all Mudbloods, which in turn would bring Slytherin House under the spotlight. Right now, most Slytherins didn't know anything about it, but a cluster of them did, and those Slytherins now conspired in a corner of the Common Room.

"Nott", said Tom, resorting as he often did when particularly serious to a slightly more formal address than first name terms, "you Memory Charmed a House Elf, and that's going to be discovered at this rate if Merrythought isn't satisfied with Peeves' questionable confession"

"What do you suggest?", replied Octavian. "Find the Elf again and do another Memory Charm, to wipe out the first one? But that'd be a bit of a risk in itself, going to the Kitchens now while we're all supposed to be in our Houses"

Tom's mind raced, to various possibilities ranging from Polyjuice Potion (no good; he had no such potion and no bit of someone else to put in it) to Imperiusing a Hufflepuff to go and get the Elf (no good; the Hufflepuffs would all be safe in their Common Room by now).

"Time for a masked operation, I think", said Tom.

"We're going to march into the Kitchen in masks? That's going to raise one Hell of a stir that won't go away soon"

"Do you know what that particular Elf was called? Could you summon it by name? Please don't, we don't want it here, but could you do it?"

"Yes, yes I could" said Octavian. "You know how they all include their name in every other sentence, so yep, this one did too"

"Good", said Tom. "Summon it not here, but outside the Hufflepuff Common Room; it's close enough and will have to do. Gryffindor would be more believable, but this is no time to go the other end of the castle"

"We could take brooms", said Belinda. It'd be quick, and if we're spotted, we'd be gone before they could stop us. "Then we could do Gryffindor Tower"

"But afterwards, how to get back without leading to our House?" asked Antonin.

"And their Common Room has a portrait right outside it", said Tom. "It'd see us, and report our appearance if questioned, including us arriving and departing on brooms. One could go unseen, I have a provision for that, but not more. Are you up to a solo mission?" he asked, of Octavian.

"Invisibility cloak?" asked the latter.

"After a fashion. It's not a true invisibility cloak, but you'll blend in near perfectly with your surroundings and certainly be even less identifiable than with mask and cloak alone"

"I've got an Invisibility Potion", said Milton Mulciber, "it should do three people for about half an hour, at a pinch; better if it were only taken between two, though"

"Why do we need so many people?" asked Morgan. "Octavian can zip up there, summon the Elf, Charm it, and dart back here. It's a stealth mission, not a battle"

“And if Merrythought finds me?” objected Octavian. “Or Dumbledore, on his way to his House? I’ll need backup, if I’m going to get back here in one piece after meeting either of them”

There was a moment’s silence, while the group contemplated how badly it could go if it came to a duel with Merrythought, or even Dumbledore, who was rumoured to have once duelled Grindelwald and come out of it unscathed.

“Tom’s held Merrythought off in the end of year practical exams”, offered Tiernan, helpfully.

“Which might rather highlight that it’s me, if I have to do so tonight”, replied Tom, thinking out loud. “If there’s a couple of us though, it’d be less obvious”

“I’ll come”, Belinda volunteered.

“Good. Good flyer, good duellist”, Tom complimented her. “Nott, you in?”

“Nott in”, said Octavian, with a grin. “Sorry, I mean yes, I’m in” he added, when it was obvious his humour hadn’t been well-received.

“Good. One more. Marca perhaps? Probably our best duellist who’s not me”

“If it is needed”, Marca consented with a curt nod. “I have no desire to do so and would welcome a volunteer to take my place, but—”

“I can go”, offered Antonin. “I am not so good a duellist as Marca, but I am good, and perhaps a better flyer, if she will forgive my conceit to suggest it”

“I forgive”, replied Marca. “I have no love of flying”

“It’s settled then”, said Tom, “And time is of the essence, so let’s get going. The Invisibility Potion?”

Some minutes later, Milton returned with the potion, and Tom had taken up his chameleon cloak, but not yet donned it. Those who were due to head out held their brooms as inconspicuously as possible, on their laps.

“A distraction, if you please”, said Tom, “that we can leave without too much notice, in case questions are asked of this lot later” he explained, gesturing to the other Slytherins in the Common Room. “Granted we can disappear now with these things, but better that the door opening goes as unnoticed as possible, not to mention the brooms”

“On it”, said Morgan. “Go”

He Charmed a table near the lake window to charge at people nearby, and when that grabbed their attention, Tom slung his chameleon cloak over his robes, and the other three took the Invisibility Potion between them, and the four of them sped from the Common Room.

“Masks on just in case”, said Tom, “and code-names only”

They did so, and flew as quickly as possible without crashing or losing each other — after all, even just their brooms were difficult to see in the half-light of the night-time corridors — and soon came to the Grand Staircase that would lead them close to Gryffindor House.

“Stop at the top of the stairs”, ordered Tom. This they did.

Confundus incanted Tom, Confunding the painting that hung nearby. The Witch in it looked suitably confused, and carefully examined her wine glass.

“Baal, where are you?” asked Octavian.

“Here”, said Tom. “Vespa?”

“Here”

“Vespa, go and be a look out in the main stairway. If anybody comes, don’t engage them, come and warn us. Also, don’t wander off, or we’ll lose you”

“Got it”, said Belinda, and dived down in the gap between the flights of stairs.

“Naka?” asked Tom.

“Here”, said Antonin. He had taken his name from a short form of *Nakazanya*, which he described as meaning “Discipline”, though Tom’s Perevodol Glass also gave “punishment”, “retribution”, and a bunch of other things.

"Watch out the East side of the staircase; I'll take the West"

"Very good"

"Kraken", said Tom.

"Here", replied Octavian.

"Summon the Elf. Charm it to forget the other memory; it must believe it had nothing to do with it. Then send it back to the kitchens"

"Hebe!" called Octavian, accentuated with a clap of the hands. There was a crack, and the House Elf appeared, and looked around it, confused.

"*Obliviate*" - the Elf looked yet more confused, but stopped looking around. Octavian worked his Spell, and then said aloud, "Go back to the kitchens".

The Elf vanished.

"Close ranks", said Tom, "Kraken, Naka, with me" he added, diving down after Belinda, finding her more readily with his mind than his eyes. "Vespa", he called, "Job done, let's go home"

They sped back to the Dungeons, and found their journey mercifully free of Professors Merrythought or Dumbledore, or indeed anyone else. Back at the entrance to Slytherin House, they dismounted, and upon a final glance around, Tom spoke the password, "*Curcurbita Maxima*". The doors opened and they went in; one or two Slytherins did look up, but saw nothing identifying, and gazed at it for a moment before going back to minding their own business.

Over the coming days, it became clear that Merrythought had grudgingly dropped the investigation, or at least suspended it, as she would have it, as no evidence could be found to indicate it wasn't Peeves. The Parpalluga copies all died promptly, but the cause of their deaths remained unknown. The Parpalluga that didn't die of its own accord was slaughtered by Merrythought, after what was reputed to be a lengthy argument between her and Professor Phillips, the school's resident Beastmaster, and teacher of the eponymous subject.

Paul Weaver came back from his next Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson carrying a Parpalluga head on a mount, silver-plated for visibility; it was the head of the Parpalluga he had killed, and Merrythought had arranged for it to be stuffed, plated, and mounted for him to keep as a trophy, which he in turn stuck above his bed. Attempts were made to play pranks with this, but it transpired that he had precluded this possibility by placing an Unbreakable Charm on it, and affixing it with a Permanent Sticking Charm. So, unless someone Transfigured it, it was there to stay, and would in all likelihood be at the school a lot longer than he was.

While many of those involved with the goings-on of Halloween felt satisfied it had gone very well, albeit with more limited casualties than they might have liked, Tom shared the opinion but not the satisfaction. He needed to turn his attentions to more serious pursuits.

Tonight, he sat alone at one of the writing desks in an alcove to the edge of the main area of the Slytherin Common Room. Light from the lamp above him cast dark shadows on the page, but did not obscure his view of where he paused with the quill, unsure as to how to begin the letter he had decided to write, in the hopes of beginning a potentially very rewarding correspondence with the Wizard who appeared to share his goals more than any other, Gellert Grindelwald himself.

How does one address a megalomaniac revolutionary, without being either offensive or sycophantic? How would he, Tom, like to be addressed? "My Lord" would do nicely, he smiled to himself, but did not seem appropriate for Grindelwald, who did not use that title, or indeed any title; for all he was the commander of an ongoing revolution, he did not seem to tie that to any specific named role - Perhaps that was key; his position had never been named because he never foresaw it being taken by someone else, as he did not

intend to die. In essence, his “position” in the world was “Gellert Grindelwald”, which was, truth be told, admittedly both unique and powerful. Tom hoped that one day his own name, his chosen name, would command the same kind of respect. Yes, he thought to himself, he’d make that happen.

As for this correspondence now, Tom thought back to more formally addressed letters that he had received without any special title, and began with a similar salutation:

Most Esteemed Gellert Grindelwald,

Now what? How to make sure that it would receive a reply? They were not best friends, and Lord Voldemort would not be any figure that would have his respect from the name alone. He would need to encourage Grindelwald to read on, right from the start.

I have something that will be of great importance to you in your war.

Tom had no idea what this might be yet, but wanted to whet the war leader’s appetite, so opted to keep the suspense going for a little bit first, so he continued on the same line:

What I am about to reveal to you will without doubt change the face of Europe at the very least, and give you the power to remodel the world in your image.

Naturally, he would have to appeal to Grindelwald’s base desires and biases, so there was no reason to not throw in a few extra of those too. After all, he could promise the moon, since he had no intention of delivering in full on any claim. In part, yes, but if he were to deliver in full, he’d have nothing left to hold as further leverage. So, confident yet extravagant claims seemed to be the way forwards.

Your new era can only endure if overseen directly, and for that, it will be necessary that you yourself endure. While you take steps to ensure your heart continues to beat, I can safely assure you I’m a little further along that path than you. I daresay you’d like to catch up, as it were, and I will be only too glad to help a like mind such as yours, from my position in the shadows.

Now of course he needed to tie these ideas together, lest Grindelwald think he only had immortality to offer, and not also a war-changing secret weapon.

Only with this twin dynamic - proofing against death itself, combined with the power to restructure the nations around you in accordance with your will, and effortlessly put their resources to your cause; putting their assets and key positions into your hands - only with these things combined can you swiftly become the complete and total leader that the world requires, that the world sorely needs, and that the world will recognise in history as the Wizard who brought us into the light, who brought us forwards together, and who brought us into a new era of prosperity, a Golden Age of Wizardkind.

Alright, thought Tom, maybe he got a little carried away there, but it did the job, and would hopefully get Grindelwald into a state of mind to leap at the chance to meet him.

Naturally, I could not entrust these two things to anyone who might betray the Cause, or seek to supplant you. To this end, I entreat audience with you. I recognise that I am as a stranger to you, so feel free to take whatever security precautions you see fit; it is a dangerous time for all of us who are in the vanguard of this advance.

It'd be necessary to make provisions for a reply, and for that he needed a reply address of at least some kind; fortunately Brega's talents made for a degree of flexibility in that regard.

For my own safety I value my secrecy, and I do not include my address in case this letter is intercepted. I am in Scotland, however, so when you reply, if you send your communication addressed to me by name via the Hogsmeade Owl Office, then such will be collected by my owl and brought to me at my home.

For the Greater Good,

Eternally,

Lord Voldemort

Tom put down his quill, and sat back to reread what he had written. As he did so, Tiernan approached.

"History of Magic?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, I just thought you were doing the History of Magic homework that Binns gave us on Tuesday. It's usually the only subject that makes you stop after every line or so and gaze into space for a while", he explained, with a smile.

"No", laughed Tom. "A letter. Anyway, what do you want?"

"To live up to the noble ancestry of the House of Lestrangle, to lay down a proud legacy for future generations, and also... to ask if you fancy a snack, because I'm going to the kitchens so I could bring you something back if you like"

"Yes, that'd be a good idea", agreed Tom. "See if they have any of that wild game pie left, if not, some cheese perhaps"

"Will do"

"Oh, and see if you can bully the House Elves into giving us some of that Mullitover spiced wine"

"For the Greater Good", grinned Tiernan, and set off. By the time he returned with a large portion of the wild game pie, an assortment of aged cheeses, and a bottle of Everwarm-Charmed Mullitover spiced wine, Tom had reread and made some small adjustments to his letter, and now had it ready to dispatch via Brega. He'd send it tomorrow though; it was already too late today. Naturally he'd not want Brega to be gone for months delivering the thing, but nor was Gellert Grindelwald the sort of Wizard to whom one could use the regular Owl Office long distance services without being noticed. So more extreme methods would be required. Tom remembered the Owl Emporium proprietor's story of how Brega got into the Ministry of Magic by flying through a Floo grate from who-knew-where; perhaps there was an idea he could use; if he could send Brega by Floo to a major Owl Office somewhere controlled by Grindelwald, the letter would be safe from that point on. But for that, several other things would need to be aligned first.

For now, he set the letter aside, and turned his attentions to his supper, while he and Tiernan discussed Peeves, whose uses Tom reckoned as fewer than Tiernan would have it.

"I don't know... Maybe... You're probably right", concluded Tiernan, eventually. "I don't know about you, but I need to sleep, if you don't mind".

"I also need to sleep", said Tom, "haven't fully fixed that one yet; potions only do so much"

"Well, shall we?" said Tiernan, rising from his seat.

“Yes”, replied Tom, “Yes, I think so” - he was clearly more wakeful than Tiernan, but not quite so wakeful that he was going to accomplish great things in any remaining time he continued to stay up tonight.

Heading to their dorm, Tom saw Paul Weaver was still up - he hadn't noticed that, and had been under the impression there was only himself and Tiernan here, and a handful of older students up at a table at the other end of the Common Room, nearer the lake window.

“Hey, good evening” said Weaver, to no immediate response beyond a somewhat surprised look from the fourth-year boys. “Riddle, could I... have a quick word before you go to bed? If you don't mind?”

Curious, Tom assented, and gestured for Tiernan to go on ahead of him, which he did.

“What is it?” asked Tom, without preamble. The boy's thoughts were all over the place.

“I wanted to ask your advice”, said Weaver, measuredly.

“Ah, everyone hates you, and you want me to help”, replied Tom, filling in the blanks from the montage of thoughts flitting through Weaver's mind.

“Well, sort of”, replied Weaver, “not help exactly, just, you know... advise. I mean, you're... Half-Blood, someone said? Sorry if that's wrong and you're Pureblood, it's just someone said...”

“My family history is not so well mapped-out as some”, answered Tom, curtly but without the obvious anger that would betray his position on the matter.

“Right, but everyone loves you, even people from the old Pureblood families, they practically worship you. The firstborn son and heir of the Lestrangle family basically asked your permission to go to bed just now”

Tom cracked a smile, as Weaver's observation softened his demeanour.

“So you wonder why they look up to me, despite my less obvious heritage, and yet look upon you with nothing short of contempt, distrust, and dislike?”

“Basically”, answered Weaver.

“For a start, you're a Mudblood, and I am not” said Tom, to make that part absolutely clear in case it wasn't already. “I may not be on any of my friends' family trees, but I'm born of Wizarding Blood, not of Muggle filth”, he continued, even though this was pushing the truth a little; after all, he almost certainly was not completely Pureblood.

“Understood”, said Weaver. He struggled to articulate what he wanted to say in an unoffensive way, which was that normally the Purebloods looked down upon even Half-Bloods as though they were but a small step up from Mudbloods, yet Tom seemed to have escaped this fate, and he, Weaver, wanted to know how. Tom opted to proceed as if he'd found a way to say it, in the interests of getting the conversation over with.

“I am brilliant, and they know it”, said Tom, most simply.

“How did you make them see it, though? Anything I do just gets sneered at, at best, like I tried too hard. And the reality is I do try hard, but then who gets to the top without trying?”

“No, Weaver. You seem to be under the mistaken impression that I am merely competent. The fact is that I am far better at most things than they are, and I have powerful abilities that they do not, some of which they could scarcely miss if they tried”, said Tom. “Others are more subtle, but power comes from many angles”.

“And they don't feel... threatened by that?”

“They feel threatened insofar as they rightly fear getting on the wrong side of me”, smirked Tom.

“But they don't need to, you know, push you down to make themselves feel safe?”

Tom gave a cold laugh at this notion.

"They couldn't push me down if they tried, and they know it. Therein, Weaver, lies the difference between us"

"So... What can I do?"

"Suffer", replied Tom, as the most obvious response, before getting his more problem-solving brain into gear, more to see if he could than any other reason. "Also... Give service, of a kind. What talents you have, if you have any worth speaking of, offer them. Be useful. We Slytherins value usefulness. Gain our respect by providing worth"

"You think they'll allow themselves to see what I bring to the table?"

"Maybe, eventually, maybe not. But at the very least, that's the part I think you need to play", said Tom. He certainly couldn't imagine any other approach working for this upstart.

"Well, you know what they say: look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it. Or, that's what Lady Macbeth said, anyway"

"Shakespeare?" said Tom, incredulously. He had never seen an actual play in his life, but knew the name from it having been advertised in London.

"Yes, what's wrong with that? Let me guess, if it's not magical, it's no good? There's witches in it, you know"

"I'm just having a hard time imagining a pauper child like you going to the theatre", said Tom, as though he himself had been anything else.

"I was mostly living at the workhouse for the last couple of years right up until coming here", shrugged Weaver. "And the theatres need workers to run around behind the scenes, so that's a job for a few months sometimes"

"I can imagine little worse", said Tom, wincing at a fleeting thought about his grandfather, who had most likely been a Muggle circus worker.

"Well anyway, you'd probably like the play if you could get over it being Muggles. It's about magic and prophecy and a rise to power. And then a fall from power, but hey, learn from other people's mistakes and all that"

"How does she fall from power?" asked Tom, curious despite himself.

"He, really, she just nags him most of the time. But anyway, yeah, there was a prophecy and he went and misunderstood it and mucked things up for himself, and in the end he got killed in a duel when he thought he'd be invincible. Something to do with how the other chap's mum died when he was a baby; I never quite got it because I always missed bits"

"So, you waste my time with half a story?"

"I'll not waste it any longer. Thanks for the advice, Riddle. And, er, let me know if you want me for anything at any point"

"I will", smiled Tom.

Chapter Seven

A Song of Futures Past

The second Quidditch match of the season was Ravenclaw vs Hufflepuff, something that had an unusual level of preparation from Slytherin House, as Ozzy Fame's new chant was to be put into practice, to get some use out of her death while ostensibly merely memorializing her. For some, this was a matter of using one thing to cloak another. In Tom's case, he personally considered that her death was indeed genuinely a waste, and to let it go without making it useful would of course only increase the amount of waste. He did not want Magical blood spilled unnecessarily, and most certainly not on account of Muggles.

The creation of the newer, lengthier chant for Ozzy ended up being a collaborative effort, and sufficiently deferential in its wording as to allow its judicious dissemination for use school-wide by those who had not necessarily hated Ozzy as much as many of Slytherin House had, especially its Quidditch team.

Belinda was sufficiently irked by this as to threaten to resign from the Quidditch team, but Walburga's counter-threat to offer the Seeker spot to her cousin Alphard called Belinda's bluff and persuaded her to pipe down about it a bit.

Tom was quite aware from Belinda's thoughts that she had every intention of singing her own slightly modified (and less complimentary) version, as doubtlessly a number of others would too, but that was all well and good. She'd be drowned out by the majority.

When the match was in play, it was Slytherins who began the chant, followed soon by some from the other Houses who had by one friendship connection or another had the new chant brought to their attention:

*Ozzy Fame, she played one,
She played Quidditch and she won;
Terrific Snitch Witch, one little hitch:
Our favourite Seeker's flown,
Ozzy Fame's not coming home.*

Tom himself was not chanting, nor even with his classmates in the usual part of the stands. He was over with Healer Tegner, and his fellow apprentices who were not in Houses whose teams were playing today, which meant that Tom was flanked by Jana and Marca, as all the other apprentices were Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff.

*Ozzy Fame, she played two,
She played Quidditch better than you;
Terrific Snitch Witch, one little hitch:
Our favourite Seeker's flown,
Ozzy Fame's not coming home.*

It was clear the Ravenclaw players were more distracted by this chant than the Hufflepuff team, but Tom was more interested in the reactions of the teachers and other staff. Professor Vassy looked uncharacteristically stony-faced, and her mind was of course on Ozzy — with anger, too, but Tom could not tell whether the anger was directed at the chanters of the chant, or circumstances that had led to Ozzy's death, or the Muggles, or the Ministry of Magic, or any number of possible sets of people who could be assigned some kind of blame.

*Ozzy Fame, she played three,
She was Ravenclaw's queen bee;
Terrific Snitch Witch, one little hitch:
Our favourite Seeker's flown!
Ozzy Fame's not coming home.*

Jana was mouthing the words absent-mindedly to herself, while her eyes darted about looking for the Snitch. Tom would be impressed if she could spot it from here, without it coming to pay them a visit. After all, up the air, she'd then have a chance of keeping up with the thing, but as a spectator, even if it came into view, much like a Parpalluga it'd be likely be gone again from sight mere seconds later.

*Ozzy Fame, she played four,
She could have played so much more;
Terrific Snitch Witch, one little hitch:
Our favourite Seeker's flown!
Ozzy Fame's not coming home.*

Professor Slughorn was looking distinctly dismayed, but making a foray into his thoughts suggested that this was more about the reminder of the loss of Ozzy, than any problem with the chant per se. Of course he always wanted Slytherin to win the Quidditch Cup, and so by default privately wished Ozzy all the worst on the Quidditch pitch, but any such victory would be very dearly bought if it cost the life of one of his beloved Slug Club favourites. Some might care most about the moment; for Slughorn, all was about the long-term and the big picture, and what his relationships with everyone might do for him over the course of their lives. In Ozzy's case, this was now "not a lot".

*Ozzy Fame, she played five,
She played Quidditch, when alive;
Terrific Snitch Witch, one little hitch:
Our favourite Seeker's flown!
Ozzy Fame's not coming home.*

Ravenclaw Chaser Trispen Hodnet scored the first goal of the match, prompting a strong but doubtlessly temporary lift to Ravenclaw's spirits. Tom wondered idly how bets had been placed on the outcome of today's game.

*Ozzy Fame, she played six,
She played Quidditch full of tricks;
Terrific Snitch Witch, one little hitch:
Our favourite Seeker's flown!
Ozzy Fame's not coming home.*

Over in the Slytherin stands, Belinda was most definitely singing her own version, having found her own things to rhyme with "six" and "Snitch".

*Ozzy Fame, she played seven,
She made this pitch her own Heaven
Terrific Snitch Witch, one little hitch:
Our favourite Seeker's flown!
Ozzy Fame's not coming home.*

Professor Merrythought seemed ready to kill someone, but then that wasn't too far from the norm for her. This year in general she seemed much more serious than previously, something Tom would not have thought possible back in his first year.

*Ozzy Fame, she played eight,
She played Quidditch quite first rate;
Terrific Snitch Witch, one little hitch:
Our favourite Seeker's flown!
Ozzy Fame's not coming home.*

To look at Dumbledore, he seemed less affected than many teachers, but Tom wouldn't have liked to guess what was going on in that head. He certainly wasn't paying attention to the game, in any case.

*Ozzy Fame, she played nine,
Who put her life on the line?
Terrific Snitch Witch, one little hitch:
Our favourite Seeker's flown!
Ozzy Fame's not coming home.*

The predictable clockwork that was Armando Dippet's brain was now whirring on the topic of what he personally could do to better secure the safety of his pupils — hopefully he'd come to some useful conclusion, but in all likelihood he'd need to over-think it for at least a day or so, and knowing the Headmaster, that would result in him taking no relevant action whatsoever by the time Monday rolled around.

*Ozzy Fame, she played ten,
Never can she play again
Terrific Snitch Witch, one little hitch:
Our favourite Seeker's flown!
Ozzy Fame's not coming home.*

Goals were scored now and again by both sides, Ravenclaw keeping a slight edge, despite any distractions. Hours passed, and Tom was sincerely missing Ossapheme Fame who would surely have caught the Snitch by now.

As night fell, so too did the frequency and volume of the chants, and the players were showing obvious signs of fatigue. Tom himself was getting hungry, and he wasn't the only one pleased when at six o'clock, a House-Elf facilitated back-up catering arrangement prompted a renewed atmosphere, as hot soups, potatoes, pies and the like were eaten in the cool night air, making the evening feel like one big outdoors dinner party, with Quidditch as entertainment - however much less attention the game now got in light of the competing distraction, the food.

Tom wondered if the players themselves were more distracted by the chants before, or the food-for-everyone-else-but-them now, and upon reaching out to their minds, came to the conclusion that it was at the least a very different kind of distraction, but in all honesty no less potent.

The first injuries serious enough to temporarily halt play were no doubt born of the increasing player fatigue, as Hufflepuff Beater Rastus Warren missed a Bludger, and narrowly avoided being injured by it by instead crashing gloriously into the Gryffindor stands.

In and of itself, this would not have been terrible, as Warren's sideways barrel roll into the stands was far from a head-on collision, but as he was still on his broom, the

Bludger still treated him as a target. Of course, Vassy stopped the game and the Bludgers with it, but not before several nearby Gryffindor first-years had been quicker with their wands to try to deal with the Bludger themselves, and the resulting Spell damage was sufficient to require relocation of Warren to the Hospital Wing.

“Right, apprentices, I need a volunteer to come with me and Mr. Warren to the Hospital Wing, and then stay there with him”

“I’ll come”, said Tom quickly. He was very comfortable missing Quidditch, and also this would give him the opportunity he needed to use an unattended Floo grate while everyone was out here. Warren groaned, but it could have been on account of his injuries as much as any disapproval of being entrusted to the care of a Slytherin, the House most commonly responsible for sabotaging other Houses’ Quidditch players.

“Good”, said Tegner. “You two”, he added to Marca and Jana, “hold the fort down here until I get back; if anything else happens while I’m at the castle, tend to it if you can, don’t do anything you’re not absolutely confident doing, and I’ll be back as quickly as I can. Clear?”

“Clear”, answered Jana, as Marca nodded.

Tegner raised the having-been-Conjured stretcher with Warren on it, and indicated to Tom to follow him off the pitch; Vassy re-started the match behind them; in the absence of a reserve Beater, Hufflepuff would need to play on with just one for the time being. That said, Ravenclaw were not playing on top form either, so it was still anybody’s match.

“Now, stairs and stretchers, always a wonderful combination”, said Tegner as they reached the base of the stairs that would lead up to the Hospital Wing. “Let’s leave our brooms here so as to not overcomplicate things”, he added, gesturing to the broom cupboard by the door. As the flight of brooms within the walls of Hogwarts was forbidden in theory and strongly discouraged in practice, provisions had been made for the stockage of brooms of those who preferred to drop them off and pick them up when entering and leaving the Castle. It saved a lot of brooms from cluttering up the Great Hall at weekends, when flyers came in to eat.

Tom hooked his broom onto a free mount, and a shimmer of magic showed the Charm was in place to keep it there securely until he got back — only the person who placed a given broom there would be able to retrieve it. Administrative exceptions could be made only by Headmaster’s disposition, and so happened rarely.

When they got up to the Hospital Wing, Tegner unlocked the main doors by tracing his hand down where they met.

“That’d be a handy thing for us to be able to do”, suggested Tom.

“Later maybe”, replied Tegner. “Responsibility first; power later. Besides, I doubt the Headmaster would agree to it; he’s not usually thrilled at giving pupils access to more things, and knowing you rascals, I can’t say I blame him, the mischief you might get up to”

“Well, I shall look forward to the responsibility”, said Tom.

“Alright, let’s just pop Mr. Warren down here”, said Tegner, transferring him to a bed.

“Am I going to die?” asked Warren, in his first full sentence since his injury.

“Not from this”, smiled Tegner. “It looks a lot worse than it is; don’t worry”

Warren didn’t seem certain whether Tegner was being honest, as he looked at his stomach where it had been blasted open by a Blasting Curse.

“I don’t feel anything; shouldn’t I be feeling something?” he asked.

“Not after the Calming Draught and the Stabilization Charm”, said Tegner.

“I don’t remember you giving me a potion”, said Warren, uncertainly, as he tried to recall it.

“I administered it directly”, said Tegner, “as there was no need for the potion to take the scenic route via your mouth, what with...” — he indicated the still-gaping wound to Warren’s stomach.

“Huh” said Warren, ostensibly accepting this.

“Now, this is a Tissue Repair Solution”, said Tegner, of an absinthe-green potion in a bottle that he now unstoppered, and poured into a graduated cylinder, and then poured a measure of it from the graduated cylinder into a phial. “This will cause your flesh to regrow itself in its proper place”, he said as he poured the measure of liquid into Warren’s stomach, as the latter tried not to look, “but I can’t give it to you all at once, or it’ll rebuild the tissue too quickly all in one place, and we don’t want that”

Warren grimaced.

“So”, continued Tegner, “My apprentice Mr. Riddle here will administer one fluid ounce every ten minutes, until six doses in total have been administered. Riddle, please repeat”

“One fluid ounce every ten minutes until six doses in total have been administered, so, five more in addition to the one you’ve just given him”

“Good. If there are any problems, come and get me immediately”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll quickly get my owl first”, said Tom, “I can be back with him in five minutes, and then if there’s any problem, I can send a message down to you more quickly and without leaving a patient unattended in crisis”

“Good idea”, agreed Tegner. “Don’t dilly dally on the way though; straight back here”

“Of course”

Not long later, Tom was back in the Hospital Wing alone with Brega and Warren. Brega perched on the rail at the end of the bed, looking inquisitively at Warren’s open wound.

“Can you get that bird away from me, please”, said Warren, “He’s looking at me like I’m a buffet”

“Brega”, called Tom.

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!” returned the bird, alighting on Tom’s outstretched hand. Tom would now need a way to get Brega into the Floo Network without making Warren suspicious.

“Why were you so keen to come up here to stay with me?” Warren asked.

“Truth be told”, said Tom, “I don’t care for Quidditch so much as most, so I’d rather potentially learn something useful up here”

“Sounds like we can still hear the commentary at least”, said Warren.

“Yes”, said Tom, “Even more audible in the corridor just outside here on the way back; Ravenclaw scored another goal when I was passing through there”

“Thank you for rubbing that in”, sighed Warren, moving as though to touch his wound, then realizing that would surely be a bad idea.

“Time for your medicine”, noted Tom, indicating to the clock.

“Joy”, groaned Warren.

Tom measured out the correct dose, and brought it over to Warren. Holding the phial over the wound, he carefully poured it very slowly. Warren closed his eyes and looked tense, so Tom took this opportunity to draw his wand without notice.

Stupefy.

Tom finished administering the potion to Warren’s now-Stunned body, and turned to Brega.

“We don’t have much time, so quickly now”, he said. “I need to send this internationally, but I can’t use the British Owl Post to do it, because they would open a letter to this addressee. I’m going to get you into the Floo Network, and will send you to the Paris Owl Office; you can pass on the message to revolutionary forces there, then get back to me when you can. Got it?”

“Hahaha-hoo!”

“I hope you’ve got it”, said Tom. “Alright”, he said, giving the letter to Brega and taking up a handful of Floo Powder, “Paris Owl Office!”

A flash of emerald green flames later, and Brega was gone. Tom went quickly back to Warren's bedside.

Rennervate.

"You alright there?", asked Tom. "Seemed to be a bit of a spasm"

"Feel so groggy", groaned Warren.

"I'll bet you do", said Tom. "I'd give you something to perk you up a bit, but I don't know how it'd react with the other potions, so best not".

"Yeah, I'll live", said Warren. "Or so I'm told, anyway", he added with a weak smile.

The Quidditch commentary outside caught the boys' attention with its upturn in excitement, and the words:

"Seth Halbert has caught the Snitch! A hard-fought victory for Hufflepuff!"

"Yes!" shouted Warren, followed swiftly by "Owww oww ow, I should not have done that...", prompting a cold laugh from Tom, and a genuine smile.

All that remained for Tom now was to await Brega's return, and hopefully, though it'd probably take longer if it came at all, a reply from Grindelwald.

Meanwhile, Tom would bide his time, carry on his own research, continue playing the part of a brilliant but otherwise ordinary student in his lessons.

Chapter Eight

The Longest Minute

“Now I warn you”, said Slughorn, “This is going to be a very long lesson for you, despite the fact that I plan to let you leave early”

He flicked his wand and the potion’s name appeared on the board:

Quickening Solution

“Quickening Solution - also known, of course, as a Speed Potion, but we’ll be using its proper textbook name here. Now, besides the obvious, can anyone tell me the key properties of this potion?”

Marca responded first. Tom’s mind was still on the *obvious* function of the potion.

“Yes, Miss Zelyonaya? No need for a Quickening Solution for you, I see”

“The obvious part is that it is a solution that quickens the drinker. As for the details, the drinker will accomplish in one second what would normally take them one minute, or in one minute what would normally take them one hour to do. The potion’s effects last only for one minute maximum, but of course the drinker can do very much in that time”

“Very good, I can see someone’s been paying attention, five points for Slytherin. Now, who, somebody else, can tell me the hazards associated with this potion? Yes, Tom?”

“A lot of wind, Sir, and friction burns when touching things - I imagine that’s why last lesson’s Fricshod Potions are on the trolley there”, he said, indicating, “so we can go about without causing catastrophe”

“Hopefully, yes”, agreed Slughorn, “Five more points to Slytherin. Although I must say it’s still going to take some care, which is why we don’t do this potion earlier in your school career; it’s not very tricky to make, but it takes a certain level of maturity to use it carefully”

Indeed, Tom could readily imagine plenty of catastrophes that could occur as a result of accelerating a person to sixty times their normal speed.

“Yes, Miss Gould?” asked Slughorn, as Gryffindor Deidre Gould had raised her hand.

“If an hour passes for us while only a minute passes for everyone else, does that mean that if we used it a lot, we’d get older really quickly?”

“Yes, it certainly does, and that’s why it’s important to not overuse this one - although some Witches and Wizards have been known to temper it with a Rejuvenation Potion, but that has its own risks too, so we’ll not go into that today”

Tom would rather go straight to learning how to brew a Rejuvenation Potion, but he could look that up later, and in any case, it was not a potion he needed at this stage in his life, not unless he planned to consume a lot of Quickening Solutions.

“Now, there will be House Points associated with today’s brewing, but points will be allocated based on the average for your House in a fifty question quiz that I expect each of you to complete within a minute of unrolling the parchment, a copy of which you’ll need to collect from the front here... but only when you’ve drunk your successfully brewed potion”, he concluded, looking proud of himself for coming up with such a means of testing them.

Slughorn conjured the ingredients list and instructions up onto the board, and soon everyone was busy grinding cinnabar salts into their cauldrons; Tom smiled wistfully when it came time to add the powdered unicorn horn, an incredibly expensive and powerful ingredient that he had failed to harvest from the unicorn he felled back in his first year.

“How are we supposed to shred this?”, asked Tiernan, holding a snakeskin notably longer than himself. “It just says *black mamba skin, shredded* - no word on how to go about it”

“Let’s give it a go with the rocking knife, shall we?” suggested Tom. A fairly safe bet, as he noted over at Jana’s table she was finely chopping hers with a knife just as one would with many herbs and herb-like ingredients. He set the rocking knife rocking, and flicked it a few more times to, ironically enough, increase its speed. “Now, just feed that through there, without mincing your fingers”

Very carefully, Tiernan did as he was told. The result, when all was said and done, was a pile of thin strips of snakeskin and no minced fingers.

“Jolly good, boys, very industrious” enthused Slughorn. With the aid of the non-standard magical knife, they were now slightly ahead of the class.

After mixing in the arrowroot as directed, the potion thickened up until it was clearly time to add the final proper ingredient, a whole kantreat’s claw. Whatever a kantreat was, its claw was scaly, four-toed, and a vile yellow colour. It looked like it came from some sort of bird, in any case.

“Now”, said Tiernan, reading from the instructions, “We stir it quickly sixty times, Bonkling Boggartsbane, that’s a lot, anyway, we stir it sixty times clockwise with this bamboo straw, then immediately drink it through the same, wait a minute, we only have one straw, how are we going to work this?”

“Using two might not work”, observed Tom, “And given the instruction to drink it immediately, drinking one after the other might not work”

“You go first”, offered Tiernan, “And I’ll see if it still works after. Don’t forget to take your Fricshod Potion before you do, though”

Tom picked up the potion that he had bottled last lesson, still sealed, still with his name on the label tied to its neck.

“Here goes”, he said, and drank it. The immediate effect of the Fricshod Potion was to make his clothes feel uncomfortable, or perhaps, strangely more comfortable than they should. As he moved, they didn’t quite move with him in the same way; it felt like everything he was wearing slipped over his skin like the highest quality silk, and not the cheap cotton and wool that his clothing mostly was. On the other hand, it felt perfectly normal when he touched it with his hand; the Fricshod Potion reduced friction over the entire body, except the soles of the feet and the palms of the hands, including the undersides of the toes and fingertips, of course. The idea was that one could broadly go about without friction, but would still be able to walk and hold things without falling over or having everything slip from one’s grasp.

“And now for the Quickening Solution”, said Tom. He took the bamboo straw and stirred it as per the instructions; it took a surprising amount of concentration to count quite as rapidly as he was stirring, since one rotation was quicker than he could say a lot of numbers, especially those involving the digit seven. Nevertheless, he got to sixty sooner than he expected, and quickly took a deep draught of the potion, while still leaving enough for Tiernan.

He offered the straw to Tiernan, who gazed at it open-mouthed without taking it. Then Tom realised that he, Tom, was Quickened, and Tiernan was not, so it was going to take Tiernan a minute to complete an action that would currently take Tom a single second. Deciding he had time to be a helpful friend, Tom lifted the potion to Tiernan’s face, and put the bamboo straw in his mouth for him, to save waiting forever for him to get it there.

Tiernan’s face - excruciatingly slowly - adopted a surprised expression. His hands were just about moving towards the beaker, but weren’t going to get there any time soon, so Tom put a Hover Charm on the beaker, such that he could leave him to it, to catch up when he eventually got to drink the potion that Tom had already put to his lips for him, but couldn’t actually get him to drink it any sooner without siphoning it in, and come to think of it, Tiernan might not react well to it arriving in his mouth so much more rapidly than expected. It’d be a waste if he ended up very slowly spitting it out in surprise.

Tom looked to Jana to see how she was doing, as the most likely candidate for finishing around the same time. She was still in the process of stirring, and her head was full of the thought of the number forty-seven, meaning that she'd be stirring a good while yet.

In accordance with Slughorn's directions, Tom made his way up to the front of the class to collect a copy of the Potions quiz. As he moved, his clothes hung back sluggishly, as though being dragged through water. Of course, the Fricshod Potion had only affected his skin, and not the clothes, which were now being slowed down by considerable air resistance as he moved. He squirmed out of his outer robe, which then hung behind him in mid-air, falling almost imperceptibly slowly. He took off his tie as well, but decided against undressing any more than that, since in the not-too-distant future the rest of the class would be going at the same speed and he would no longer be quite so alone and at peace as he was presently.

His copy of the quiz likewise expressed a reluctance to move, of course, and he had to take quite some care to not rip it as he took it back to his place.

"Capricious kelpies!", said Tiernan, spluttering and putting the beaker down.

"Ah, you've caught up", observed Tom.

"Yeah, I... Gosh, these robes don't want to move, do they? Oh, you took yours off, that's a good idea" he said, doing the same, but taking the trouble to fold his, and then Tom's too, which he caught just as they were about to reach the ground, and which he now manhandled onto the worktop instead.

"Well, the quiz doesn't look too hard", said Tom, dipping his quill into the inkwell, and shaking the excess ink off it; a routine action normally quite uneventful, but now a jet of inky droplets splashed upward from the force of it.

"Oops... *Tergeo*", incanted Tiernan, cleaning up the spillage while half of it was still on its way back down to the desk. "I don't think it's the questions that'll be trying us", he observed wryly.

"Slughorn wasn't exaggerating when he said this was going to be a long lesson", said Tom.

"He seems to be looking at us; can he hear us?"

"We're going at sixty times our normal speed, so who knows what we sound like to him, but I'm quite certain he can't understand it"

"Feels weird, doesn't it?" said Tiernan, in hushed tones. "I feel like I could shout rude things at him and get away with it, but something in me wonders if he knows a way around so that he'd hear it anyway"

"It does seem quite trusting of him to not take a Quickening Potion at the same time", said Tom; "I'm surprised he doesn't want to keep an eye on the class. Oh well, best not do anything too silly; I like him liking us"

"I'm going to take a quick look at other people's potions", declared Tiernan.

"Obviously it'll be a quick look, Tiernan", said Tom, wishing he had a pencil or a pen, and thinking on how to solve this problem. He certainly didn't fancy trying to answer the whole page of questions with a quill at this speed, and would delegate that task to Tiernan if necessary.

"Heh, yeah" answered Tiernan with a laugh. "Look how funny Marca looks while she's drinking through the straw"

Tom looked across at Marca, and then glanced back at Jana, who was still stirring, her mind now on the number fifty-one. Jana might be the more talented potioneer in general, but in all likelihood she had wasted time talking to Valerie, while Marca had got on with the work.

"Argh!" cried Tiernan, stumbling away from Marca, who had just hit him in the face.

"Why did you have your face so close to me?", she asked.

"Sorry, I was just looking", Tiernan replied, apologetically.

"Is your eyesight faulty?"

"No, I just... forgot you were about to come back to life"

"I did not stop being alive", objected Marca.

"Yeah, I mean, now you're back up to our speed, and before you weren't"

"I still do not see how that required your face to be so close to mine"

"It didn't; I'm sorry; my mistake"

"Do not make the mistake again", Marca advised him.

"Marca, do you have a pen or a pencil?" asked Tom, partly to break up the interrogation that was otherwise likely to continue perpetually as Tiernan could not offer an acceptable answer.

"I do not have either with me", replied Marca. "I have some pencils in my bedroom"

"Back in the girls' dorm, you mean?"

"No. In my bedroom. In Sverdlovsk"

"That's no good to us; ah, wands, of course", said Tom. "I don't know how to conjure a pen or pencil, but I can conjure writing, and it'll be neater than any effort with a quill at this speed"

"Good thinking", commended Marca. "A quill would probably flick ink everywhere at this speed. Why do you laugh?"

"It's because we already tried the quill and found out the hard way", confessed Tiernan.

Marca moved to make off towards the front to collect a copy of the quiz, and found the same problem with her robes that the boys had.

"*Glisseo*" she incanted, robbing her robes of friction and allowing her to move much more freely and easily, without having to remove them. Tom and Tiernan silently repeated her idea on their own remaining uniforms.

Marca regarded Antonin, her brewing partner, and evidently came to the conclusion that he'd get there eventually with drinking it, as she did not so much as lift it off the worktop for him.

"This is not very difficult", she observed, reading through her copy of the quiz.

"No", agreed Tom, "I think the reason for having us do it was more just an excuse to give us something to do while Quickened. Like he said, it's going to be a long lesson for us"

"Do you think we should take this opportunity to interfere with the Gryffindors' potions, for points?", suggested Tiernan. "After all, the less time they have to do the quiz, the lower their House's average mark will be"

"Not unless you can think of a way of doing it that's not obvious", said Tom.

"Otherwise they might not see properly what we're doing, but they'll see a blur visiting their cauldron and it won't be difficult to work out what it was"

"Fair enough" agreed Tiernan, diligently copying Tom's answers so far.

"Robes feel weird like this", announced Jana, catching up. "Just you two... three... Quickened so far?"

"And you", Tom corrected her.

"Yeah, and me. Right, where are the quizzes again?"

"Up front"

Jana battled her way towards the front of the class, getting a good portion of the way back before stopping to observe that Marca's robes weren't behaving the way hers were, and came upon the idea of Charming the friction out of them as the others had.

"This is not easy to move", said Antonin, taking his turn now. Marca applied the Charm to his robes without a word. "Ah, that is better", he agreed.

"If you don't mind", said Tiernan, "I'm going to nip back to our Common Room to use the bathroom; I really don't want to wait nearly an hour for this potion to wear off"

“Well, see you in a few seconds then, I suppose” said Tom; after all, the Common Room was not far from here at all. Tiernan went to the back of the classroom, and pulled the doorknob off the door.

“Err... help?” he asked, repairing it with his wand. “How do I open this without breaking it?”

“Slowly”, Marca called back to him. Slowly, carefully, Tiernan opened the door without further incident, and disappeared out into the corridor, leaving the door to swing shut behind him. In all likelihood, he’d be back before it was all the way closed.

“Tom, do you know the chief properties of the Wimbling Woadweed?”, asked Marca, “because I do not”

“No, I’m sure it’s in Pepculer’s book though, but presently I’m leaving that one for later, as I don’t expect it’s easy to use a book at this speed”

“Wimbling Woadweed?”, repeated Jana.

“Yes, do you know?”

“It makes things blue, but only when they’re moving”, said Jana.

“What use is that to things?” wondered Antonin aloud.

“Hang on, there’s more... what was it? There was a more serious use...” said Jana, racking her brains. “Ah, it binds fluxes, erm, so... it’s good in potions that have defluxions of the blood as a side-effect” she announced proudly, as though expecting House Points to Gryffindor for the answer.

“Very well then, thank you”, said Tom, as he and the others wrote it down. Jana was, it seemed, not so concerned with competitiveness in this milieu as Tiernan was, or perhaps was just so used to earning points in Potions lessons by being the first to answer questions correctly, and so continued to do so now even though Slughorn was obviously not listening.

“Heh, there’s a thing you don’t often see”, she observed, “the very dignified and proper Abraxas Malfoy is picking his nose”

Indeed, Abraxas was probably giving his nose a half-second scratch while nobody was looking, but it looked very uncouth when it was lasting half a minute instead.

Soon, Valerie had also caught up, had her robes Charmed, and learned to not try to use a quill at sixty times normal speed.

Not that this was the worst mistake one could possibly make, as they found out when Tiernan got back, laughing.

“Do not try to use a toilet at this speed” he recommended.

“What happened?” asked Antonin.

“Well, I realized the Common Room door would probably be a challenge, so I went up to the toilets up by the portrait of Myfanwy Quimble instead. Got in without too much difficulty, but let’s just say the ricochet was impressive and not something I want to repeat”

Tom would not have shared this information if it had been him who had erred so, but apparently Tiernan was quite lax with such.

Somehow, Tom had expected more of the class to have joined them in pace by now, but doing the maths, he now realized that this would require a synchronized finishing (and drinking) of potions all within the same minute of real time, and thus quite unlikely to happen. Using some of the extra time he had after completing his quiz, Tom strolled around the classroom, seeing where various people had got to in the process. Some were nearly finished; others were still shredding snakeskin the slow way, and still yet others didn’t appear to be engaged in potion-making at all. No doubt something had momentarily distracted them, but that moment obviously seemed like a long time to Tom, and those others currently operating at the same speed.

Eventually, Tom’s potion wore off, causing a strange sensation of disorientation.

“Ah, Riddle, first to finish, eh?” enthused Slughorn. “You did finish the quiz, I trust?” he added.

“Yes, of course, Sir”, replied Tom with a smile, trying not to be distracted by the blur of Hogwarts uniforms rushing by. He felt somewhat self-conscious, knowing they’d be seeing every tiniest gesture and expression from him stretched out for minutes on end.

“Well, do pop it on my desk, and you can head off early”, said Slughorn.

“Thank you Sir”, said Tom, applying the Counter-Charms to his robes to stop them from whipping around dramatically, now that the Charm was no longer needed to permit his movement. He took his quiz up to Slughorn’s desk, reflecting on how long this walk must seem to his hastened colleagues, and was just about to gather up his things when they pre-emptively gathered themselves up in an instant without him touching them, and occurrence that was swiftly followed by Tiernan coming to an abrupt halt as his own potion wore off.

“Welcome back, Lestranger” Slughorn greeted him, “Glad to see my own House showing their merit, but come on Gryffindors, don’t get left behind” he added, to those who had still not completed their potions, much less their quizzes. Of course there were Slytherins still brewing their potions too, but Slughorn was far too partial to concern himself with little things like that.

Slughorn, who had earlier in the term clearly been somewhat winded by the loss of one of his Slug Club favourites, had been regaining his usual attitude as he went and now seemed to finally be fully back to his old self; probably he would hold one of his dinner parties again soon.

Others were not so apt to recovering; Professor Vassy, for instance, seemed to be mostly going through the motions of teaching, this year — the death of one of her star pupils seemed to have had the opposite effect on her than it had on the likes of Professors Merrythought and Dumbledore; while it had fired up the former and redirected the latter to at least useful lessons, it had quite pulled the rug out from under Vassy, as if it were all no longer so worthwhile as it had been to her previously, when in fact the opposite was true.

More than usual stayed behind at Hogwarts when it came to the Christmas holidays, an understandable circumstance in light of the dangers still rife through the country, and also the fact that many pupils’ parents were themselves called off to various war efforts, but Slytherin House’s holiday-staying population increased only by one, in that Tom, Antonin, and Marca were joined by Paul Weaver, who predictably had nowhere better to be. Happily, he did not impose his company upon them however, and the holiday promised to be quite peaceful.

Nevertheless, it turned out to be far too much to expect it to pass uneventfully.

Chapter Nine

Christmas Delivery

“Look!” said Jana excitedly, throwing down a newspaper. The pictures were all frozen in place.

“How did you do that?” asked Marca, before realizing, “Oh, it is a Muggle newspaper. Why have you brought it to us?”

“Well, I’d do it with Valerie, but she’s not here, so...”

“Jana, what are you talking about?” asked Tom, looking at the page of Muggle news, as presented by what he now saw was page ten of the *Manchester Guardian*.

“Look, here” she said, reading out now the headline in question, a half-column article partway down the page, entitled “Who is Stephanie Faye?”

“Well?” asked Tom. “Who is Stephanie Faye, and why do we care?”

“Read it!”

With a sigh, Tom skimmed through the article:

One of the patients under the care of the Women’s Voluntary Services of blah blah blah...

...found in the rubble after German Air-Raid of...

...head injury, and comatose since...

...suffering from apparent memory loss, has identified herself by the name of Stephanie Faye and now believes she is a witch, and must be sedated daily as she insists she be given her magic wand or a broomstick, but becomes very distressed when offered broomsticks in an effort to placate her - the nurses, of course, have patiently tried to ease her suffering. If any friends or family members are reading this, please contact...

“Alright, so it’s either a Witch or a muggle who thinks she is one”, observed Tom.

“It’s Ozzy Fame”, said Jana. “Look, same air-raid, and Stephanie Faye, they probably just misheard Ossapheme Fame”

Tom looked back at the article.

“You know what, you’re probably right”, he said. “You’ve told Vassy, I presume?”

“She’s not here - she’s doing something for the Ministry and won’t be back until Christmas Eve at the earliest. I’ll send Tetu with the newspaper clipping and a note, but Tetu will go to the Hogsmeade Owl Office, they’ll transfer it to a long-distance owl at dusk, and Vassy won’t get it until the morning, and that’s if there’s no delays to her mail down in London, which there probably will be; there is a war on, you know”

“Well, good luck then, well-spotted”, said Tom.

“We could go and get her while we’re waiting”, said Jana. “It has the address right here. It’d be brilliant, we’d be bringing Ozzy Fame back”

“Belinda will kill you”, laughed Tom.

“It might not be her”, observed Antonin, speaking for the first time.

“Oh come on”, said Jana, “it must be, and besides, what’s to lose?”

“Your morning, your sanity, and the Statute of Secrecy”, replied Marca curtly.

“So, nothing of pressing importance that’s not lost already”, thought Tom, out loud. “How did the Ministry of Magic miss this though, that’s what I want to know - don’t they have people for this sort of thing?”

Jana shrugged.

“It’s a regional newspaper”, she said. “Reports on stuff in the North-West; don’t expect many people in London read it, let alone notice a tiny article on page ten. Or maybe they have, and we just haven’t heard about it yet”

“Why were you reading it?”

“I just like to keep tabs on things, especially as it looks like my brother might get called up soon for the Muggle war”

“I see”, said Tom dismissively, lest she start talking more about her family. “What are you suggesting? About bringing Fame back?”

“Well, since the Floo Network’s been restricted, we could fly or go by train”

“To the WVS place in Liverpool? That’d be a long flight, or a long train journey”, observed Tom. “Apparition...”, he suggested, looking up to the teachers’ table, which was empty. “Are there any teachers still around? There must be some”

“Almost everyone’s off somewhere because of the war”, said Jana.

“Professor Diggory is still here, I think”, offered Marca.

“No, he’s definitely consulting down in London”, said Jana. “Something to do with making sure we can do without imported crops, if Grindelwald blocks our supply lines”

Tom pondered this.

“I spent some time during summer practicing Apparition”, said Tom, slowly. “Are you game for a side-along with an unqualified Wizard?”

“No, not” replied Marca, most quickly.

“You can Apparate?” asked Jana, impressed. Tom gave her a withering look. “Oh yeah, you did it in the Great Hall that time”.

“You can control it now, after this practice that you mention?”, asked Antonin.

“I’ve only done short distances, outside at Fengrey Hall; line-of-sight hops”, said Tom, “But yes”

“This is not a short distance” noted Marca. “One cannot see Liverpool from here”

“That’s true”, said Tom. “In fact, I can’t see Liverpool at all, even in my mind; I’ve never been there. I’ve seen a couple of pictures of the docks and the rubble and the Liver building, but it’s not really enough; the rubble could be anywhere, the docks as I understand it are now heavily damaged and we don’t want to land in the Mersey if we can help it; as for the Liver building, well, I could probably land us on top of it if necessary, but I’d rather make a subtler, safer entry. Jana, have you been there? Liverpool town, I mean?”

“Yes, I went there with my family when...”

“That’s fine. I can work with that. If you’re comfortable riding on the strength of my confidence?”

“What’s life without a little risk?” replied Jana resolutely, and grinned.

“Tom, no, this is stupid” objected Marca.

“I prefer to stay here”, said Antonin, “But I will come with you, if you need me”.

“That is a bad idea”, Marca told him, “More people means more difficult. Have you ever yet Apparated a long distance with a spare person?”, she asked, turning back to Tom.

“No, but how hard can it be?”, returned Tom. “She’s surely the same as any other random object I take with me”

Jana looked conflicted at this assessment, but assented:

“I’m sure you’ll do fine. I trust you”

“That also is a ba...” began Marca, but she broke off at a reproachful look from Tom.

“Well then, it seems we’re going on an expedition”, said Tom to Jana, with a smile.

“Great. What do we need?”

Tom thought for a second, but it was Marca who replied:

“A plan, you crazy Gryffindor ready to jump into the smallest chance of adventure”

“So”, said Tom, “We get ready, we walk into Hogsmeade, we Apparate to Liverpool, we find the place, we...”

He hesitated at this stage in the plan. They couldn’t do magic when not on magical premises without it being noticed. In fact, would appearing in Liverpool be enough to cause alarm, or would it be alright, as the spell was performed in Hogsmeade? He looked to Marca.

“Assuming you Apparate with success, nobody should notice. However, you will not be able to do more magic there then”, she replied to his thoughts that had been shared with a glance. “And how will you find the place? And how will you return, as if you Disapparate from Liverpool, you will need to use magic there?”

“There must be some magical residence that we could use to get back from”, said Tom. “We’d just need to find it. Anybody know any?”

“There’s a little place in Manchester, a bit like Diagon Alley but smaller”, said Jana. “It’s not Liverpool, but if we can’t find anywhere in Liverpool, it’s at least closer, if we need to take a train - we’d only need to ride between Liverpool and Manchester, which isn’t that far”.

“If you are really going to do this madness”, said Marca, “It would be sensible to arrive to that magical place, not to the middle of Liverpool. This way you will more certainly avoid notice, if you succeed in not making yourself a gruesome part of the scenery”

“A good point”, replied Tom. “Alright, both ways then, via...”

“Caulspell Square”, repeated Jana.

“And catch the Muggle train from Manchester to Liverpool; how much does that cost? I don’t have much Muggle money and we can’t just Confund the ticket inspector”

“I’ll have enough”, said Jana, “It’ll be less than the train between Manchester and London”

“Alright, you’re paying, then”, confirmed Tom. “Then we go to the place on foot; do we have the address?”

“Yes, it’s here”

“We go to the place on foot, pretend to be relatives to get to see her, then improvise from there to get her out, depending on the layout, people, and such”

“I guess we’ll have to”, agreed Jana.

“Do you have any useful potions to hand, by the way? Things we could use to great effect without using magic where we shouldn’t?”

“Nothing too out of the ordinary”, said Jana. “Bunch of health and beauty things, mainly”

“No Quickening Solution? Invisibility Potion? Liquid Luck?”

Jana shook her head.

“Sorry”

“Well, if that’s that then, let’s change into more appropriate attire, and meet in the Entrance Hall as soon as possible?”

“See you there”, affirmed Jana.

*

Some twenty or so minutes later, Jana finally caught up with Tom, as she came hurrying down the Grand Staircase to meet Tom, who was ready waiting for her.

“I would never have foreseen saying this, Jana, but it may be best if you at least try to look a bit more like a Muggle”

“Come again?”

“Here we are, about to embark on a kidnapping, and with your hair like that, you are the most recognizable person in Britain”

“I think Rubeus Ha... Wait, a kidnapping? It’s not a kidnapping, Tom, it’s a rescue mission”, retorted Jana.

“A rescue mission of great stealth, because otherwise we’ll end up having to Curse the Muggles, and I’m sure you don’t want that any more than I do”, said Tom, opting to ignore the fact that he would, of course, be quite content to Curse as many Muggles as happened to show their stupid Muggle faces, were it not for the stiff warnings he’d

received against doing so, and the near-certainty of being caught if he were to go ahead and Curse them anyway. Jana, for her part, looked pensive.

"It's not a kidnapping because we won't be taking Ozzy against her will; she'll be glad to come with us"

"She might not even be conscious, and who knows what the Muggles have done to her", observed Tom quietly. "Anyway, this is all beside the point. No matter if Ozzy leaps into our arms on sight, the Muggles will still consider this a kidnapping, unless the Muggles agree to hand her over to us, which they're not likely to do without some show of us being grown-up relatives of hers"

"So I don't want my recognisable description being given to the police" concluded Jana, catching on eventually.

"Correct. So, either we outright disguise ourselves using Polyjuice Potion, or we at the very least do something about your hair so that we look... ordinary"

"I don't think it would be a good idea to use Polyjuice Potion as a disguise, if you don't mind", said Jana, "I really don't want to draw attention to my use of it, and I'd have to wait for this form to run out, take the other, wait for that to run out, take this one... No, that'd be really... I don't want to do that", said Jana, plaintively.

"Then I recommend a less conspicuous hairstyle", said Tom.

"Right", said Jana, taking a compact mirror from her pocket, and pointing her wand at her hair, "*Conflacrinis*" - her hair fell flat over her eyes - "*Capilustruo...*" - it reordered itself in a more backwards-facing arrangement, much like a flattened version of her usual style - "Umm.. *Comacollo*" - the whole mess took on a neat combed-looking appearance as she ran her wand down the back of her head - "and now I just need something to look like it's keeping it in place, umm... *Kalamsarsham*" - a tan felt beret appeared, and she slid it on to her head.

"Now you look like a Muggle", nodded Tom, with mixed feelings about that.

"It feels weird", said Jana, frowning.

"Well, yes, you're not a Muggle", agreed Tom.

"No, I meant the hair, and the hat"

"You'll live", opined Tom, as they now headed out of the castle. When they arrived in Hogsmeade, naturally there was no shortage of people in the village, what with it being a Friday shortly before Christmas. In light of this, they elected for a deserted side-street, to make their departure.

"Alright, stay close to me", Tom instructed her. He nearly continued with "Not *that* close, Jana" but considered that under the circumstances he would do well to tolerate her closeness for a moment, in the interests of arriving in one piece.

Laying a hand on top of Jana's, to feel that he had a grip on her as well as her having a grip on him, which latter he did not feel certain of relying upon, he twisted on the spot as he had learned to do at Fengrey Hall, focussing all the power of his mind on the vision that Jana had of the bar that served as the entranceway to Caulspell Square, pushing off through reality as he did so.

There was a loud CRACK, and they tumbled to a wooden floor. Jana looked shocked and pained.

"That was louder than usual", observed Tom, "Maybe because of the extra weight"

"My ankle" said Jana, her eyes watering. A voice interrupted them before he could investigate what had happened to her ankle, however.

"What are you doing there?"

"Pardon, fell over while Apparating", said Tom, getting up. Jana tried to get up too, but found that to not be happening just yet, on account of her ankle.

"I can see that", said what must surely be the barman of the Old Wellington Inn. At any rate he was clearly not a Muggle, if he was familiar with Apparition. "A bit young to be Apparating, aren't you?", he asked.

“My ankle...” repeated Jana, as though her plight was being unreasonably ignored.

“Did you splinch... Ah, looks like your shoe got stuck in the floor, then the rest of you fell down from there” observed the barman. “Looks nasty though, better get that seen to. Where did you come from, anyway? Let’s get you back there”

“Liverpool”, said Tom, before Jana could answer with something less helpful.

“Well I’m not Apparating with schoolchildren I don’t know, and the Floo Network’s down again, so we’d best send for someone to come and get you - what are your names; who are your parents?”

“That won’t help”, said Tom, “I’m an orphan and she’s a Mu—”

“Muggle-born”, winced Jana, gingerly probing her ankle with her hand.

“So who’s responsible for you?”, asked the barman.

“I am”, said Tom. He turned to Jana, prompting her “And I think you have a potion that’ll sort that out, don’t you?”

“No, I just... Oh yeah”, she concluded, catching on, and wincing again now as she twisted to reach her usual supply of Polyjuice Potion, that would of course restore her to her usual shape, complete with non-broken ankle. Her base form would retain the broken ankle, of course, but that could be dealt with later and was not a problem for now, being as it was currently unmanifest.

“Well, Mr. Responsible”, said the barman with a tone of open-minded skepticism, “what do you propose we do with you?”

“Well, if you’re not up for giving us a lift back to Liverpool”, said Tom, “then we’ll take the Muggle train; the station’s not far from here, I think?”

“Your friend here won’t be walking on that ankle until it’s sorted, so—”

“Aargh!” exclaimed Jana in pain, as her ankle reformed itself, rendered perhaps a little more painful than it should be by the fact that her leg was starting at ninety degrees to the foot, which was until now still in the shoe, which was still in the floor. She clutched her mended ankle, now freed from the shoe. “That was not fun”, she breathed. “But it’s sorted now”.

“You alright now?”, asked the barman.

“I think so, yes”, answered Jana, clambering to her feet and carefully testing putting her weight upon it.

“You’ll be wanting a shoe before you go anywhere”, observed the barman.

Tom cast an Unbreakable Charm on the shoe, and then followed that up by Blasting the floor into which it was embedded.

“Excuse me!” objected the barman. Tom ignored him, in favour of returning the shoe to Jana, and repairing the floor.

“There, no harm done”, he smiled.

“No harm done? You’re lucky if I don’t tell your...” he faltered, realising he could not very well threaten to tell the parents of an orphan and a Muggle-born anything about this. “...your school about this”, he concluded, somewhat more feebly.

“Well, we very much appreciate your understanding”, said Tom, mentally stabilizing the barman’s mood a little, softening him, subduing him.

“Just... don’t let me catch you up to such hijinks again. You’ll be straight off to the train station now, will you?”

“Yes, it’s... which way, sorry?”

“Through here”, said the barman, indicating to two doors next to each other; a large sign above them read:

TO THE MUGGLE LOUNGE
WANDS AWAY BEFORE ENTERING
MUGGLE ATTIRE OBLIGATORY

The doors themselves had a small sign each, saying “LADIES” and “GENTLEMEN” respectively.

Jana went through one door; Tom through the other. On the other side, Tom found himself in a small space with another door; behind him now was a toilet, and no trace of the door he had just walked through. He opened the door that was now in front of him, to find himself facing a couple of sinks, and another stall to the side of the one he had just now exited. He found the way out, into what was clearly the Muggle lounge. Jana appeared from an adjacent door.

“This way”, she indicated, and indeed a doorway out to the street could be seen. Casting a look back at the bar, where the same barman now returned the glance — evidently he had his own route between Muggle and Magical sides of the bar — and walked out into the Muggle streets.

It did not take long for Jana to lead the way to Exchange Station, where Tom delegated the task of talking to the Muggle ticket-seller.

“Good morning, could we have tickets for two for Liverpool and back, your cheapest, please?”

“There and back today?”

“Yes please”

“You two travelling, is it?”

“That’s right”

“Return for Lime Street, that’s three and seven a piece Third Class, half price for a child’s ticket, so three and seven total, if you please”

Jana paid up, and received in return two small tickets, each perforated to divide them into outward and return sections.

“Thanks”

“Twelve thirty-five, platform three”

“Thanks a lot, bye”

On the platform, Jana looked around uneasily.

“I feel like everyone’s looking at me”, she said. Tom glanced around.

“They’re not”, he assured her.

“I suppose I just feel silly with the disguise hair and the disguise hat”

“Well, you’d still look fine without the hat, so you may remove that if you wish”

“Then my hair will look like it’s staying in place by magic”, objected Jana.

“Don’t Muggle women have Muggle potions to do that for them?”, asked Tom, quite certain that they did.

“I... don’t know. Probably, but I’m not sure” replied Jana unhelpfully. “I didn’t exactly get a Muggle girl’s upbringing, and I’ve learned to do everything the magical way. Even in the holidays, I’m living with a Squib Potioneer, remember”.

“Well, never mind then, leave the stupid hat on”

“Do you think it’s a stupid hat?”, asked Jana, sounding half-hurt, half-annoyed.

“I think it’s stupid to worry so much about it. Your hair’s not spiky, that’s good enough to avoid attracting undue attention. Aside from that, hat or no hat, I don’t think anyone will care, and cannot see why you do”

The train ride was decidedly overpopulated with Muggles, and so didn’t provide for further brainstorming together; as such, Tom was privy to Jana’s thoughts, but could not share his own with her. He’d have to work on a way to get his own thoughts into other people’s heads without speaking or casting a Spell, but for now, he went mostly over his own considerations in the privacy of his own mind.

“You know”, said Jana when finally they were in the relative freedom of the streets of Liverpool, “If this goes at all badly, they’re going to have to Obliviate the Muggles at the hospital place”

“Yes, I know”, said Tom. “Let’s see how low-impact we can make what we do”, he reminded her. She wasn’t generally one for breaking the “no magic outside of school” rule, having more of a habit regards such than he did, what with living at a Squib’s house over summer, but it didn’t hurt to reiterate it rather than have a reckless Gryffindor do her thing in the heat of the moment.

Finding the place was not as easy as expected, and they had to ask more people for directions than Tom would have liked; it was not good to leave such a trail of memories of them throughout the city, but it couldn’t be helped if they were to reach their objective. Eventually, they reached at the very least the right place, as the sign beside the door indicated “Women’s Voluntary Service - Blitz Casualty Reception Ward”.

“Here goes”, said Tom. “I suggest you let me do the talking”

“Fine by me”, consented Jana readily.

Tom pulled on the doorbell, and a ringing could be heard on the other side of the door. They waited, and waited some more.

As Tom considered ringing it again, it opened.

Chapter Ten

A Broken Flight

A tall and rather careworn-looking nurse stood in the doorway.

"Yes?" she asked, by way of greeting.

"We're here about Stephanie Faye; she's our cousin"

"Oh, right" replied the nurse, taking this news positively. "Don't you have any grown-up with you?"

"Mum won't be able to get here before three o'clock", said Tom.

"You're the vanguard are you then?" replied the nurse, checking the time on her fob-watch. "Alright, you can come in and wait here, so long as you're good and quiet - any nonsense or trouble, and you shall have to go and come back later"

"Of course", smiled Tom.

"Your cousin, you say?", double-checked the nurse, as she saw them into the building, her mind on their respective appearances.

"She's our cousin", said Tom, repeating the lie. "If like many you're surprised by the complexion that we don't share, she's part Greek and we're not"

"I see. Well, here we are", said the nurse, lowering her voice now as they entered what was clearly a hospital ward room. Tom's eyes scanned the beds for Fame, and it took him a second glance to recognise her. She seemed to be asleep, her hair was different, and of course he was used to seeing her in school robes or Quidditch robes, not in bed, in... what was doubtlessly a Muggle hospital nightgown, under those linen bedsheets. Damn, he thought, he had forgotten completely about this, and apparently Jana had too. How were they going to get her across two cities and a train unnoticed in a hospital gown?

"Let me get you another chair, so you can both have a seat; I'm afraid it might be a bit of a boring wait for you, but here she is, getting better now"

"How badly is she hurt?", asked Jana.

"She's a very lucky girl", opined the nurse. "Fractured skull and a concussion, but otherwise in one piece - was touch and go for a while, slipping in and out of coma. She's been stable for the best part of this week, so touch wood, hopefully she doesn't slip back. She's really not herself, though, I'm afraid, very confused, bless her. We've been doing all we can, but that's not much. What she most needs is recovery time and love"

Tom tried to not sneer at that last. Love was hardly going to fix her fractured skull. What she needed was a competent Healer.

"Does she have any bags that need packing?", he asked, hoping to prompt an offering of clothing for her departure.

"She didn't come in with anything, just the clothes she was wearing and her gas mask; they're in the little cupboard there. Well, I'll leave you to it for now. There's some orange squash there if you want a drink, and you see there's already two glasses there - we put two on each table so there's always one for a visitor, but you're the first here for her, of course, so... well, anyway, there you are, just let me know if you need something"

Tom nodded and Jana smiled, each by way of dismissal. They waited until the nurse left, and discussed the situation:

"Her clothes need to be on, and they're not" mentioned Tom, first of all.

"Shall we wake her up now or do we need to do anything first?" asked Jana.

"My only plan is the one we discussed, to create a distraction and leave with her on foot; obviously she needs to be awake and dressed for that"

"Right", said Jana, shaking Fame's shoulder, gently at first and then a little more vigorously, before looking back to Tom, with a clear thought of *I don't know what to do now because she's not waking up but I don't want to shake her any harder.*

Tom, meanwhile, inspected the clipboard at the end of her bed.

“Morph / Barb PRN”, he read aloud from it. “I know what morphine is”, he said, knowing that some Muggles were addicted to it for its pain-numbing qualities that helped them to cope with their unpleasant existence, “but do you know what *Barb PRN* means?”

Jana shook her head.

“Sorry, no idea”

“Whatever it is, hopefully it’s not going to cause a problem for us. Now, how to wake her up”

“Ooh” interjected Jana suddenly, her mind going to a small bottle in her bag.

“Wideye Potion might do the trick, I carry it with me because I don’t get to sleep through the night undisturbed and sometimes I, well... shall we try?”

Tom waved a hand in a “go ahead” gesture. Jana took out the bottle, and after a shifty look around, carefully poured a little into Fame’s mouth.

A second later, Fame’s eyes opened suddenly, with a look of panic followed by confusion; obviously disoriented. She turned to face Jana, and frowned in concentration.

“You... thingy... Are you...?” she stuttered.

“Ssh”, said Jana, putting a finger to her lips, “It’s me, Jana”

“Jana...” echoed Fame, before a look of hope broke out across her confused face. “It’s really you... I... you... please help, I’ve got to get back to...” - she trailed off.

“I know”, Jana reassured her, soothingly, “We’re here to take you back, Ozzy”

Without warning, Ozzy Fame sat forwards and wrapped Jana in a clearly heartfelt hug, before seeing Tom and frowning, sitting back again.

“Why are you... why is it you two here, where’s... well... is it time to go back to school already, where’s my mum?”

“She’s dead, and it’s December”, replied Tom. Jana looked at him like he was crazy. Fame’s eyes filled with tears, but she looked too dismayed to actually cry; too much to process at once, perhaps, especially in her drugged state, Wideye Potion or not. It was a short while before she spoke again, and despite the short schedule, Tom thought it best to give her a moment.

“Is... Is Professor Vassy here?”, she asked, hopefully. Jana shook her head.

“She’s doing some work for the Ministry; she’s in London, we think”

“So... is it just you here?”

“Afraid so, but we’re going to take you back to Hogwarts now. Healer Tegner will fix you up in no time — when he gets back, anyway”

“Alright, let me just grab... where’s my... have you seen my wand?”

“If you don’t have it, then either the Muggles took it, or more likely, it was destroyed in the bombing”, said Tom.

“Why more likely?”

“If the Muggles had found it, then the Ministry would likely have found you”, assessed Tom.

“That’s true. Alright, my wand is gone. I’m a bit sad about that”

“You can get a new one”, Tom reminded her, although privately he could quite understand her sentiment; or rather, he would not be so much sad as angry, if he were to lose his wand, but still, the overall idea was not alien to him. “For now, let’s get you out of here”

“Right. Have you told the Matron?”

“No, and nor do we intend to. She knows nothing of Hogwarts or magic, and thinks you are our Muggle cousin, and is waiting on an adult relative to arrive”

“Who’s that?”

“There isn’t one, which is why we’re going to need to get you out of here without the Matron knowing”

“Oh. Can’t you get Professor Vassy?”

"We've written to her, but she won't get the message until tomorrow or maybe later. And we're not going to leave you here longer than necessary", he said, resolutely.

"Thank you. So... We just make a run for it? I tried to leave already, but they stopped me, wouldn't let me..."

"Let them try to stop us", said Tom, with a grin. Ozzy seemed unsure how to take this, but assented.

"Alright, I'll trust you. What do we do?"

"Well to start with, you need to look a bit more presentable than you do presently; can't take you through the streets in a hospital gown"

"Right", said Ozzy, sitting up awkwardly. Jana got her clothes out for her.

"These are bit tatty", she said. It was quite an understatement; they'd clearly been washed since coming in, as they were clean and neatly folded, but they were torn and frayed.

"Yes, there was a bomb", said Ozzy, still rather dazed.

"They'll do", said Tom, "They're better than this nightgown. Help her get them on"

Tom politely turned his back on the girls to watch the door instead, not that it hindered even remotely his ability to keep a mental eye on their painfully slow progress.

"We're done", announced Jana unnecessarily, when Ozzy was finally dressed, shoes and all.

"Not a moment too soon; let's go", said Tom. "Remember, if we get into trouble, be ready to grab onto me and I'll Apparate us straight back to Hogsmeade. Statute of Secrecy goes out the window if we're under threat"

"Mustn't let the Muggles know", said Ozzy, as though she hadn't personally broken the Statute of Secrecy badly enough that it had been reported in a Muggle newspaper serving the entire North-West.

"Come on, off we go, we have a train to catch", said Tom.

"Hogwarts Express", said Ozzy, brightly.

"Muggle train from Lime Street", Jana corrected her. "Come on"

They made their way more awkwardly than Tom would have liked to the front door, only to be confronted by the nurse just as they were leaving.

"Where on Earth do you think you're going?!" she demanded.

"She just wanted some fresh air", said Tom, with a smile.

"Back to bed with her, now", insisted the nurse, outraged but trying to keep her voice down.

"Back to Hogwarts", Ozzy chimed in.

"She is absolutely in no state to—" began the nurse, but Tom interrupted her:

"Wait" he commanded. The nurse frowned, taken aback but also waiting. Tom approached her, and Jana's heart raced while Ozzy's tranquility was threatening to become a thing of the past.

"Just who do you think you are?" asked the nurse. Tom fought the urge to answer that one honestly, satisfying as it may be. Instead, he ignored her question in favour of bringing a more useful idea to the forefront of her mind.

"I'm here to help. We're here to take Ossapheme home, and you're not going to stop us", he said calmly but firmly.

"Stephanie..."

"We're going to take her home, and you're not going to stop us"

"Not going to... But why are you—"

"Here to help. Go to your other patients; they need you. This one's in good caring hands now"

"Caring hands", echoed the nurse, her brow furrowed in concentration, but her mind struggling with the task as much as if she had been Confused. Without casting a single Spell, Tom had all but overthrown her mind, which was in all likelihood very sharp in its

own known environment, but could not possibly hope to contend with the natural power of Lord Voldemort, who was here to recover a Witch, and was certainly not going to let an old Muggle get in the way of this. Muggles had done enough harm to the Witch already.

“Go”, he concluded, with a note of finality.

“Yes, goodbye”, nodded the nurse gravely.

Nobody spoke until they had turned the corner at the end of the road.

“How did you do that?”, asked Jana.

“Talk her down?” asked Tom. “Just... Will. It’s not like her Muggle mind was going to stand up to mine”

“You didn’t Confund her, or...?” Jana trailed off, without going so far as ask whether he had Imperiused her, in so many words.

“I cast no Spell”, said Tom. “We need to go more quickly, or we’re going to miss the train, and then we’ll have to Apparate”

“Where are we going?” queried Ozzy, as though they hadn’t told her several times.

“Lime Street Station”, Jana replied. “Unless you know a magical property we can go to nearby, because then we could Disapparate from there”

“My house... No, they said that’s gone” answered Ozzy, unhelpfully. “There’s the Owl Office” she added, more helpfully.

“Where’s that?” asked Tom.

“Liverpool Owl Office”, Ozzy replied, “It’s near the cathedral”

“Which one? Which way?” asked Jana. “No wait”, she added, while Ozzy pondered the question, “We’re on the wrong side for either of them”, said Jana. “It’d be closed before we got there, even if we knew where we were going”

“Lime Street it is then”, sighed Tom.

At the station, another ticket was purchased, this time for Ozzy, and they got to the platform in time for the train back to Manchester. It had even more Muggles on it than the previous one, but fortunately Ozzy was coming to her senses more, and didn’t say anything too damning or too loud, as they discussed their situation in hushed tones.

Finally back in Manchester, they headed back to Caulspell Square, from where they could Disapparate, or even travel by Floo if the network was back up yet.

“What are you doing back here?” asked the barman of the Old Wellington Inn.

“Heading home now”, said Tom, as reassuringly as possible.

“Is that... Are you Ossapheme Fame?”

“That’s me”, replied Ozzy, who was much more with it my now. “Rumours of my death have been exaggerated, but not by much”

“Come on through, I’ll take you this way” offered the barman in a low voice, inviting them behind the bar, rather than them having to go through the toilets to get into the the magical side of the bar.

“Is the Floo Network back up yet?” asked Tom.

“Not yet. You going to be alright Apparating? You didn’t do too great on your way in”

“I can do it” said Ozzy, “But I’ll need a wand”

“You sure?” asked Tom, somewhat alarmed at the prospect of entrusting their wellbeing to her.

“Yeah, my head’s much clearer now, honestly, I’m fine”

She sounded it, and Tom couldn’t deny his own arrival with Jana hadn’t exactly been stellar.

“You can stop here the night, you know, if you want to wait for someone to come get you”, offered the barman.

“I’ve done my waiting”, said Ozzy, “Please, I just want to get back to Hogwarts”

“Alright, if you’re sure”, said the barman, not sounding convinced that this was the best course of action, but not so unconvinced as to stop them.

“I still need a wand, though”

Jana offered up hers, which was just as well, as Tom certainly wasn't willing to be parted from his, and would rather chance doing the Apparition himself, if it came to it.

“What wood is this; what core?”

“Sycamore; Dragon heartstring”, answered Jana.

“Mine was Laurel and Phoenix tail-feather”, sighed Ozzy. “Jana, if you hold my wand-arm and wish us well, it should help the wand to help me”

Jana took the Ozzy's wand-arm as directed, and Tom took the other as Ozzy held it out in turn.

“To Hogwarts!” she proclaimed, as though to speed them on their way, pushing off from the floor of the Old Wellington Inn.

An instant later, Hogwarts Castle stood before them in all its glory. Or rather, below them; Ozzy had Apparated them well above the castle.

“Oh bludgering snidgewicket, the Anti-Apparition Wards”, she cried. “*Accio Broom, Accio Brooms*” she added, gesturing awkwardly with the wand in the general direction of the Broom Shed — which would, in all likelihood, be locked. Meanwhile, they were falling and nearly at the castle.

“Now!” cried Tom, calling his wand to his hand and focussing all his energy on the Hogsmeade end of the Hogsmeade Bridge, and bringing the two Witches with him.

A great whirling split-second later, he landed awkwardly on the cobbles that lay on the bridge-ends; they had made it. At least, he had — looking up, he saw Ozzy had too, as she was now lying on her back on top of the short wall that bordered the bridge. Which meant Jana was... He got to his feet, and moved to peer over the bridge. Jana was clinging to a tree-branch, the wrong side of the wall, the river running some distance below.

“All in one piece”, she called over to him. “Are we? All in one piece?”

Tom looked to Ozzy, who seemed to be fine, albeit taking a moment to rest where she lay.

“One piece each, anyway”, called Tom in return. “Could have been worse. Can you get down from there?”

“Getting down isn't the problem; I'd rather get up from here, or across from here”

“Fair point”, observed Tom, his eyes scanning for a way for her to get across. “Aha, brooms”, he said, narrowly avoiding being hit by the brooms that Ozzy had summoned, and which had now finally arrived. Maybe the Broom Shed had been unlocked, maybe they'd come from somewhere else, but in any case, three brooms hovered patiently by them. Tom mounted one, and took another down to Jana, who easily got on it and rode it back up to where Ozzy was now cradling hers to her like a precious object.

“I never thought I'd be so glad to see a Comet 140”, she said. After a moment, Jana spoke:

“So, back up to the castle, I suppose”, she offered.

“Specifically, the Hospital Wing first”, said Tom. “Let's get you fixed up before your Housemates swamp you”

“Good idea; I'm in no good shape right now and don't think I can face much”, Ozzy replied, kicking off from the ground.

“Can I have my wand back, by the way?”, asked Jana, rising up after her.

“Sorry, of course” said Ozzy, returning it to its owner.

“Thanks”

A short flight later, the three were safely back in Hogwarts Castle, which prompted glistening not-quite-tears from Ozzy, and Tom was keen for his part in this little adventure to be over soon. He rang once again the bell in the Hospital Wing's antechamber.

“Please do not ring this bell again”, advised the bell, in its tinkling voice.

“Let’s see if we can... *Reducto!*” incanted Tom, before being knocked backwards off his feet. The doors remained in place.

“Looks like they’ve beefed up the doors a bit”, said Jana.

“Thank you for that observation”, replied Tom tersely, getting back up.

“Oh well, we’re here, we’re safe, we’re... about as *home* as I’m going to get now”, sighed Ozzy, taking a seat.

Tom and Jana exchanged a brief glance, and Tom looked away. For them, and especially for him at any rate, Hogwarts was more *home* than anywhere else.

There was a heavy-sounding CLUNK, and the doors to the main ward opened, with Healer Tegner standing amid them. That was quick.

“You two agai—” he began, and then saw Ozzy sitting behind them.

“Ossapheme? How?”

“Hi”, she said in reply, raising a hand weakly. “Not dead yet”

“Where have you been? How are you?” asked, his eyes taking in the injury to her head and her general exhausted appearance.

“Muggle hospital”, she said, “And... well, I’m alive, but I’ve no idea how I am beyond that; I was hoping you could tell me”

“Of course”, said Tegner, catching up with himself. “Can you walk?” he asked, offering a hand.

“Yep. Walk, fly, Apparate...ish. I need a new wand”

“Let’s settle for walking for the moment, shall we?” suggested Tegner, helping her unnecessarily as they entered the main ward. “And you two, dare I ask?” he added, addressing Tom and Jana.

“They found me”, answered Ozzy. “Came and got me, please overlook if they broke any rules; I owe them my life”

“I don’t know about owing your life”, said Tegner, “But I can say I’m very glad to have you here. Not just to have you back, I mean — though of course that as well — but also Muggles don’t do very well with these sorts of injuries; what have they been doing to you?”

“I don’t know; I slept a lot, dreamed strange dreams...”

Tegner gave her a concerned but piercing look, as though trying to unravel what exactly had happened to get her into her current state.

“Her medical notes said *Morphine Barb PRN*”, said Tom. “The morphine I understood, but the—”

“Barbiturates”, said Tegner. “They gave her a Barbiturate Potion whenever she started to get agitated about being a Witch in a Muggle hospital”

“What does that do?” asked Jana.

“It’s a sort of Muggle Sleeping Potion”, said Tegner, “But it’s not as good as magical Sleeping Potions, and it’s very dangerous”

“Will I get better?” asked Ozzy. “Because right now I feel, well... useless”

“You’ll be as well as can be, given time and proper treatment”, said Tegner.

“Any word on my mum?”, asked Ozzy, hopefully.

“None”, said Tegner, shaking his head sadly. “I can’t deny there’s a tiny chance she survived as you did, but I cannot help but conclude that if she had, she would have been found by the same Muggles as found you, and taken to the same hospital. You’re sure she wasn’t there?”

“She definitely wasn’t there”, confirmed Ozzy. “I’ll find her, if she’s alive though. What about my dad?”

“As I understand it, the authorities have been unable to get in touch with him; communications aren’t great, out where he is. I’m sure they’ll make a redoubled effort, though. In the meantime, let’s look after you”

Tegner ran the tip of his wand down the side of her head.

"This is fractured, and they've done almost nothing with it", he said. There was a brief glowing between his wand and her injury. "That's the fracture fixed, but what lies underneath will take quite a bit more fixing"

"What's underneath?" asked Ozzy.

"Well, your brain", answered Tegner. "But more specifically, heavy physical trauma, and the brain's not a simple organ. I'm going to need to keep you here for a bit while I see to that. Could be a few days, could be more; it depends on how well you take to the treatment"

"Better here than that place", said Ozzy. "At least I'll be able to think clearly again, without the Muggle potions... Won't I?"

"There's... do you want to have this conversation privately, perhaps?" asked Tegner.

"At this stage, I don't care", answered Ozzy. "These two have seen me at my worst already"

"There's a chance you might still need sedation; your mind has become used to the Muggle potions... You might get anxious without them now"

"Please, I don't want them. Please let me think clearly again"

"We'll see how it goes, and I'll do what I can", said Tegner, his voice grave with what might have been pity. "You two", he added, turning to Tom and Jana, "If you could leave Ossapheme to rest now, and me to tend to her, I think that would be best. Who else knows she's here?"

"Nobody else yet", answered Tom. "We sent a message to Professor Vassy, but she won't receive it until tomorrow at the earliest"

"Very well", said Tegner. "I would request your discretion on this topic, and by that I mean please resist the urge to mention Miss Fame's return to others, however tempting it may be. Ossapheme, is there anyone in particular you'd like sent for, or shall we wait for Professor Vassy?"

"Let me get my own head clear first", said Ozzy. "I really don't feel up to meeting more people than necessary just yet"

"Jolly good. Well, you two... Please return to your Houses, and keep this to yourselves for now. I daresay your part will be known in time, and I expect Headmaster Dippet will be wanting a word with you to explore just how exactly you came upon retrieving Miss Fame, and why you took it upon yourselves to go and get her instead of alerting the staff"

"Everyone seemed to be away, even you", objected Tom, "And she might not have been there, so we didn't want to waste anybody's time"

"Given the circumstances", replied Tegner, "I expect you'll escape any form of punishment, but I recommend you prepare yourselves for a fair interrogation first"

"Punishment?" repeated Ozzy, "But they—"

"They'll be fine, I'm sure" Tegner said to her reassuringly. "You're back, you're alive, that's what matters the most"

"If they need me to vouch for them, of course I'll be all too ready to do so"

"That's very thoughtful, but for now, let's focus on you, shall we?", said Tegner.

It took a few attempts, but Tom and Jana managed to take their leave, soon parting also from each other, as they headed back each to their own House.

Naturally, Tom did report his success to Antonin and Marca, since they already knew the intended purpose of his excursion anyway. Jana, meanwhile, would have to sit on the secret, as whom was she going to tell up in Gryffindor Tower over Christmas? Hagrid?

Headmaster Dippet and Professor Vassy did indeed soon both want to see Tom and Jana to extract any information possible from them on the topic. Under the circumstances, it was agreed that Tom's use of magic outside of school — he had, after all, Apparated into

and out of Caulspell Square, even if his Apparition had not been traced by the Ministry due to where it had occurred — was a justified exercising of the Exemption Clause to the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery.

It doubtlessly helped that they were both old Ravenclaws, and it equally doubtlessly further helped that Ozzy's death had been so politicized as to bring a lot of attention to the importance of using magic when necessary to save magical lives, even if it may sometimes mean going against the Statute of Secrecy or in this case, practicing Underage Sorcery, not to mention Apparition without a Licence, itself a thing that was a hot talking point in the papers these days, with many calling for the deregulation of Apparition entirely.

“Safety first” was a watchword by which Witches and Wizards were finally beginning to live correctly: by empowering themselves, instead of holding back in misplaced fear.

Chapter Eleven

Acquisition and Apparition

Of gifts given and received in honour of Christmas 1941, the one from Ozzy surprised Tom; he hadn't expected anything from her, as he had rather grown accustomed to his small and fairly closed circle of festive offerings.

It was not unusual by now that Tom passed the first clutches of Christmas morning down in the Slytherin Dungeons with Antonin and Marca, and while they had all grown up notably since since they first did this three years ago, it was with a slight smile that Tom knelt to open presents on the plush carpet by the ornate tree that stood in the wide alcove at one end of the Common Room, just in front of the broad window that just about showed the morning's sunlight through the rippling waters of the lake.

"From Ossapheme Fame", noted Antonin, reading the label upside-down as Tom examined the package. "Ah, you are her saviour now"

"I would say I only rescued her from the Muggles", said Tom, "as it's not like I pulled her out of the rubble in Everton, but then again, I think the Muggles are arguably worse, so you may well have a point, my friend"

Inside the packaging was a small box, and atop the box was a note; it read:

Dear Tom,

I'm afraid I don't have much to give in the way of gifts, as most of what I had was lost in the bombing. I Transfigured and Charmed this bracelet for you; Jana has a similar one with a lion clasp. As for yours, if you touch the silver serpent with your thumb and forefinger, the clasp on mine — I have one too — will glow warm, and I'll get a sense of where you are. I can't promise it'll work at Hogwarts, with all the magical interference here, but it did work when I tested them when they were right next to each other, here in Ravenclaw Tower.

Anyway, the idea is that if ever you find yourself alone and in need of a friend, you can alert me to that, and I can find you. I hope you don't think it's too silly a thing, but I can probably never repay you for coming to find me, and this is my small effort at making sure you can always call upon me.

Merry Christmas,

Ozzy

Well, that was a mess of sentiment, but it was an interesting idea behind it. Tom opened the box, and found as described a light bracelet, with a silver clasp in the form of a serpent, wrapped around itself in a flat knot. He resisted the urge to hold the clasp itself to look at it, lest he trigger its connection to Ozzy's, not that she'd be able to find him down here in any case.

"A jewellery?" said Antonin, looking over at it.

"It has some magical property, I suppose?" added Marca.

"Yes", said Tom, "It has a Charm set into it, an... err... Ozzy-summoning Charm"

"I cannot imagine, wanting someone to be able to summon me to them at whim", said Marca.

"It could be useful, especially in war", countered Antonin. "I would not mind such a thing"

Up in the Great Hall, as usual it was snowing at dinnertime, but the fairies normally present in the Christmas trees there were absent - perhaps called away on some wartime duty - and the trees were illuminated with many tiny candles instead.

Paul Weaver was already at the Slytherin table, and the three new arrivals sat a short way along from him, albeit returning his greeting with passing politeness as they did so. Tom, for his part, wondered where the younger boy had been that morning; the boy's thoughts gave no clue, however, as they returned to a family scene of some Christmas past. A Muggle, presumably Weaver Sr, expressed his discontent with what could be taken to be Mrs Weaver, flinging a Christmas dinner into the wall of their dining room. Gravy trickled down the wallpaper, and here in the current world, the young Mudblood thought on how he might use magic to set things right.

"Tom?" said Antonin. Marca would not have interrupted Tom's Legilimency.

"What?" said Tom, tersely.

"You are thinking of him? He is content over there"

"Yes, I daresay", said Tom, abandoning his effort and turning his attention to the victuals before him.

It wasn't long before the Ravenclaws were down, including Ozzy, who gave a smile but did not come over to disturb them. She glanced over from time to time, but broadly stayed involved in her immediate Ravenclaw social circle.

Soon the castle's few holiday-staying Gryffindors arrived en masse, greeting the Hufflepuffs as they passed their table. Hagrid made a point of speaking loudly across the Great Hall, wishing the Ravenclaws and Slytherins a happy Christmas too..

"If you'll excuse me", Tom said to his companions as he rose from his seat, "I'm going to find out what this flask is about". He was speaking of the gift he had received from Jana, which had arrived with a card but without an explanatory note of the kind usually considered standard practice when giving gifts with special Charms whose function might not be immediately obvious. Jana was often lax in this regard; in fairness, so was Tom. As he approached the Gryffindor table, she greeted him.

"Happy Christmas, Tom"

"Good morning, and yes, happy Christmas and all that", returned Tom. "Do explain, why have I received what appears to be a one-way potion flask?"

"It's an unspillable flask", said Jana, brightly.

"I gathered that much", said Tom. "The potion won't come out at all; is there some trick to it, or is the thing entirely a humorous novelty?"

"It has to be drunk", replied Jana.

"How, when it won't come out?"

"Just put it to your lips and drink it, and it'll come out just fine; and then when you've drunk the Hyggelixir that's in it, you can put something else in that you don't want spilled"

"Really? Hmm" — Tom had not considered this, that merely drinking it would work when attempting to decant a small volume of it had not. Then again, he'd learned to be somewhat cautious with Jana's gifts. After all, the last potion-like thing he had received from her had gone blazing through the Slytherin Common Room.

"Thanks for the book; I don't know how much good it'll do me, but it's very sweet of you".

"You're welcome", said Tom; "In any case, see you about", he concluded, taking his leave and heading back to the Slytherin table.

The book in question had been a copy of *Unravelling Your Blood*, by Diena Helikazeus, and promised to help the reader learn what they could about their bloodlines, complete with testimonials of Witches and Wizards finding themselves distantly related to various heroes of old. It seemed incongruous that Mudbloods should get magic from just nowhere, and case was made for magic sometimes skipping a generation or six. Tom wasn't sure whether to believe this, and if not, where exactly Mudbloods did get their

magic from, but he had originally bought the book for his own use, to help him on his quest to de-mystify his own ancestry.

The main thing that he had learned from the book was more a confirmation of a supposition he had already made, that specific talents were commonly hereditary, and rare talents could often be used for tracing one's roots. The book used chiefly the example of metamorphmagi, though for Tom the same argument would surely apply to the ability to speak Parseltongue.

What he had not as yet succeeded in doing was finding Witches or Wizards other than himself in anything close to recent years who could speak it, based on any references he had been able to find in publications on cross-species communications, even with a pass to the Restricted Section from Professor Mipsum, citing a research project into possible connections between Parseltongue and Draconian.

"Apparently it'll work if I drink directly from it", said Tom, in response to the expectant looks from Marca and Antonin, neither of whom had been able to coax any liquid out of the flask either, when they had tried it earlier in the morning.

"And what is the potion, that's in it?" asked Antonin.

"Hyggelixir, so quite safe", affirmed Tom. After all, about the only way Tom could think of that Hyggelixir could possibly be dangerous would be drinking it before needing to be very much on one's guard, such as duelling or a similar activity.

These past few days, however, with Christmas Day being no exception, Tom was far more likely to be ambushed by people wanting to talk to him about how he and Jana had recovered Ozzy Fame.

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New Year's Eve brought with it Tom's birthday, which an increasing number of people were getting to know about. Each year brought a present or two more than the previous, but Tom had no need for constant company, and soon found himself at least as alone as he tended to get these days, which as a rule meant quiet study time — or sometimes, private experimentations, quiet or otherwise. Most recently that had meant trying to deconstruct the Charms set into some of the gifts he had received, to see how they worked.

Tom had spent some time trying to work out how the Charm bracelet from Ozzy worked, for instance, such that he'd only need to ask her about it quite minimally, if at all. It occurred to him that the bracelet itself was not a thing he'd really want on him at all times; in fact, he had already found it sufficiently irritating on his wrist that it now lived in one of his pockets. Indeed, it was a good thing to have with him, but it seemed hardly the best medium for it.

What Tom really wanted to do with this particular magic was find a way to bring into reality an idea he'd had last year but as yet failed to get working the way he wanted, which was to provide a method for gathering his masked Legions to him, be it a matter of regrouping them in the event of calamity, or just assembling them for some more proactive purpose; a sort of "Call to Arms" Charm that he felt certain ought to have been pioneered by someone already, but as far as he could tell, it had not. Witches and Wizards would shoot up sparks of various colours, would send forth Patronuses, would amplify their voices, and so forth, but had never been so practically minded as to put into one Spell or magical artefact, so far as he had been able to find, a means of gathering one's followers to oneself quickly and efficiently, in any circumstances.

He tried various avenues of investigating this bracelet, and when he found himself sufficiently frustrated, from time to time he would take a break and turn to investigating the Charm on the flask from Jana. This was of course far less practical; after all, Tom could not envisage an occasion when it would be especially useful to have a potion whose vessel one could only empty by drinking it, but nevertheless, he did find himself curious, and this

challenge he met sooner than the other, upon realizing that it was a matter of certain conflicting Charms interplaying with each other, to create this ostensibly unique result.

The return of the rest of the students to the school brought with it more topical endeavours: in the wake of the events during the Christmas holiday, Professor Merrythought had finally got her much sought-after permission to teach Apparition at Hogwarts, to all students aged thirteen and over, which had been the Ministry's sticking point.

To teach everyone at once would be utterly chaotic, of course, so lessons were timetabled into the evenings. This was an arrangement that troubled Quidditch Captains and homework strugglers alike, but the argument was made that everyone was in the same boat, so it was completely fair.

There was a degree of falsehood to this claim, of course, as it could happen that one House might lose half of its players on their training evening, while another House might luckily dodge that fate by chance, but this was (rightly, in Tom's opinion), considered trivial next to the genuinely life-and-death matter that was Apparition.

"We will do Apparition without line-of-sight constraints in the next session, so do not concern yourself with that for now", advised Merrythought, during the fourth-years' first session. Tom would still concern himself with this, but would certainly not do so unless a perfect opportunity happened to present itself to him to do so without incurring Merrythought's displeasure.

"As for safety, there are a lot of us in the Hall, so to start with - and that means until I say otherwise - you will only be Apparating into the hoop in front of you. I do not want to see you splinched into the walls or floor, let alone each other. Any splinchings that do occur will be dealt with by Healer Tegner if necessary, and by me in any case - I can assure you, you won't splinch twice"

There was a tone of menace to her voice that suggested punitive action would be taken for even accidental splinchings.

"Now, regards technique. You will require your wand to dislodge you from your current position, and to allow you to arrive to your intended destination without mishap. Apparition without a wand is technically possible - some of you may even have done so in your years before Hogwarts, prompted by some accident or incident - however, it's extremely unadvisable except in the very direst of circumstances, as your control will be truly terrible without a wand. To start with, it's likely to be bad enough even with a wand, so let's get started. Draw your wands."

Those who did not already have their wands in hand now did so, and waited apprehensively; some with excitement and readiness, many with a sense of dread that they might well be about to spirit themselves into a wall.

"The Anti-Apparition Charm has been lifted from the Great Hall alone, so do not try to go anywhere else. Again, just the hoop in front of you. Not your neighbour's hoop, not the staff table, not the ceiling, whereupon you would have only yourself to blame for the consequences you would incur"

Tom looked at the green wicker hoop in front of him. It did not seem very exciting, but then, he wasn't sure where the Anti-Apparition Charm re-began, and whether it would be possible to splinch into the floor as he had done in the Old Wellington Inn.

"You will now twist yourself out of your current location, using your wand to excise you, and find yourself inside your hoop. This act must be pre-determined before you do it; don't try to do it on the go. Before you Apparate, you will focus strongly on your destination. Because your hoop is very much like the hoops of those around you, I suggest to not concentrate on the hoop itself, so much as the patch of floor within it, noting its details that will allow you to differentiate between it and your neighbour's patch. Take a moment now to examine your bit of floor more carefully than you have ever examined a patch of floor previously"

This was not a thrilling exercise, and indeed it seemed to calm the nerves of some of the more anxious attendees in the Great Hall. Tom, for his part, made out the rough edges of the otherwise smooth-polished flagstones, taking in every crevice as though it were a great ravine seen from afar.

“Now, focusing all your attention on your destination, turn on the spot and twist yourself out of your current location, into your hoop. Do this now”

Apparating into the hoop was not tricky for Tom, after the Apparitions he had done already. A split second later he was in the hoop, not even feeling off-kilter. He looked around him.

Tom, Tiernan, Abraxas, and Ravenclaw’s Elvira Highcastle had succeeded, albeit Tiernan stumbled in his hoop and had to scramble back to his feet; most others in the room teetered off-balance exactly where they had started. Nobody was splinched — yet.

“Those of you in your hoops, remain there for the moment”, instructed Professor Merrythought. “The rest of you, focus more sharply. Make sure you absolutely desire and intend to arrive at your destination, with all your heart and will. Concentrate absolutely on where you want to be, and excise yourself from your starting point with a flick of your wand as you turn, and end up where you want to be NOW”

The up-turn in her tone at the end of her sentence prompted quite a few learners to success, but not quite everyone.

“Your destination is everything” exhorted Merrythought. “More important than anything else. Be determined to get there; stake your life on getting to that position, where you absolutely want to be more than anywhere else, do it now!”

Something heavy slammed into Tom; his knees buckled and he stumbled to the ground, his free hand breaking his fall only partially as he hit the stone floor with his face as his instinct to preserve his wand was apparently stronger than his aversion to pain, meaning that he didn’t put out his wand hand to slow the impact. Nor did any instinctive magic come to him on this occasion; perhaps he had taken too much to heart Merrythought’s admonishment to stay put.

“Oh bummer, sorry, are you alright?” asked Jana.

“Get off me” grunted Tom, shoving her aside roughly, partly with his hand and partly with magic. There was a tearing sound, and it became clear that while they were not splinched together, their robes were. Tom glared at Jana for a furious moment, and then slashed their robes apart with a swish of his wand. He repaired his own, and left her to tend to hers. Nearby, Gryffindor Arthur Harding sniggered, and stopped instantly when Tom made eye contact with him.

“Teires, back to your starting point”, snapped Merrythought, apparently not removing people from the class for such accidental antics despite her initial tone regards splinchings; perhaps mishaps were expected in such a lesson, things they’d just have to weather if they wanted to learn to Apparate effectively.

“Sorry Professor, accident” said Jana, scrambling back to her feet and momentarily looking around her, disoriented, to find her starting point again - of course, it was not where it felt to her it should be, owing to her having Apparated partway across the Great Hall.

Tom, meanwhile, felt his face for damage, after observing that he was dripping blood onto the floor.

“Hold still”, said Tegner, appearing to the side of him with a damp cloth, which stung slightly, no doubt dampened with a tincture of Squinancy Woodruffe and Essence of Murtlap. “There, good as new”, he smiled.

Tom did not return the smile, but nodded curtly.

The remainder of the lesson gave slightly better results for some, but by the end of it, there were many who had not so much as budged, and one case of splinching, that having been Leonid Llewelyn, who was soon put right by Healer Tegner — although

Professor Merrythought directed the boy to clean his own blood and stomach contents off the floor, which he did.

Leaving the Great Hall at the end of the lesson, Tom felt it had rather been a wasted hour, but planned further attendance regardless, in the hopes that Professor Merrythought would teach better skills for Apparition outside of line-of-sight, and of course it'd be of great benefit to be able to take others for side-along Apparition without dropping them off the sides of bridges. If not, well, he would learn; this he resolved to do no matter what the inconvenience to those with whom he had to practice.

Chapter Twelve

Kharon

Brega watched with interest as Tom opened the letter hastily; he skimmed quickly through for the most vital information first: had Grindelwald responded positively with some suggestion regards a meeting?

“...to facilitate our meeting, I will send my trusted lieutenant, Special Envoy Kharon, to meet you in Scotland and bring you to my own secret location. Be in the main street of Hogsmeade, Sunday night at one o’clock in the morning on the 13th of January. Kharon will make himself known by tapping his wand thrice. You must then make yourself known by twice turning your wand in hand. After this introduction, he will then bring you to this vicinity by Apparition, whereupon a short walk will suffice to bring you to my presence, and we can discuss at our leisure that which you have to offer.”

The 13th of January, that was tomorrow, good, plenty of time to prepare. But wait, it said Sunday, that was tonight, so which was it to be? Ah, Sunday night, one o’clock in the morning, that would be after midnight and therefore the 13th. Not so much time to prepare, then!

Well, in an ideal world he’d have the time to make himself look older, be it by an Aging Potion or by some other means of disguise, but then unless Grindelwald and any who were privy to his secrets were all accomplished Occlumenses, he should be able to get the information he needed quite promptly and without the need for trust on their part.

However, they would be more suspicious, and therefore more guarded, around him with his current appearance, and Tom did not want to have to fight his way out of the situation, not against such a legendary Wizard as Grindelwald, complete with the backing of his followers. On the one hand, Tom was a very competent duellist by now. On the other, he wasn’t perfect, and such a situation was not the kind of circumstance where Tom felt he had room to play with the possibility of failure.

Aha, his mask and Vantamantium-weave robes would be a good option here. With them, his height may still be perhaps a little under that of an average grown-up, but then, so was Professor Sortsun’s - the important thing was that his identity would continue to be disguised, and he would not appear to be an obvious schoolboy. Tom was on the tall end of things for his age; furthermore, his skin would be hidden, and his voice, distorted.

This too was of course imperfect, and would hardly result in a friendly chat over a cup of tea, but Grindelwald could surely understand a desire for secrecy more readily than the appearance of a schoolboy.

Tom made immediately back down to the Slytherin Dungeons, in order to prepare these things now; he would also need to mentally prepare himself, but he could do that out in Hogsmeade as easily as here. After all, nobody was likely to notice him after nightfall in Vantamantine robes with his chameleon cloak worn over — not that he was going to put that on just yet, of course.

“Going somewhere?” asked Tiernan as Tom got himself ready.

“Yes, into Hogsmeade”, replied Tom, wondering what he was forgetting, and wishing for more peace than Tiernan was giving him.

“Care for company?”

“Not on this occasion”

“Dark deeds afoot, eh?”, asked Tiernan. “Sorry, I’ll take that as a yes and leave you to it”, he concluded, as Tom stopped what he was doing to look him in the eye. “Let me know if you want anything from me, though”

Content to now be left alone by Tiernan, Tom did a quick run-through of what he would need: wand, Vantamantine-weave robes, chameleon cloak, gloves, mask (currently in its discreet pin form). He considered it would be wise to bring his letter as token, in case of any mishap with the suggested method of recognition, so he tucked that into a pocket too.

Checking his pockets, his fingertips touched upon the Charm bracelet from Ozzy; he slid it onto his wrist, and shrank it down slightly so that it didn't move about so much. He had considered cutting off the rest of the bracelet and just attaching the serpentine clasp to something, but he wasn't utterly sure the Charm was set only into the clasp, despite it being the triggering mechanism. He didn't want to break the Charm by breaking the bracelet, so with him the bracelet was destined to come for now.

Not that he foresaw wanting to call Ozzy to wherever he might find himself with Grindelwald, but it seemed only sensible that he might as well have the option as not. Of course even then, any appearance of such aid would be delayed, as she'd have to leave the castle grounds before she could Apparate to him.

And then when all was said and done, he'd need to tell a fantastic story to explain what he was doing in the presence of Grindelwald in the first place, or quite possibly kill her. Or both. And then that would become very complicated, politically, what with the prior politicizing of Ozzy's death at the hands of Muggles, if she were now to die at the hands of Grindelwald as well. Tom would definitely rather avoid that if possible, and would certainly only summon her at the utmost end of need.

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The front door being locked at this hour, Tom left via the ramparts. Not wanting to be burdened with a broom out at this meeting, and not wanting to leave his broom unattended in some outside place either, he simply donned his chameleon cloak and jumped down, magically countering his momentum before reaching the ground. Looking back up at the castle against the stars, he wondered how many others had done the same over the centuries, and whether the castle's security was more about dissuading the masses from making midnight sortees than it was about impeding the actually competent from their nocturnal business.

Leaving the castle behind him, Tom headed forth towards Hogsmeade. Passing by the edge of the Forbidden Forest, he was reminded to take a glance at the moon; it was a beautifully clear full moon, tonight. Marvellous. He peered warily into the inky blackness of the forest. Not that a werewolf should be too much of a threat to him, of course, so long as he was careful. Such a beast might smell him under his cloak easily enough, but it was after all he who was carrying a wand, and could have the creature at his mercy quite swiftly. And Tom did not have very much in the way of mercy at the best of times, so any creature "at it" would soon find he had none left at all.

For now, however, he followed the shore of the lake whose ripples gave no suggestion of the many creatures great and small below its dark surface. Tom walked with his wand in hand, just in case. It wasn't far from here that he had duelled with Jana in their first year, unaware of quite how many dangers lurked there. Indeed, he hadn't learned about the school's arrangement with the Mer-people of the lake to not drown schoolchildren until much later, and if Merrythought was to be believed, the Grindylows were still a law unto themselves — not that they would be able to reach him on the shore, but as she often pointed out, any Witch or Wizard on the shore was only a whim of the giant squid away from finding themselves in deep water, and deep trouble.

Upon arrival, the big clock above the front door of the Hogsmeade Owl Office showed that it was twelve minutes to one. He waited in a shadow, not that such was necessary with his invisibility cloak over his Vantamantium-weave robes; between these

two artefacts, he would be hidden to all but the most careful observer - a person would really have to be looking for him, right there, and know what they were looking for, in order to have a chance of making him out against the rest of the shadows.

Someone else moving in the street caught his attention; was Grindelwald's Special Envoy early? Peering through the darkness, Tom saw that it was in fact not one but two people; had Grindelwald sent a two-person guard? No, the white "W"s on these Wizards' hats, gleaming in the moonlight, showed them to be Ministry-appointed Watchwizards, stationed in Hogsmeade to keep an eye out for, well, exactly the sort of thing that was about to happen; agents of Grindelwald entering a British Wizarding community with nefarious intentions.

"Well, whaddya know, Nobby", said one of them, "Looking like another nice night of Grindelwald's armies not invading Hogsmeade High Street. Who'da thunk it"

"You complaining at three Sickles an hour for patrolling a peaceful village?", asked Nobby.

"Nah, 'course not, but it's a daft job all the same. What're we supposed to do if Grindelwald or his soldiers show up anyway?"

"You know the drill, Bill: *Shout, Stun, and Send up Sparks*; simple as that, nothing fancy"

"Come on, Nobby, that's just the Ministry line. It's not like Grindy's gonna be playing to a Ministry rulebook, is it? Are you telling me that if a squad of Grindy's finest show up one night, you're going to holler out and hope for the best in a battle?"

"Well, who knows how it'd pan out" said Nobby. "We'll probably never know until it happens, and here's hoping it it never does"

"Aye, I'll drink to that", said Bill, "Or would, if they let us drink on duty"

Their conversation continued, but they rounded the corner, and Tom did not follow their conversation with his mind, as he found he would rather focus his mind on his own apparent problem of what he would do with Kharon arriving shortly and potentially getting seen by the Watchwizards - whom he'd then almost certainly kill, assuming Grindelwald has more reliable Wizards as his confidants than these Watchwizards with their casual attitudes - but this would cause an alarm and enquiry that might make it difficult for Tom to get back without being noticed, given how security would probably get stepped up ten notches.

One possible way to avoid this would be for him to Stun Nobby and Bill sooner than Kharon could kill them, but even this would create quite a mess, as obviously somebody must have done it. Similarly, an Imperius Curse would be all very well and good for now, but then he'd need to maintain it potentially indefinitely afterwards, lest they report it as soon as they're clear of the Curse. Maybe he could Imperius them and have them go and quietly kill themselves somewhere else at a later time to rid him of their nuisance, but even then, he'd have to maintain the Curse for at least the time between now and when he got back, and he wasn't sure he could do that, especially at such a distance and with such distractions going on. He understood from his readings on the subject that such longer-term control was possible, even over the course of days, with the casting Wizard presumably facing many distractions in the meantime, not to mention possibly sleep - but he, Tom, did not yet know how to do so, and now did not seem to be the ideal time to find out the hard way if it turned out he had the wrong idea about it.

Six minutes to one, now. Whatever Tom was going to do, he was going to have to do it soon. Maybe Kharon would arrive before they rounded back on the main street.

Maybe Tom could distract them over in one of the backstreets. But how? There wasn't time to go set a trap that could be later considered something very trivial. Maybe if he set fire to one of the buildings up near the opposite end of the street, it would be distraction enough? But he didn't know which end that was going to be; Kharon might appear anywhere.

Four minutes to one. If only there were not street-lamps lit. Didn't they know there was a war on?

One minute to one. Was Kharon coming? Would he be late?

Tom didn't have to wait long for his answer, because as the clock hand shifted onto the hour, so a figure appeared in the middle of the street. That must be him; no time to wait. A quick check into his thoughts revealed the focused mind of a soldier, quickly scanning the street for dangers, though he did not move from the very exposed point of his arrival. He was brazen, that was for sure. Tom would have to be brazen too; he stepped out.

Just as he did so, and was about to doff his chameleon cloak, the Watchwizards Nobby and Bill rounded the corner again.

"Who's that?" called out one of them. Kharon didn't move, and didn't answer. His wand was already drawn; it had been upon his arrival.

"Warning yer", called the Watchwizard, "Identify yourself or you'll find yourself under arrest", he threatened, as he and his fellow Watchwizard advanced warily.

"Avada kedavra"

There was a flash of green light, and the sound of rushing death, and one of the Watchwizards fell.

"Nobby! *Stupefy! Expelliarmus! Incarcerus! Protego!*" exclaimed the remaining Watchwizard; his efforts were almost inconsequential in and of themselves, as Kharon blocked everything easily, but the ongoing barrage of Spells did mean one thing, which was that Kharon wasn't getting time to cast another Killing Curse, and was having to settle for Spells that were quicker to get out. Tom leveled his wand at Bill the brave but foolish Watchwizard, but this latter now fell before Tom could Curse him; Kharon had hit him with something, possibly a Stunning spell, judging from the appearance.

Tom stepped out now, and as he did so, Kharon glanced around, spun on the spot, and vanished.

"Kharon!" called Tom in a loud whisper, creating a strange voice as he tried to make it both a shout and a whisper at once. He laughed at the absurdity of it, but any lightening of tension was but momentary, because now the village's General Alarm was sounded, and it rang loud in Tom's ears, not to mention the ears of every other living soul in Hogsmeade. He shrank back into the shadows, not that he would be likely to be seen in this cloak even out in the middle of the street.

What to do now? Villagers were appearing in windows, and lights were being turned on; the exact opposite of what happened in Muggle residential areas when the Air Raid Sirens were sounded. Tom sighed. There was nothing else for it; Kharon was gone and wasn't coming back. He, Tom, might as well return to the castle and figure out where to go from here.

The walk back to Hogwarts seemed a lot slower and more onerous than the walk out, and Tom found himself increasingly annoyed with Kharon's failure. He hoped that Grindelwald would be at least equally annoyed, and punish his lieutenant accordingly. He glanced back, half wondering if Grindelwald might appear in the village to finish the job himself; such a great Wizard as Grindelwald would surely not fear a few village locals. But there seemed to be no sign of a battle now, so Tom trudged on up to the castle, and resolved to write back — again — in the morning.

*

MINISTRY WATCHWIZARD MURDERED IN THE STREETS OF HOGSMEADE

Agents of Dark Wizard Grindelwald infiltrated Hogsmeade on Sunday night, leading to the shocking murder of Norbert "Nobby" Bullock, 49, a heroic Watchwizard assigned to protect the safety of the village.

The Daily Prophet spoke with eyewitness Bill Talbot, 51, who was on duty with Bullock when the fateful events occurred. Talbot told us the chilling tale:

"There we were, a peaceful evening, doing our job patrolling the village, and this Wizard in black robes just Apparated right into the middle of the street. Nobby challenged him, and just like that, the Wizard struck him dead with a Killing Curse, and starts launching Curses at me. Of course I gave him what for, but he got away, the coward"

Nobody seems to know who the mysterious combatant was, or what dark business he had in Hogsmeade, but we can only hope that the Ministry will do the necessary and improve security, as the residents of Hogsmeade live in fear of another attack, not knowing where or when the mad followers of Grindelwald will strike again

Tom passed the morning's newspaper back to Tiernan.

"So, any thoughts on it, Tom?", Tiernan asked openly enough, without voicing the rest of his thoughts, which would have been along the lines of *because you went out into Hogsmeade last night wearing black robes.*

"I think it's nothing we need worry about", said Tom.

"Wonder what Grindelwald wants in Hogsmeade", said Abraxas, "And why he or whoever it was cleared off so quickly"

"If they wanted to invade Hogsmeade, it surely could not not hold its ground", opined Antonin.

"Reinforcements could arrive in an instant from London though, couldn't they?" suggested Tom. Abraxas shook his head.

"No. Well, yes, rather, but not if whoever got there first put up Anti-Apparition Wards before doing anything else, to isolate the place. It's standard practice now, so they say"

"I wonder, if he got what he came for", said Antonin.

"Doesn't look like it, does it?", said Tom. "It's a curious thing, though, a powerful Dark Wizard having his plan foiled by village Watchwizards"

"Well, you know what they say", said Abraxas, "Sometimes if you want something doing, you've got to do it yourself"

"You could well be right", said Tom with a smile, "Maybe Grindelwald will make a personal visit next time"

"You laugh", said Abraxas, "But it depends what it is he wants; if it's something really important, he might well show up, and we should be ready in case we need to make certain decisions"

Tom nodded. He didn't know whether Grindelwald would come personally in the wake of Kharon's failure, but he also didn't really care, so long as the meeting succeeded in taking place somewhere, and that was clearly something that was going to take a little more work, it seemed.

Chapter Thirteen

Return Post

The morning's Charms lesson had them Charming pocket-watches to sing them the time, and it being so focussed around listening did not afford much chance for discussion, which suited Tom. By lunchtime however, Tiernan predictably did ask Tom privately about the business of last night, as they headed up to the History of Magic classroom for their next lesson after eating.

"Tom, a quick word in private?" he asked, gesturing towards a rarely-used corridor that led to little more than an oubliette — if the oubliette had a function, it had long since been forgotten.

"Of course" said Tom, as it would be better (and safer) to get this done with than leave Tiernan wondering or have him ask at a worse time.

"So, that last night... Was that you?" asked Tiernan, after checking the coast was clear. "I mean, if it was, I'm sure you had good reason, don't worry about anything; you know you can trust me"

"I'm sure I can", said Tom. "But the Wizard in the article was not me, and I didn't Curse anyone. The reason I went out into Hogsmeade was to meet him, as I've been corresponding with his master"

"Grinde—"

"Ssh", said Tom. "This much I've shared so that you can put the matter out of your mind. The less involvement you have with it, the better. If I need you, I'll call on you. Until such a time, this conversation never happened. Understood?"

"Right", said Tiernan, simply. "History of Magic, then?"

"History of Magic", nodded Tom.

"Yay"

In the class, Binns droned ceaselessly on the threateningly boring topic of Spell Standardization Treaties, which had been better summarized in the library's copy of *Universal Animus*, which Tom had read not two months ago, while researching Spell creation methods for a personal project inspired by one of Professor Vassy's lessons. Binns' mind tended to be as dry as his lecturing, and very often offered little more than glimpses of pages with the same information as he was relaying to them. His lack of imagination was truly impressive, and Tom sometimes wondered if the old man had ever even left the castle in living memory.

Certainly he didn't even join the majority of the staff in dining down in the Great Hall, for Tom never saw him there. Frankly, even the Bloody Baron, who had been dead for centuries, seemed to get around the castle more than Cuthbert Binns did.

In any case, Tom opted relieve some of his boredom by doing something he most certainly could not have got away with doing in Charms with Vassy: writing a new missive to Grindelwald, with whom he was practically pen-pals by now. Taking a fresh sheet of parchment and noting that the only person who might possibly be in a position to see was Tiernan, and he was gazing into the distance, his mind on the particulars of the party he would like to throw at Fengrey Hall if Grindelwald were to attend.

Tom took up his quill and wrote:

Most Esteemed Gellert Grindelwald,

By now you will be aware that last night at one o'clock the morning of the thirteenth, your Special Envoy Kharon was involved in an altercation with two Watchwizards on duty in Hogsmeade village, killing one and duelling briefly with the other before Disapparating, whereupon the General Alarm was soon sounded by a third villager.

I was there in the street, hidden by means of my invisibility cloak, and would have revealed myself if it were not for the fact I had full confidence that your agent would kill the second Watchwizard and then wait at least a few seconds for me before departing.

Alas, as we now know, this was not to be. After the Special Envoy's swift departure, and with the klaxons of the General Alarm ringing in my ears, and villagers appearing at many windows, and the dead Watchwizard lying dead for all to see—

"You wrote *dead* twice" whispered Tiernan, startling Tom, who had not hitherto noticed Tiernan was reading his letter.

"I didn't ask you to proofread it", said Tom, testily.

"Sorry, didn't mean to", offered Tiernan. Tom glanced sideways at him.

"Do not speak of this to anyone", he said, folding the letter away to finish it later.

"Of course not", said Tiernan, shaking his head.

As Tiernan clearly could not control his curiosity despite his best efforts, Tom finished his letter that evening in the solitude of the local history section in the library, before returning to the Common Room, contemplating how to send the letter this time, once again needing access to a connected Floo grate — assuming the Floo network was even up and running — to hasten Brega's arrival to an Owl Office in a Grindelwald-controlled area, to pass on the letter to friendly communication channels.

He sank into an armchair in a dark corner of the Common Room to ponder this problem anew, since obviously the method he used last time was quite opportunistic and would not be viable again. He could maybe break into the Hospital Wing, taking his broom and gaining access via a window if needs be, but he had absolutely no idea when Tegner retired for the night, and did not want to have to find out in person. Even if he checked for Tegner's presence by magical means before entering the ward, if he got up there and Tegner was indeed there, he didn't want to have to sit on the roof for hours on end, waiting for him to leave.

Tom had an idea, and called over to Belinda, who was frowning at her essay nearby.

"Belinda, I require a distraction"

"Yeah, me too", said Belinda, looking up from her essay. She stretched, and smiled, before coming over to join Tom at his armchair and sitting herself on his lap. She was heavier than he would have expected; perhaps he had been misled by the combination of her generally dynamic nature, and often seeing her whizzing around on a Broomstick.

"What are you doing?"

"Distracting", said Belinda. "Good to take a break now and again"

"It is not I who needs distracting" clarified Tom, disentangling her.

"But you said..." began Belinda, confused.

"I need a distraction for someone else" clarified Tom.

"Huh?"

"I need there to be a distraction in the castle that will require Healer Tegner's attendance, to make absolutely sure he's not in the Hospital Wing for a few minutes"

"What are you doing there?" she asked, sitting up straighter.

"The less you know, the less trouble you'll be in if you're found out. Can you make a distraction for me?"

"When, now?"

Tom thought through how he needed to get Brega first - bearing in mind that Brega was near the top of the castle and he was near the bottom - but that Belinda would also require time to get herself into position, and then Tegner would need time to get himself to the scene of the distraction.

"Yes, now would be good", affirmed Tom. "Have you something in mind already?"

"I could start a fight... set something on fire... release some creatures..."

"Ideally without getting caught yourself, or associated with it. Also probably not parpallugas, after the Halloween show"

"Not parpallugas, alright then. And as for places, not Gryffindor", thought Belinda out loud, "Because they're pretty close to the Hospital Wing already, and Ravenclaw's not terribly further off, so maybe Hufflepuff"

"Alright, badger-baiting it is, then. Shouldn't take too long for someone to be going to the kitchens to collect a supper snack, at this hour — aha, take Tiernan with you, go collect some food, release a creature, pretend to try to stop it, accidentally hit a Hufflepuff, Tiernan can hurry off to get help, then no House Points will be lost for Slytherin, but I'll get the distraction I need. Repeat to me the plan, so I know you understand it"

"Take Tiernan to go get snacks from the kitchens. Lurk around waiting for a Hufflepuff to come by; release something, haven't figured out what yet, accidentally-on-purpose make sure the Hufflepuff gets injured, send Tiernan to go get help from Tegner"

"Good, you have it. The Hufflepuffs will be suspicious, Tegner might too, but there'll be no evidence to the contrary. Even if he reads minds, he'll only get a glimpse of me, not enough information to damn anybody, because you don't know what I'm doing. Perfect. As I said, the less you know, the safer you are, which makes you quite safe indeed"

"Thanks"

"Tiernan!"

"Hello", replied Tiernan from an alcove-table a short distance away. He looked over expectantly, but visibly confused as to what was wanted of him. Had Tom been on his own, it'd be obvious that he was to come over to him; with Belinda sat on Tom's lap, it was much less clear that this was what was desired. Tom noted this, and gave Belinda a shove.

"What?" she asked.

"Get off", he said. "You're too heavy"

"I am not..." she began, but trailed off as Tom waved a hand to indicate this was irrelevant, and that he was now interested in getting Tiernan to come over.

"You wanted me?" asked Tiernan, upon joining them.

"Obviously. You and Belinda have a mission. I do too, but..."

"...the less you know, the safer you are", interrupted Belinda, with a knowing smile.

"Exactly", agreed Tom, "which is why you and Belinda don't need to know what I'll be up". Belinda looked slightly less pleased, now that it was obvious to Tiernan that she, too, had not been let in on the secret.

"Jolly good then", said Tiernan stoically, "What do you want us to do?"

"Create a distraction", said Belinda. "He wants us to distract Tegner down to the dungeons, without getting caught doing anything serious enough to get us into trouble, long enough for him to do his thing up in the Hospital Wing"

"So what's the plan?"

"We're going to go to the kitchens pretending to go to get sneaky food, but we'll wait and ambush a Hufflepuff when they do the same, set some creatures on them, get them injured, and then you can run up to the Hospital Wing to get Tegner"

"That's a lot of running", observed Tiernan.

"Well, he does it often enough", observed Tom. "You'll live"

"What creatures are we setting on them?"

"Belinda?" prompted Tom. It took Tiernan a beat to realise Tom was inviting Belinda to answer, not suggesting that she was what was going to be set upon them.

"Not Parpallugas, after Halloween, not Night Terror Weavers after last year, how about luring a Kelpie from the lake?"

"How will you acquire and transport it? Shrink it, I suppose, but getting it in the first place?"

"I... Well, I suppose we could get someone to pretend to be stuck, and... Hmm..."

“Do we need creatures, definitely?” asked Tiernan, tentatively.

“Well, yes, we don’t want it to be a replay of last year’s raid on the Hufflepuffs, do we? It’d link it too closely and make it far more obvious it was us last year”

“But... Sorry if I’m being stupid here... Do we need the Hufflepuffs, either?”

“Ah, you’re right” replied Tom. “Good point. Stay here, both of you. I’ll be back in just a moment”

Tom dashed off the fourth-year boys’ dormitory, and pulled out his coffer. He took out the Glauber Globe, filled with Heptamirabilite Thanaroles that he had been working for Al-Muharik. He smiled, and hurried back out to rejoin Tiernan and Belinda.

“What’s this?” asked Belinda.

“It’s my Alchemy coursework”, said Tom.

“It is? What is it? I don’t even know what I’m doing for mine yet”

Tom didn’t answer, but moved Tiernan aside slightly with a gesture of his arm, and made to show the thing more closely to Belinda alone. Carefully, he unscrewed the top part of the dark metal orb, allowing the contents to dramatically up-light Belinda’s face as she peered into it — then she recoiled in horror.

“That’s enough, then”, said Tom, closing the thing.

“What have you done to me?” demanded Belinda, putting her hands to her face to feel it.

“I haven’t done anything to you”, said Tom, “you just took a look at my Alchemy homework, which turned out to be a bad idea”

“It stings, it burns, owww... Spittal of Glenshee, this really hurts and and you’d better put it right soon, ow, I can’t open my eyes; it hurts...”

“Perfect”, said Tom. “If you can’t open your eyes, you can’t reasonably go to the Hospital Wing, so Healer Tegner must be called down here. Don’t tell him I gave you this to look at; tell him it was on the table and you ignored my instruction to make sure nobody looks at it, understood?”

“Can you not fix this?”, demanded Belinda.

“No, I have no idea how, and if you’d like us to get Healer Tegner to look at, I suggest you confirm what you’re going to tell him”

“Fine, err, your stupid ball thing was on the table and I looked at it”

“Despite my instruction not to”

“Well what did you expect?!” complained Belinda, as though they were now discussing something that had actually happened.

“Alright; you sit tight, and Tiernan will go get Tegner. If you’d be so kind...” he added, to Tiernan.

“Of course”

“Come to think of it” said Tom, casually Stunning Belinda as she started to get up to try to go somewhere, “I’ll actually be coming with you most of the way. *Accio broom*”

“We’re flying?” asked Tiernan, as Tom’s broom arrived from where it had been, stored above his bed.

“No, of course not; you know we’re not allowed to fly in the corridors”, said Tom with a smile. “However, I’m bringing this with me” he confirmed, heading out of the Common Room, with Tiernan following swiftly after, leaving Belinda slumped back in the armchair.

“What is that you did to her face, by the way?” asked Tiernan as they climbed the stairs up from the Dungeons.

“I didn’t do anything; my homework did it”, said Tom, innocently. “However, what it did was replace the natural salts in a good portion of her skin and eyes with new and more interesting salts. It’s actually quite possible she’ll be fine by the time you get back, or then again she might have nasty burns, I’m honestly not sure. Do let me know, as I am curious and obviously can’t be there”

“Will do. She’ll be alright then?”

“It’s Tegner, he can sort anything out, and there might not even be anything to sort out”

“Why did you Stun her?”, Tiernan asked.

“Mainly so that nobody asks her what happened, while we’re away. If she talks to people in the Common Room while we’re gone, then Tegner asks what happened, one of them might tell him the truth. So, unconscious friends tell no tales”, he smiled. “If she’s still out when you get back, which she should be, you can tell Tegner you Stunned her for her own safety because she was panicking and seemed to be a hazard to herself”

“Fair enough”, said Tiernan. “So, if we mention that’s your homework that did it, he might ask where you are, to ask about it; where should I say are?”

“Owlery” said Tom. “And in the unlikely event he then goes looking for me at the Owlery, he’ll find me there, or on the back way down from there”.

“Fair enough, so if you’re really going there, what’s with getting Tegner out of the Hospital Wing?”

“You didn’t ask that”

“I didn’t...? Oh, right, of course, I follow now. Sorry.”

Upon parting ways with Tiernan, Tom picked up the pace in the remainder of his ascent to go get Brega, who would hopefully be in the Owlery and not out hunting, as he didn’t have time to wait, and all his efforts so far would be for nothing in Brega’s absence.

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!”

“Ah good, you are here”, said Tom. “We have work to do”

“Hahoo!”

“First things first, I need you to come with me; follow” said Tom, kicking off with his broom and gliding out through one of the many unglazed windows of the Owlery.

“Brega-hahaha-hoo!” - Brega soared and banked alongside Tom, and together they arrived to roof of the Hospital Wing; Brega fluttered to alight on a leaden ridge, while Tom hovered a moment. Casting forth his mind, he couldn’t find Tegner’s in the ward below, nor anyone else’s, for that matter. He swung down to the high windows, and peered through; certainly no sign of anyone there.

The windows were all closed; hardly surprising in the middle of January. His first thought was to break one and repair it afterwards, but then had a better idea:

Alohomora, he essayed. It worked! The latch undid itself, and thereafter it was easy to open the window itself.

“Hahaha-hoo!” enthused Brega, still up on his newfound perch.

“Come Brega”, said Tom. “We’re going inside. Be quiet now”

“Hoo”, cooed Brega softly, and glided silently in ahead of Tom, and alighting on a partition rail. Tom entered a little less elegantly, but got in nevertheless. He dearly hoped Tegner didn’t arrive back right now, because he wasn’t getting out of that window without at least a comparable struggle, so hearing the first set of doors wouldn’t be sufficient notice to get out before the second set of doors were opened.

“Another long distance message, Brega”, said Tom, giving Brega the letter.

“Assuming it works, this Floo grate will get you to the Paris Owl Office, then you pass the letter to the Revolutionary Post Grid in the morning, and get back here when you can, understand?”

“Hahoo”

“I hope that’s a yes. Alright”, he said, picking up a handful of Floo Powder, “Paris Owl Office!” - he threw the powder into the fireplace, and Brega swooped in and vanished as the bright green flames flared up. Tom glanced back at the door, and briefly considered whether there was anything he wanted to raid while he was in here, but decided it was not worth risking capture for greed, so opted instead of making a hasty retreat. Squirming back out of the window was not easy, and without a broom he’d surely have plummeted down the other side, but as it was, he closed the window behind him, smiled at a job well done

— or his part of it at least, since he wouldn't know of Brega's success for sure for a little while yet — and flew back to the Owlery, to re-enter the castle that way.

Healer Tegner didn't come to find Tom up at the Owlery, but they did pass each other much nearer to the Slytherin Dungeons, as Tegner was back on his way up.

"Evening, Tom"

"Healer Tegner", replied Tom, deferentially. "Were you visiting us?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact; your homework tried to burn Miss Jabez's face off"

"Ah, my Alchemy coursework, you mean? I told her not to touch it, but she did keep asking about it"

"Yes, well, maybe have someone else watch it next time"

"She's alright now, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes, she's fine. Inverted Decoction of Sandiver. She'll be a bit fresh-faced for a day or so, but that's all"

Having bidden the Healer goodnight, Tom re-entered the Common Room a little cautiously in case Belinda was still about and angry, but it seemed she had already retired to her dormitory now, or bathroom, and was in any case nowhere to be seen.

"Did what you needed to?" asked Tiernan.

"Yes, thank you", replied Tom with a smile.

"Good good. Let me know if you need anything else, obviously"

"I will".

Chapter Fourteen

Looking Forward, Looking Back

The third Quidditch match of the season was soon upon them, Hufflepuff vs Gryffindor. After Gryffindor winning their first match (vs Slytherin), and Hufflepuff winning their first match (vs Ravenclaw), this would probably be a more exciting match for most of the spectators than Gryffindor vs Hufflepuff matches might usually be.

Not that this pairing was always devoid of interest, despite Gryffindor's more well-reputed Seeker - after all, Jana's first-year match against Hufflepuff had been quite a spectacle to behold.

Of course there were some hoping for similar goings-on this time around, and others who merely hoped their preferred team would win; for Tom's part, he merely hoped that *somebody* would catch the Snitch fairly soon. He had a mild passing interest in the Quidditch games as they occurred, often seeing them more as an interesting interplay of the wills and ambitions of those in flight, more than the actual scores of this-team-vs-that-team. On one previous occasion, when he had been confined up in the Hospital Wing during a match, he'd much rather have been down at the pitch - after all, it was more interesting than an otherwise empty Hospital Wing where he was not even at liberty to explore, or to experiment with its contents. At times like now, however, he'd rather be up there with a clear goal of his own in the undertaking. However, it seemed that would have to wait for now, unless a player got sufficiently injured as to require medical attention.

As it happened, both Seekers ended up with mild injuries, but only at the very end of the game; as the Snitch whizzed through the air with both Seekers in hot pursuit of it, the Snitch doubled back to go the other way. Halbert was too slow, and it rushed past his grasp. Jana's fingers closed upon it, but she couldn't get to it directly, as it had flown straight up Halbert's sleeve after his fingers missed it. They both realized what had occurred, and both tried to get it out, resulting in them getting tangled at a very high speed and low altitude.

After the inevitable crash, the two Seekers were clearly in more or less one piece, but it was Halbert who held up the Snitch, uncontested, as Jana had never quite reached it, despite catching it first through the fabric of his sleeve, which didn't count.

Jubilation for Hufflepuff; frustration for Gryffindor. Indifference for Tom, but at least it hadn't been so long a match as the Hufflepuff vs Ravenclaw game.

"Well, we're now down to you four", proclaimed Tegner the next day, meeting the assembled Apprentices for their Sunday session, where they had been waiting for him in the antechamber of the Hospital Wing.

"Evangeline isn't coming either?", asked Raymond, the last Ravenclaw remaining in the Apprenticeship group after his fellow Housemates Elvira and Lana had already dropped out.

"No indeed, her friend Miss Meyrick conveyed her apologies to me at breakfast this morning; so it seems Miss Brocklehurst will be enjoying a long lie-in while we get to work. Possibly just as well, depending on how vigorously she celebrated Hufflepuff's win yesterday evening; I suspect a lot of her House had rather a late night"

"So she'll be coming back?", asked Jana.

"Maybe", said Tegner, "But if she wants to return she'll need to do so next session. Healership is a serious business, so naturally we can't have someone reappear at the end of the year and enjoy the same honours that you enjoy from having been here all year long"

"Fair enough", said Tom, pleased that it was taken seriously by Tegner and that his own efforts would not be undervalued — not that Tom was in this for the plaudits, but that didn't mean he couldn't appreciate them.

“That said, we’ll have to work hard”, said Tegner, “because next month we’ll be missing a couple of sessions; one because it’s a short month, and one because of the Valentine’s Day Ball”

“There definitely will be one, then?” asked Tom. “People have been wondering, but there’s been no announcement”

“Yes”, said Tegner, “There will be one, even after the various antics last year, and since Valentine’s Day is on a Friday, the Ball is scheduled for when we’d normally have our Friday evening session, and I can hardly expect you spend your Valentine’s Day evening with me”, he smiled.

I wouldn’t say no, thought Jana, but mercifully said nothing.

Soon the five of them were at St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, and the four students had been split into two pairs, and tasked with assignments. In Tom and Marca’s case, this involved administering potions scheduled at certain times to a series of patients according to instructions; a task that would be disastrous if carried out incorrectly, but simple enough that this was very unlikely to occur — doubtlessly the reason Tegner had entrusted it to them. In a lull between scheduled potion deliveries, Tom talked with Marca:

“So, would you care to accompany me to the Ball again?”, he asked.

“No”, replied Marca.

“What?”

“No, I would not care to accompany you to the Ball” reiterated Marca, as clearly as possible.

“Is there some problem?” asked Tom, baffled. Marca looked intently at an empty Spleech jar for a while, before answering:

“What do you mean; are you asking if there is a problem with us socially?”

“Yes, that’d be one way of putting it”, said Tom. Almost anyone else, he’d have the answer by now.

“Then no, I do not think there is a social problem, do you?”

“I must confess to some confusion”, said Tom. “Was it terrible with me last time? Or is it just that you have someone else in mind?”

“You are not good for me in that way”, said Marca. “So I will see if somebody else will be good for me in that way. That is all.”

It was Tom’s turn to pause for thought. He had been somewhat neglectful of her last year; had she required more attendance from him? It had not seemed so. Certainly he would not want someone who required a lot of attention anyway.

“Oh well, that’s your choice”, said Tom. “Good luck with that. I am curious though, in what way am I not good for you?”

“As a romantic partnership. You would only ever give to that how much is convenient, and would not hesitate to cut or destroy a thing for which you do not have a use”

“Well, yes”, shrugged Tom. “I’m a Slytherin; I’m a pragmatist”

“I also am such”, said Marca, “and so I politely reject that which will clearly not serve my interests at all in the field of courting”

“Well, let me know if you change your mind”, said Tom, on the off-chance she would save him the job of finding someone else.

They rotated jobs at midday, and Tom found himself assigned to prepping Healer supply kits with Jana, who was by far the most cheerful person in the place.

“Hey guess what?”, she asked, almost immediately.

“Raymond asked you to the Ball, and you agreed”, said Tom.

“How did you... Oh yeah, bloody mind-reader, I should really... Hmmm”

"I thought it was your practice to wait for a bunch of boys to ask you, and then choose one?"

"What? No... I mean, last year I was holding out hope that you might ask me, but since you made it quite clear that... Wait were you going to ask me?" she asked, looking shocked. "I'm sorry, I—"

"No, I was not going to ask you, you mad Witch", laughed Tom. "When it comes down to it", he added in a more serious tone, "It'd do our friendship a disservice if I were to lead you on, and I do think that even if you tried not to, you'd take it too much to heart. So I'd rather keep you in my life as you are, while Ball dates come and go"

"So you won't be asking Marca, then?"

"No", said Tom, "I will not be asking her"

"Well, that's very principled of you, at least", said Jana. "Do you know who you are going to ask?"

"One metayoking sponge", said Tom.

"I beg your pardon?"

"One metayoking sponge; you just put two in that kit"

"Oh, right", said Jana, removing the extra sponge. "But yeah, the Ball, do you know who you'll ask this year?"

"No", answered Tom, honestly enough.

"Well, you're the Ravenclaws' hero now", said Jana, "I expect you could have your pick of them"

"Maybe", said Tom, thoughtfully. "Couldn't you?" he added, as an afterthought. "I mean, you're the hero of the hour in that regard too; you didn't need to accept the first offer someone made you — or was Raymond your first choice?"

"He's nice", said Jana, "You should spend more time with him"

"Ha!" laughed Tom, "I'm not sure that niceness is contagious"

"I didn't mean it like that; I just meant, you clearly get on with him here and at the occasional Slug Club dinner"

"He's a bright Wizard of thoroughly acceptable company", shrugged Tom.

"Do we have enough Essence of Dittany for all these kits?" - the conversation turned to their task a while, and then petered out. Eventually their job was done, and it was time to head back to the main ward to look for Tegner, for another assignment or else dismissal back to Hogwarts. Jana looked concerned, when it would surely be more reasonable that she should be happy to soon be able to varyingly get something to eat and catch up with Raymond. He looked into her mind.

"You seem to be concerned about Belinda; why?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing, I was just... Overthinking things and hoping you'll not end up going to the Ball with her, because... well, if you do, I'll be dodging you at the Ball; I don't want to speak badly of your friends, but she—"

"I'm quite aware of your mutual dislike", said Tom. "I could possibly go with her. Probably not. Who knows".

"You should ask Ozzy; I bet she'd say yes", said Jana.

"I'm impressed, Jana, you must really hate Belinda if you'd palm me off on the Witch who stole your date last year, not to mention a fellow sporting rival, of yesteryear at least, as she doesn't appear to be making a comeback any time soon"

"Ozzy's alright", said Jana. "I mean... she might kiss half the boys in the school, but she's not hateful like Jabez"

Tom did not feel rushed to ask anyone to the Ball, however; after all, most of the school didn't even know for sure there would be one, yet. More students were surely getting to know about it in dribs and drabs, though, because in their next Divination lesson,

Professor Sortsun all but confirmed it to those who asked him his predictions regards such.

Sortsun was easily side-tracked in his lessons, but he'd almost always find his way back to lesson plan, and today, that was a rather more far-flung look into the future, using more direct methods than they had previously, moving on now to the use of crystal balls for such. He swished his wand in the direction of the windows, and shutters flew closed over them, each in turn.

"So take a look, relax, take as much time as you need, and see where you'll be in five years from now"

Tom peered into his crystal ball, scrutinizing it for any signs of information. At first, all he saw was reflections of things and people about the room, albeit in its now dimmer light. Parts of the image, distorted by the shape of the crystal, blended and flowed into other parts. He cocked his head slightly, and Tiernan's reflection loomed over the rest of the image; Jana's, on the other side, disappeared into a swirling shadow.

A point of light appeared near the middle, that might or might not have been the reflection of the fireplace in the classroom. Tom focussed on it, and saw that it was a reflection of sky; looking more closely, sweeping mountains and valleys ranged under it, and a castle, certainly not Hogwarts, although it also had a forest near it. He peered more closely still, and a face became visible; it was Professor Sortsun, squinting into the other side of the crystal ball.

"Carry on", he enthused, moving to another table to disturb someone else, but Tom wasn't able to reacquire any kind of imagery in his crystal ball now, beyond that naturally reflected from the room.

After some time of pupils peering and scribbling and sketching and scrying, Sortsun picked out students one by one, to tell the class about their findings.

"I tried to look at five years in my future", said Jana, "But all I got was swirly shadows"

"Maybe you were seeing a particularly stormy Quidditch match", offered Valerie Clemence, helpfully.

"Or maybe you were knocked out in a game and unconscious in hospital... again" offered Belinda in turn.

Jana looked thoughtful; Sortsun spoke to quash these suggestions.

"The crystal ball tends to give more of a rounded view of one's future at that general point in one's life, not a specific moment in time. In your case Jana, it's possible you just didn't succeed in connecting to it at this time; all that means is to keep on trying. How about you, Valerie, any more luck?"

"Yes, it worked fine for me, Sir", affirmed Clemence. "I got pinpricks of light that became faces in the Wizengamot - at first I thought I might be on trial, but no, I was sitting in the Wizengamot, so perhaps a legal career for me".

"Very good, very good. And you, Tom?"

"A sky, and then rolling mountains and valleys, not these ones, and a castle", said Tom, honestly enough. "So I seem to be travelling, for one reason or another, whether to further my education or perhaps on some tour of duty. I do plan to become a Healer, so either could be entirely possible"

"Excellent. And yes, it's often very good to take a travelling sabbatical, for any vocation that involves a lot of continued learning. I've been on a fair few myself", he added with a smile which, as Tom saw in his mind, was connected to thoughts of attending gambling halls in far-flung places, and lazing on beaches sipping drinks. "Tiernan?"

"Yes, travelling's great - oh, you mean what did I see in the crystal ball, right..." began Tiernan, gazing thoughtfully back at the ball in the hopes of receiving some reminder of what he saw, but what he saw had in fact been quite vague.

“The Ministry of Magic”, said Tiernan. “I’ve never exactly imagined myself working for them, but I daresay I might have dealings with them”

“Any more specificity to your vision, Tiernan?”

“Not really, Sir. I mean, I could see myself doing consultations regards International Magical Cooperation, but that’s just me assessing me, not really anything coming from the crystal ball there”.

“Very well; Belinda?” asked Sortsun, shifting his attention to her.

Belinda immediately recalled the vision she had seen in the crystal ball, of her torturing somebody in a Ministry Office that she had clearly broken into.

“I... in five years time I’m a professional Quidditch player”, she lied. “Playing for...” - she looked back at the crystal ball as though double-checking the details that she was in fact making up - “England; I’m playing for the national team; sorry, I didn’t see my regional team in the vision”

“That’s quite alright”, smiled Sortsun, “Do be sure to let me know if you get any glimpses of scores though, will you?” he suggested, jovially.

Professor Sortsun continued to go around the class until everyone was done; most had at best some vague notion of what they would be doing five years from now; in most cases, no better nor clearer than what they might have guessed themselves without a crystal ball, and in some cases, decidedly more vague or confusing.

The lesson that followed Divination, Glyphs and Tongues, was the one that gave Tom a rather more surprising revelation, as today’s class was to be about the hieroglyphs used by Egyptian scribes of antiquity, a writing system that had long since fallen into disuse.

The examples that Mipsum conjured up onto the board were very familiar to Tom; they were the same style of pictures as were on his pyramid stone. The same manner of little people with funny hats, the same little snakes, the same little birds, the same eye with long curly eyelashes.

Tom sat up straighter, and paid much more attention as she went on to explain their usage, and had the class conjure simple collections of glyphs — mostly names and titles and the like, not actual sentences — but what Tom was now impatient to do was of course to get back to the Slytherin Dungeons, to re-inspect his pyramid with the Perevodol Glass, not something he had ever thought to do before, not having expected the little pictures to constitute writing, as such. Experiments with the Perevodol Glass here in the lesson showed that the Glass took its time to translate them, initially causing Tom to think it wasn’t working at all, but did get there eventually.

The same was true, he found, of the pyramid, when he got to examine it upon hurrying there after the lesson. Like the hieroglyphs in the class, they did not immediately change, but rather slowly, sluggishly, shifted through a more writing-like form, before finally becoming legible words; the resultant words were still difficult to read on account of how they came in and out of being and took each other’s places, but with some effort, and working his way around the four sides of the pyramid that had these markings, he made out the following words:

WITHOUT EYES PLACE WITHIN SPEAK SAY WHISPER

GREATEST SALAZAR SLYTHERIN FOUR HOGWARTS

SEE MOUTH DOOR AGAINST ENEMIES ROSE STONE

SERPENT UNDERNEATH KING PERFECTLY SAFE

Tom could all but hear his own heartbeat now, racing as he read and reread the words, lest he lose them and be unable to get them back.

The part about eyes he was sure he understood; it meant that the Parseltongue that he needed to speak to use this key, he must speak in a place without onlookers. That was easy and obvious enough.

“Greatest Salazar Slytherin Four Hogwarts” was at once both clear and yet just out of reach in its connection to the other sides, insofar as Salazar Slytherin was ostensibly being proclaimed “greatest” of the four Hogwarts founders, but was it he who was seeing a mouth door against enemies of a rose stone? What was a mouth door? What was a rose stone? Was it the same thing, repeated? Was one a metaphor for the other?

Why was the serpent perfectly safe underneath the King, and why was he being told this? Or was it the King who was perfectly safe, with the serpent under him? Yes, that made more sense; the King was the Parselmouth, commanding the serpent metaphorically under him, not necessarily literally, the serpent’s mouth was a door against enemies, maybe?

Tom lay back on his bed thinking about these possibilities and more, until he finally recruited Tiernan to the task, who often had a way with reading things, and he didn’t need to know where it came from.

“Well let’s see, we’ve got some names... Salazar Slytherin, Hogwarts, the number four, a person, Greatest, that’s an honorific...” — Tiernan turned the thing in his hand, his eyes narrowed as he scrutinized it. “Here we have a mouth and an eye, enemies, protection against enemies, a desert rose?”

“I got it as rose stone”, said Tom, “but carry on”

“The rose could symbolize any number of things, to be honest, let’s leave that bit and come back to it... Definitely some kind of protection against enemies, something to do with stone, serpent underneath... Serpent underneath the stone? The king is... in complete safety in a place without eyes, oh, we’re back to the beginning, speak to me in a whisper, no, I whisper, you whisper? Somebody whispers, tell me, speak to me, ah, it’s part of the next bit, speak to me, o great Salazar Slytherin of the four of Hogwarts, I guess that’s the Founders, and show me... I’ll show you? See? Look at? Somebody’s showing something, showing the door to the enemies? No, it can’t mean that... It’s like showing the way in, maybe, a sort of signpost, marking the entrance, but the door is shut against enemies, that’s it... I still don’t know what this rose is about, to be honest... It could be to do with the snake? See, it’s as though it has a bloom on top of it, maybe the kind of snake?”

Tom and Tiernan discussed the possibilities a while longer, until they’d got as much as it seemed they could for now, and Tom declared he was going to go and check some of the ideas in the library, and took his leave accordingly.

In reality, Tom had no intention of taking it to the library at this time, and instead, he made his way to dark dungeon room some way from anywhere that would be likely to be visited or even passed by at this hour, in order to try again to use the stone, this time with his newfound knowledge.

By the light of his wand, Tom held the stone before him, and spoke in Parseltongue:

“There are no eyes here but mine. Speak to me, Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four, show me the...”

He stopped; the pyramid itself was opening, the sides of the stone folding down like petals of a flower; evidently these words had been enough.

Tom watched, transfixed, as glowing particles of dull yellowish light rose up, and formed the familiar shape of Hogwarts Castle’s most notable features, from its towers to its dungeons, but then it carried on, there was more, a shimmering thread ran deeper like a runaway root, and then spread out into a network of more caverns, far deeper than the deepest dungeon; in the centre of them there formed a chamber around the size of the Great Hall, but far down below it.

The cord that ran between this place and the rest of the castle ran up through what had always been called the lowest Dungeons, not far from here, in fact, and carried on up some way past ground level, stopping slightly short of Ravenclaw Tower, not far from where it would meet the way to the library.

As Tom's eyes roved over the glittering map hovering in three dimensions in front of him, suddenly it all moved back in towards that snake-like thread that lead from (almost) top to bottom, forming an actual snake for a moment, before collapsing back down into the pyramid stone, which snapped shut after the last of the sand-like particles of light had made its way safely inside.

"Come back, show me again", Tom entreated it, but it did not. Maybe he needed to do the incantation again? *"Speak to me Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four, show me your secrets one more time, I bid you"*

It did not open again, and Tom glanced around uncertainly, in case this was because there were now more eyes than just his here. Unfortunately, after gazing so intently at the light of the castle in the air, everything else in the room was cloaked in impenetrable inky blackness. He lit his wand, which revealed only the dank stones of the storeroom.

"Peeves, show yourself!", Tom demanded. Nothing. Of course, that didn't necessarily mean he wasn't there, but usually Peeves was fairly easily taunted if present in a given room.

Tom pocketed the pyramid, and went for a walk, looking for the various places that tallest shaft in the map might make an appearance into corridors or rooms behind some hidden wall, but to no avail just yet, and there was a limit to how long he could spend showing unusual amounts of interest in the walls in various parts of the castle that were otherwise nothing to do with his more mundane daily activities.

Still, it most certainly was not something he planned to let drop.

Chapter Fifteen

Dance

“This is even worse than last time”, complained Tiernan. “I really don’t want to go with Julia again, not after last time, it took ages to get rid of her - what am I supposed to do? Don’t answer that; I know what I’m supposed to do, but really... Save me, Tom”

“Pick another respectable girl, ask her, then politely distance yourself afterwards”, shrugged Tom.

“What if I pick someone worse than Julia?”

“Don’t pick someone worse than Julia, then”

Tiernan did not seem placated by this advice.

“How am I supposed to do that? Get her to sign a waiver in advance, or something?”, he suggested desperately.

“Take someone that you can count on to not take it as anything grander than it is, like I did with Marca”

“Yeah, you’re alright, you have her; you can just pick her up and drop her off, and she cares as little as you do”

This was an interesting way of looking at it, but, from what Tom could tell, not far from the truth; or at least it had worked out well enough that way last year, even if she was apparently not so keen on repeating that idea this time.

“Ask her then”, suggested Tom. “You’re a perfectly respectable partner; I’m sure she’ll be content with you”

“Don’t you want her?”, asked Tiernan.

“I could ask her or one of any number of other people”, said Tom, nonchalantly. “If you want her though, you’d better be quick before Antonin plucks up the courage to ask her”

“I don’t know that she’d be thrilled; she didn’t seem too impressed with my dancing last year”, reflected Tiernan.

“Well, dance better, then” advised Tom, perhaps unhelpfully. “You only need to show up with her and leave with her; it’s not like either of you are going to cast a Permanent Sticking Charm, is it?”, he added, more helpfully.

“But what will you do for yourself if I ask Marca and she says yes?” queried Tiernan.

“I could take Belinda; I know she’s keeping several boys waiting while she sees what best offer comes her way. I feel I could be... persuasive”

“I’m sure you could”, agreed Tiernan with a smile.

“In any case, I’m sure I’ll be fine regardless. I could even go alone if everyone respectable is otherwise paired up; it’s not that consequential for me; honestly I have more important things on my mind”.

“Alright, if you’re sure, no time like the present, eh? I’d better go find Marca”

This he did, and Tom soon learned of Marca’s acceptance of this offer, much to Antonin’s quiet annoyance. For Tom, however, this all seemed quite trivial, but then, he had greater aims in mind than petty notions of romance, and considered love to be something of a poison, that corroded the greatness of many.

For others, sport was the poison of choice. The time came for Ravenclaw and Gryffindor to clash on the Quidditch pitch, and in the wake of the former’s resounding defeat at the hands of the latter, Jana was ever yet more the Lions’ hero. This resulted in her having to decline yet more requests to go to the Valentine’s Day Ball together, the disappointment of various boys being made yet funnier — from an outsider’s perspective, at least — by the fact the boy Jana had already said yes to was a Ravenclaw.

Meanwhile, Tom largely put such thoughts from his mind, and was more interested in possible alterations to Hogwarts castle that may allow for a very old map being inaccurate now. To this end, he found himself in the library, using a Bookworm to point out

books that he'd find most stimulating. After all, this was quite a specific research project, and he was willing to entertain wildly speculative books if they might give him ideas he hadn't considered yet, ideas he could put to the test. Right now though, he was to be disturbed before he could get that far.

"You know you really shouldn't trust those", said Ozzy, indicating to the Bookworm.

"So I've heard, but they have their purposes", replied Tom. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, actually"

"Then what brought you here?", asked Tom. "I could have been anywhere". He wondered if his bracelet told her where he was, even when he did not activate its Charm. That would be concerning, and would certainly be a good reason to not carry it with him.

"Your friend Lestrage said you were in the Library. Madame Redmond said you were in the History of Magic department, again"

"Hmm. Well, to what do I owe the disruption?" asked Tom, with a smile.

"Oh, simple enough. Quick question really. Ball. Whom are you taking?"

"Nobody yet. I set my most likely prospect up with my friend", said Tom.

"Marca Zelyonaya?", asked Ozzy.

"Yes"

"So who's she going with now?" furthered Ozzy, curious.

"Tiernan. Why the interest in fourth-year Ball partnerships?"

"Actually no special reason there when it comes to them. But I did want to ask, you're not taking Jana?"

"I haven't planned to, no", replied Tom.

"Why not, if I may ask?"

"She... likes me too much. If I took her to the Ball I'd never be rid of her, and I prefer her as a friend"

"It's not because of her being Muggle-born, then?", asked Ozzy, pointedly. "I expect it'd make things difficult for you with your Housemates if you did", she offered, to suggest that she might not condemn him for avoiding Jana as a date on those grounds.

"I associate with whomsoever I please", answered Tom, dodging the question slightly. "My Housemates have got quite used to that and would not challenge me", he concluded, half-truthfully. After all, taking Jana to the Ball would evoke quite some response, but nothing he couldn't quickly quell. However, it was a circumstance he'd rather avoid — not to mention the reason he had given already, that Jana may grow far too attached. Last year's Ball had been bad enough in that regard. Ozzy looked thoughtful, so Tom looked into her thoughts; as he did so, however, she spoke again:

"Strange question then: would you like to go to the Ball together? With me, I mean", she clarified.

"Why is that a strange question?", countered Tom. He could think of a number of possibilities, but it was of interest to him to know which it was in her mind.

"Well, I just mean we're a year apart, or a bit less if you take our birthdays into account, and different Houses, and Slytherins aren't exactly known for inter-House unity, but you seem a bit of an exception to that rule, especially of late, and—"

"I'm an exception to a lot of rules", observed Tom. "But aren't you snowed under with prospects from your own year and House, the famous Ozzy Fame?"

"I... wouldn't be left without a date, far from it, but... everyone's different with me now"

"Different?" asked Tom, with a raised eyebrow.

"After my return from the dead", said Ozzy. "I swear, I'm treated like a ghost half of the time. The Quidditch team are almost normal with me, but even that's only really when training Quidditch — I've been attending Ravenclaw training sessions, even though I'm not playing — or talking about it"

“Well, I daresay they’re confused. It took them a good while to get to grips with your death, and then back you came. And you missed out on nearly half the school year, which only heightens your alienation”

“Tell me about it”, sighed Ozzy. Her mind went back to her question, but she didn’t want to repeat the question directly; asking it once had been hard enough.

“As to your suggestion”, said Tom, letting her off the hook, “why me?”, he asked, more to buy himself a little more time than because he couldn’t pre-empt the answer she’d now give.

Sure enough, she replied as expected, with an expression of feeling at least somewhat more comfortable with him, as he treated her in a friendly but otherwise normal fashion. As she explained this, Tom reflected on her as a prospect. Pureblood, glamorized, universally recognised as brilliant, popularly considered attractive. Ravenclaw, sworn enemy of the Slytherin Quidditch team. Belinda at the very least would need pacifying with some promise of violence and some explanation as to why this was a good strategic move. He could give her these things, granted.

“Sure”, said Tom. “Let’s do that”.

Tom had figured that he could wear the same smart dress robes that he had worn last year, but when it came to the night in question, it turned out that he had grown more than he thought, and they now looked a touch silly on him. He could put an Engorgement Charm on them, of course, but then they’d grow in all directions, while he had grown rather more up than across.

“Those aren’t right”, observed Tiernan, in his much better-fitting robes, in the fourth-year boys’ dormitory.

“Yes, I can see that”, said Tom. “Where’s your date?”

“Still getting dressed, in the girls’ dormitory”, replied Tiernan. “Or at least, she hadn’t emerged when I was out there just a minute ago”

“Still getting dressed?” echoed Tom. “How long can it possibly take to put a dress on?”

Tiernan shrugged.

“Baffles me too”, he said, “but there we are”

“Well, let her know I want her, when you see her”, said Tom.

“You... what?”

“She’ll be able to sort this out; I know she knows all kinds of Charms for clothes adjustments”

“She hates everything”, offered Antonin, joining the conversation.

“Come again?” asked Tiernan.

“She finds fault with most clothes, and then corrects them so that they do not annoy her so much”

“Well, I don’t, but I’ll be glad of her doing the same with these” said Tom. “But I don’t pressingly want to wait out there looking like this, so Tiernan, if you could get her to come in here when she’s ready, that would be best”

Indeed, Marca fixed Tom’s robe proportions in about three seconds flat, and also Tiernan’s hair, before bidding the latter to escort her to the Great Hall.

“Coming?” Tiernan asked Tom; Antonin had already gone on ahead, having found the courage this year to attend despite once again missing out on asking Marca to the Ball, and once again not wanting to ask anybody else.

“Yes”, said Tom, “Though I’m meeting Ozzy up at Ravenclaw Tower first, so I’ll be leaving you partway”.

“You are already late”, observed Marca.

“She’ll cope”, said Tiernan. “She was the late Ozzy Fame for half the year, after all”

Tom had never been all the way to Ravenclaw Tower before, and now he found himself ascending its very many stairs for the first time. At the very top of the staircase he came to a door, whose only feature was a large bronze door-knocker in the form of the Ravenclaw eagle. He knocked it, and it spoke:

"He sent war, a revolution. You seek me, what am I?"

"I'm here for Ossapheme Fame", said Tom, and waited. Nothing. He knocked again.

"He sent war, a revolution. You seek me, what am I?"

Ah, it was a riddle. He glowered at it; due to the obvious play on words with his name, he had come to hate riddles. Well, the first part was clearly a reference to Grindelwald, whom Tom did indeed seek, but it was concerning that the door-knocked should know this. Still, the allusion was obvious enough that it would not be incriminating to answer:

"Gellert Grindelwald"

Still nothing. Then again, it had said *what*, not *who*.

"A revolutionary?", he essayed.

Not a word, not a movement. Well, on the bright side, someone else would surely be emerging soon, be it Ozzy or someone else. He contemplated using the Charm on his bracelet. Yes, after all, it'd be quite apparent to her why he was summoning her so. He reached into his pocket, and balls, it was in his other pocket, in his other robe. Down at the opposite end of the castle. He knocked again, for lack of anything immediately more promising to do.

"He sent war, a revolution. You seek me, what am I?"

This time the door then opened, before he had chance even to try another answer.

"Oh, it's you", said Sofia, "Sorry, I thought you were my date", she added, and moved to close the door.

"Wait, let me in", said Tom, and she paused accordingly, but kept the door closed mostly to.

"No, you have to wait there", she said. "You're here for Ozzy though, aren't you? I'll tell her you're here"

"Thanks", said Tom, contenting himself that the message would at least be conveyed. The door closed again with a gentle *thunk*. It looked like wood, probably oak, and he had not even tried blasting it apart. He looked down the spiral staircase that he had ascended, and considered that it'd be an uncomfortable fall if the door were Charmed to bounce his Spells back at him.

Tom turned back to the door as it opened, and this time it was Ozzy Fame who appeared, and stepped outside, letting the door fall closed behind her.

"Hello", she said, and offered her hand. Tom took it, and made a polite bow, and kissed it.

"Hello", he replied. "Shall we?"

"Yep, let's go" she smiled, dropping the pretence of formality.

"I'm curious", said Tom, as they headed down the stairs of Ravenclaw Tower, "How does that door-knocker work? Do you have a list of riddles and answers inside, then it gives you a random riddle, to prompt the answer? I imagine it doesn't really give actual solvable riddles?"

"It really gives actual solvable riddles", laughed Ozzy. "I gather it stumped you, then?"

"Well, I didn't get it before Sofia answered the door anyway", said Tom, somewhat defensively. After all, quite possibly he'd have got it with a few more tries.

"Did you get it in the end?"

"No, not yet", said Tom, growing more irked. "What was the answer?"

"I don't know; what was the riddle? It makes a new one every time someone gets the old one, so I won't have heard the one you got"

"Something about Grindelwald", said Tom, "He sent a war, a revolution, you seek me, what am I?"

"Ah right", said Ozzy. "A revolution, that could be just that, or it could be a clue, that something needs to be turned around. Always look out for instructions like revolve, turn, add, take away, et cetera... He sent a war, that could be about Grindelwald as you say, what's that backwards? Dwlad... Dlaw...led... nirg? I don't know, I'd have to write that one out and play with it..."

"How long does it usually take you to get into your own Common Room?" asked Tom; it was his turn to laugh now.

"Normally not too long", said Ozzy. "The easiest ones are usually the ones that have the answer hidden in the question, or are just logic puzzles. The worst ones are the ones that actually require knowledge of something too; then it's all very well if you know it, but if you don't, then it's a trip to the library, and by the time you get back, it's probably a different riddle. But you'll have learned something on the way, so it's not all bad."

"Spoken like a true Ravenclaw", said Tom. "So there's no cheat-sheet?"

"Spoken like a true Slytherin", said Ozzy. "And no, there isn't"

"Surely that means anyone of any House has equal chance of getting in, or nearly equal chance if we consider that Ravenclaws are more used to playing these word games?"

"Very occasionally someone from another House gets in", Ozzy admitted.

"What happens to them then? Mobbed by Ravenclaws and thrown down the stairs? You do seem to have a terrain advantage", he said, indicating to the large drop in the centre of the spiral staircase.

"No, we serve them tea in the First Atrium", said Ozzy. "It's tradition"

"I've never heard of this tradition", said Tom, looking in to her mind. She didn't seem to be lying, but it was difficult to tell. She had a mental image of such a circumstance, but it could easily have been fabricated, which would be equally natural if she were joking.

"I guess none of your friends have made it in, then", smiled Ozzy.

"Who has made it in? Anyone I'd know?", asked Tom.

"Carlotta Pinkstone got in a few times", said Ozzy, "and Healer Tegner's never had a problem whenever he's had to come over"

"With whom is Sofia Clarence going to the Ball?" asked Tom, as they neared the bottom of the staircase. "I was led to believe she was waiting for her date, which implies it's someone from another House, but nobody's passed us, and we're a touch on the late side"

"Emil Talbot", answered Ozzy, "Not someone who's ever got into our Common Room, I might add"

"I don't know him", said Tom. "Doesn't it bother you that anyone who's sufficiently clever can get into your Common Room?"

"Well, technically the same is true of all the Common Rooms, isn't it?" countered Ozzy. "You just have a greater illusion of security"

"Really?", said Tom. "How would you go about getting into our Common Room, then?"

"Well", thought Ozzy out loud, "We all know you live down in the Dungeons somewhere, and I know from briefly dating Sylvester Murdock that your Common Room door looks like a plain corridor wall, and that for security reasons there are no portraits or

statues nearby — he bragged about the cleverness of this, and that narrows it down a lot — and that it's accessed by a set password."

"Very helpful of him to compromise our security by bragging about it", observed Tom.

"Indeed, and I know from you, or at least can reasonably infer, that your password is indicated on a noticeboard in your Common Room, probably on a rotational basis"

"I don't think that latter part helps you, though"

"Maybe, probably not", said Ozzy, "but it's good practice to consider all known parts of a puzzle; you never know when a piece of information may come in handy"

"So what'd be your strategy in this case?", asked Tom.

"Probably use my feminine wiles to get a Slytherin boy to yield the password", she said with a smile.

Tom frowned; he'd made the same mistake as Abraxas had made back in summer; assuming security and paying too little attention to the high chance of betrayal by a trusted member of one's own in-crowd. He silently vowed to make sure to burn this weakness out of himself.

"Don't worry; I've no such ambition", she said, kissing him on the cheek as they neared the Great Hall.

When they got there, of course most of the school was already present. Much like last year, petals fell from the ceiling, disappearing shortly above the heads of everyone except for Hagrid, who made periodic futile attempts to waft them away.

Arriving to the Ball with Ozzy was very different than arriving last year with Marca; people stopped and stared before looking hastily away upon making eye contact. Furtive words were shared amongst the hubbub:

"Ozzy Fame's with that Tom Riddle"

"Look who's here"

"Isn't he the one who found her?"

"How long d'you reckon they'll last?"

A lot of unspoken thoughts were far less polite. Some smiled, and Ozzy greeted people as they went by. She was either unaware of the malice or ignored it; her own mind was a racing mass of the pairings and dynamics of the Hall.

"Drinks?" suggested Tom.

"Sure", consented Ozzy.

This year, there was no magical drinks fountain, possibly on account of last year's mishap. Instead, there bar of non- or low-alcoholic drinks down where the teachers' table would normally be, staffed by the Landlord of the Lonely Broomstick, a middle-aged Wizard with a bald head, a curly beard, and rosy cheeks. Tom gathered the school was paying, as the bartender didn't seem to be taking money.

Ozzy's mind went to the butterbeers.

"Two butterbeers please", said Tom.

"How do you know if that's what I want?", asked Ozzy

"Just intuition", said Tom. "Is it what you want?"

"Butterbeer will be great thanks, yes", she confirmed.

"Better late than never, Tom", said Tiernan, appearing to Tom's flank. "Ozzy", he added by way of greeting to the latter, in a friendly enough tone. "We were beginning to worry you'd kidnapped him", he added.

"That'll be me", she said, "Like a Siren, luring young Wizards away and then mercilessly torturing them with blow-by-blow accounts of Holyhead Harpies victories against their team"

"You're a Harpy supporter?" asked Tiernan.

"Of course, you?"

“Puddlemere United”, retorted Tiernan, indignantly but jovially enough.

“Ah, the only team in the British and Irish Quidditch League to fail to come up with an alliterative name”

“Call us rebels”, smiled Tiernan.

“Nah, we all know your team’s proper alliterative name is the Puddlemere Pi—”

“I’ll leave you two to talk Quidditch”, interrupted Tom, bowing out of the conversation.

“No no, come back” said Ozzy, “Lestrangle and I can discuss another time how his team lost to the Chudley Cannons, despite...”

“Later?” suggested Tiernan, as Tom made to leave again.

“Alright then, but you know it’s true”, chided Ozzy.

“Lost Marca already?” asked Tom of Tiernan, to change the subject.

“Yeah, she’s dancing with Antonin... somewhere” answered Tiernan, momentarily trying and failing to point her out, but clearly unconcerned.

While looking around for Marca, Tom couldn’t immediately see her either, but made eye contact with Jana, who mentioned this to Raymond, resulting in the two of them coming over.

“Looks like Ravenclaw dates are in fashion” said Jana, to Tom.

“Can’t be; I don’t have one” objected Tiernan.

“I’m sure you could have found yourself one”, said Ozzy, graciously enough, “so long as they weren’t scared off by your family name”

“Scared off by my family name?” echoed Tiernan, with a tone of annoyance Tom did not often hear. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh not like that”, said Ozzy, “Just, you know, intimidated”, she suggested, by way of a save.

Tiernan was about to reply, but was interrupted by the rather distracting event that was Rubeus Hagrid sneezing behind him.

“Sorry” said Hagrid, “Ruddy flowers” he added, trying unsuccessfully to waft them away.

“Here”, said Jana, producing her wand from her small shoulder-bag, and muttering a Conjurition Spell under her breath. Something pink shot out of her wand, expanding to cause all but Hagrid to jump back; it dropped to the ground between them, and remained stationary. “Sorry, didn’t mean for it to burst open like that... or for it to be pink... but it should keep the petals off at least, if you want it”, she said, handing the pink umbrella to Hagrid.

Hagrid looked utterly ridiculous, well, more ridiculous than usual, sporting a pink umbrella to keep the petals from falling into his face, but it clearly did the job and he seemed very pleased with it.

Everyone steered as well clear of Hagrid as possible over the course of the evening, who was a menace at the best of times seemed strangely more threatening with an umbrella, even though nobody else’s head was at that height to lose an eye on account of his wayward swings.

It was at least halfway through the evening before Ozzy parted from Tom to dance with someone else, a Ravenclaw boy whose name Tom did not know. He’d rather expected her to abandon him earlier than that, but it wasn’t like he had anything more important to do; tonight was just about going through the motions of the social game he was expected to play — much like Tiernan, and so many others, who would not actually have this as their first choice of how to spend an evening.

By the end of the night, Ozzy did seek out Tom again, kissing him goodnight, which he had foreseen, and giving him every chance to invite her somewhere else, which he had not considered and did not consider now. In the end he walked her back to her House, whereupon he opted to leave her with the throng of tired and in some cases slightly

inebriated Ravenclaws arguing about the new riddle. Not before she'd excised another last kiss from him, but without yet learning the answer to the infernal door-knob's new riddle:

"Talons of Talus tell us tall tales of Talos — how does the Ichor flow?"

Chapter Sixteen

Unpleasant Preparations

In the wake of Valentine's day, life returned soon enough to normal, or what passed for normal at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, or at least for most of its denizens.

In Tom's case, when he was not in lessons, duelling, Healer's Apprenticeship sessions, doing homework, coursework, or very occasionally eating and sleeping, he was scouring certain parts of the castle for any entrance to the tunnels that, according to the map, would lead to what must be the Chamber of Secrets.

This endeavour had yet to bring him success. He was working from memory, and so had an imperfect assessment of where that main shaft down lay. He tried re-checking in library books that contained information on the castle's various features and occasional additions or modifications over the centuries, but the only one with any meaningful degree of detail was merely about the rather mundane topic of the castle's sanitation facilities being updated in the time of Headmaster Black, so naturally the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets would not be anything to do with any of those pipe ducts and channels, since the Chamber pre-existed them by many centuries, meaning it must be accessed by some other secret door or passageway.

Others' obsessions were decidedly more prosaic. After the loss early in the year against Gryffindor, it was of course absolutely crucial that the Slytherin Quidditch team should triumph against their next opponents, Hufflepuff, to be in with any chances in the Quidditch Cup, and Walburga was no gentler a taskmaster as Captain than Violet Selwyn had been before her, and once again much of Slytherin House gave concessions to the Quidditch team to enable them to get the most of their training time available; doing their homework for them, handling errands such as the library run for them, making sure that no sleeping Quidditch player was disturbed unless on the Captain's orders, and so forth.

When the day of the match game, Selwyn's replacement Liam Wardgarren did a much better job as Keeper against Hufflepuff than he had against Gryffindor, something that clearly relieved many Slytherin spectators, no matter whether it was a result of him being more "broken in" by now or whether simply Gryffindor's Chasers had been more skilled and aggressive than Hufflepuff's.

Seth Halbert was no Jana Teires, and while naturally the pressure was very much on Belinda to perform, she clearly felt assured enough in her superiority over Halbert that she could go about her task without the kind of distraction that Tom had observed her to typically suffer when flying against Jana or Ozzy; indeed, by the end of the match it was the Slytherin side who came out victorious by a huge margin, as Belinda held the aloft the Snitch.

Returning to the castle with the cheering crowds, Tom found particular personal cause for a good mood also, as Brega had brought him mail, that from its familiar appearance promised to be — and indeed was — from the office of Gellert Grindelwald.

Inside the envelope was a postcard from Egypt, showing three pyramids, and the words "Wish you were here". Turning it over, bemused, the other side was blank. He unfolded the letter itself, and read:

Most Eminent Lord Voldemort,

Perhaps we overlooked a simpler way of getting you out; you will find enclosed with this letter a Portkey in the form of a postcard; this Portkey will activate to facilitate a meeting on Easter Sunday, the 13th, at 13:00h.

The Enemies of the Cause have bombarded this area with Disruption Jinxes. To minimize the effect of this, please ensure that at the appointed hour you are not holding the Portkey

in an area that already has a lot of magical disruption at your end, for example the British Ministry of Magic, Hogwarts Castle, or Azkaban Prison.

I can make no guarantee of being able to extract you from any of those places.

For the Greater Good,

Gellert Grindelwald

Tom smiled at the notion that he could possibly be engaging in this correspondence from Azkaban Prison; it was difficult enough getting letters to Grindelwald from the comfort and relative convenience of Hogwarts.

Well, it'd be simple enough to be out in or near Hogsmeade in the afternoon on Easter Sunday, but Tom would much rather have a more adult appearance. Last time he had cobbled together a semi-respectable look with his mask and cloak, but that had not been his first choice, and was assembled only out of need, what with the very short time constraints. Now, in contrast, he had time to prepare an appearance that would not only not show him to be a schoolchild, but also not require that he do business from behind a faceless mask.

No matter how much he considered various Transfigurative disguises, experimenting before a mirror in his dormitory's bathroom, Tom could not help but conclude that the only way he wasn't going to look like a teenager that had Hexed himself was by means of either an Aging Potion or a Polyjuice Potion.

In favour of the Aging Potion was that he would broadly maintain his own appearance, which could be the start of a good long working relationship with Grindelwald. On the other hand, this would reduce its effectiveness as also being a security countermeasure, if he was going to be recognizable as himself. Yet further, the history of the use of Aging Potions was fraught with disaster; there were many things that could go wrong, and the reversal of them was often quite haphazard. All in all, it seemed an unfavourable cost to worth analysis if he had a better option.

Polyjuice Potion as an option had its own problems; it took longer to brew than he had to brew, which meant he'd have to procure some ready-made, the only obvious sources of which was Jana's personal supply either with her, or her back-up supply which Tom was aware of being kept in the Hospital Wing. Not pressingly wanting to have to go through the whole rigmarole of breaking into the Hospital Wing again unnecessarily, he resolved to approach Jana somewhat directly on the topic.

After a fierce evening at the Duelling Club, Tom dismissed his entourage of Slytherins and accosted Jana alone, after separating her from Valerie, by means of calling Jana back as everyone left the Great Hall; of course she motioned for Valerie to go on without her, and with the sea of duellists going the other way, it was easy for Valerie to accept this suggestion.

"What's up?" asked Jana, as they themselves now left the Hall, and Tom endeavoured to pace them such that they would neither catch up with the others, nor be caught up by Merrythought and Tegner, who had lingered talking in the Great Hall.

"Jana, I need Polyjuice Potion; can you spare me some?"

"Why?", asked Jana with a note of concern. "I mean, in principle I could, but I really shouldn't; it's a dangerous potion... what do you need it for?"

"Nothing to do with school stuff", Tom reassured her, "Nothing that'll possibly get you into trouble"

"What out-of-school stuff could you possibly need it for?" asked Jana, now more confused than skeptical.

"I correspond with various Witches and Wizards - call it a degree of extra-curricular education; I think we both know that our lessons here don't exactly push me in most subjects - but now I need to meet with one of them, and it'd be better for my safety and security if I go as a grown-up"

"Oh alright, that makes sense" said Jana, with a furrowed brow. "Yes, important to be safe, especially with the war on, and what happened at the start of term. But be careful though, and do you have a donor of body-bits? Because I don't think most people would take kindly to being impersonated"

"I do", Tom assured her without actually giving any name to back it up, "I just need the potion itself, and I need it sooner than I can make it, since it takes forever, what with the—"

"—21 days for the lacewing flies, yes, believe me, it'd be a bugger to be caught out in a pinch"

"Well, I am", said Tom. "Caught out in a pinch, that is. Will you help me?"

Putting it this way seemed certain to get the needed result.

"I will" answered Jana, not having entirely put aside her concerns, but at least acquiescent for the moment. "How much do you need?"

"A few hours' worth at the very most, and in all likelihood very much less"

"So, if I give you... quarter of a bottle the size of my normal flask, you'll be fine? I don't mean to be stingy, but if you don't need more, then there's no reason to waste it, and it's pretty valuable to me, you know"

"How long would that give me?", asked Tom.

"Well, my day-flask is good for a little over sixteen hours, so quarter of that would be good for four hours"

"That'll be plenty, and very sincerely appreciated", said Tom.

"When do you need it?"

"I need it for Easter weekend, so any time between now and then is fine; of course the sooner I have it in hand, the sooner I can rest easy that it's taken care of"

"You can come with me and get it now, if you want", said Jana.

"That'd be perfect", agreed Tom.

Up on the seventh floor, at the entrance to Gryffindor Tower that could be found there behind a painting, Jana bade Tom wait, something he readily consented to do as the Common Room would of course now be full of Gryffindors, not like the last time he had been here with Jana, when everyone had been down in the Great Hall.

He had not been pacing long in the corridor by the time Jana re-appeared clutching a small flask of syrupy liquid.

"There should be plenty here for four hours", she said. "Remember, you need to take it every hour; you don't want to accidentally revert. You can overlap it a little to be on the safe side; you can't overdose, but when you've tasted it, you'll understand why nobody takes it more than necessary"

Tom opened the flask, and smelled it. He jerked his head back, and closed the stopper.

"How do you drink this stuff?" he asked, his nose wrinkled in disgust.

"Quickly", replied Jana. "Also, make sure you change into size-appropriate clothes before you take it; you don't want to... Well, you've seen what happens otherwise", she grimaced.

"Indeed", said Tom. "Well, thank you", he said, raising the flask as though in a toast, and turning to leave.

"And Tom?" called Jana after him. He paused to look back at her. "Do be careful", she added.

"I will", affirmed Tom with a smile. "Goodnight, Jana"

The obvious place to get a bit of a grown-up who wasn't a teacher was, of course, Hogsmeade village, and Tom headed out there as soon as most of the school had emptied for the Easter holiday. There were shopkeepers and the like, and certainly some who had long enough hair to surely find some of theirs about the place; he'd just need to be subtle about it. Of course, only a Wizard's hair would do; Lord Voldemort could hardly be a Witch.

His first port-of-call was the Owl Office, usually presided over by a Wizard with quite long hair; indeed he was there today, but as Tom approached the counter he noted that there was no hair to be found within easy reach anywhere but on the Wizard's head, and his own abilities did not extend so far as plucking hair from someone's head, while they are conscious, without them noticing. He abandoned that option, but a back-up plan did occur to him in the process:

If all else failed him, he could get Brega to snatch some Wizard's hair. That would be irksome, as Brega might then be recognised afterwards and he'd rather not be associated with an owl who attacked a local Wizard, but if needs must, then that was a way of getting what he needed. And when it came down to it, he would always err on the side of getting what he needed, no matter what it necessitated doing to achieve it.

Wandering up the main street, he passed by the local teashop and bookshop, each staffed by a Witch. He peered through the window of the apothecary, but here was a short-haired Wizard. He decided however to chance it, as one never knew when a hair might fall, all the same.

"Morning", the Wizard greeted him, with a smile.

"Good morning", said Tom, "I wonder if you can help me, I'm looking for Bulbiferous Toothwort" - an ingredient Tom knew to be fairly uncommon. Hopefully they wouldn't have it here, but if they did, he'd still be able to say the price was beyond his means, and dodge the purchase that way.

"Bulbiferous Toothwort?", echoed the Wizard. "Sorry, we don't keep that in stock here. I can get it mailed in for you though, if you like"

"How long will that take?" asked Tom, his eyes scanning the countertop as he ran a hand along it casually, as though absent-mindedly. There was no hair to be found.

"Well, I'll have to send for it, then there's usually a two-day turn around, then I've got to get it back, and then there's Easter this weekend, so... a little under a week, all told, perhaps"

"I'm afraid that's no good to me", replied Tom. "Thanks anyway", he said, turning to leave.

"Your only other option", continued the shopkeeper, "Is to try Professor Slughorn or Healer Tegner if they're still up at the castle - they both keep their own stocks - but I wouldn't count on them having Bulbiferous Toothwort, or even on them still being up at Hogwarts".

"Thanks" replied Tom, simply. "Bye"

Carrying on up the road, Tom noted a side-street heading up a hill. At the top of that lane was another pub, less popular than the Lonely Broomstick, but he might as well check it out while he was at this end of the village, and then swing by the Lonely Broomstick on the way back if necessary.

Arriving at the door and pushing it open, some bells rang to announce his presence. There seemed to be nobody immediately about, though, so he walked in and looked around for any sign of life, or at least of hair.

Both greeted him soon enough, as a long-haired Wizard tramped up some stairs from a lower level.

"What do you want?"

"A drink?" suggested Tom. "This is the Hog's Head pub, isn't it?" he asked, momentarily wondering if he had walked through the wrong door; that would explain the

lack of other customers and, come to think of it, the lack of drinks behind what he had taken to be the bar.

“Yeah”, said the Wizard. “What do you want to drink?”

Tom glanced behind the bar for inspiration, but did not find it inspiring.

“You don’t seem to have a wide variety of drinks available here”, commented Tom, walking up to the bar now, his eyes scanning for any sign of hair or similar. The place was filthy, but the only hair he could see anywhere was a few wispy strands on a seat cushion, that were not only the wrong colour — they were white, and this Wizard’s hair was brown — but also down at that level, they were more likely some pet’s hair, and thus best avoided.

“I don’t keep stuff out for people to pinch”, said the Wizard, as though the picture-postcard village of Hogsmeade might actually be a den of thieves of the kind more readily found back in Whitechapel.

“Right”, said Tom uncertainly. “Well, if you have some kind of red wine, I’ll take one of those while I wait for my friend to meet me”

“Red wine? How old are you?”

“How old do you think I am?”, asked Tom with a smile. He felt sure he could get what he needed if he could just get this grumpy barkeep to relax a little, and jovial conversation seemed a possible approach to that, and safer than risking trying to Obliviate him while he was paying full attention and would surely be alerted by him drawing his wand.

“Old enough to handle a small glass” said the Wizard grudgingly, looking under the bar now. Tom’s hand went to his wand, but the Wizard re-emerged too quickly for him to take it out and make use of it.

“How much?” asked Tom amiably, hoping that he looked plausibly like he might have been reaching for his money, and not his wand. Judging from the Wizard’s thoughts, it was clear that he was entertaining both possibilities now.

“You’ll not be using your wand to pay, laddy, no matter how good at Conjunction you think you are”, he advised. “Three Knuts of real bronze, a small red”

“Of course”, said Tom with a smile, patting his various pockets as though he’d merely been unsure which one he’d put his money in. As he counted out three Knuts, the bartender put a dusty cardboard box half-filled with bottles on the bar, sending up a fair amount of the dust as he did so.

“Let’s see, there should be one I’ve... Achoo! Opened already, yes, here we are”

Tom’s nose wrinkled in disgust on account of the unimpeded sneeze at such close quarters, made worse when he now noted the foul Wizard had sneezed over his — Tom’s — hand. Ah, but mucous could be used for Polyjuice Potion. Tom felt conflicted and pained by this prospect, but when it came down to it, he didn’t have a better option.

“You know what, I think I’ll leave it” said Tom coldly, and turned to leave, fighting the urge to clean his hand, and fighting the urge to unleash his fury on the loathsome excuse for a Wizard that had befouled it.

“Agh, get out of here, time-wasting pucker”

This was not an instruction that Tom needed repeating, and he was very soon out of the door. He walked quickly down the approach, to turn the corner as soon as possible, such that he might deal with this mess on his hand usefully but without arousing suspicion.

As soon as he had the offending slime coaxed into the small glass tube he had intended to use for storing hair, he cleaned his hand with three different Charms, and resisted the inclination to set it on fire. He briefly contemplated severing it and growing it back, but realized he didn’t actually know how to do that latter, and merely expected it to be not only possible but also simple enough to be well within the realms of basic Healer Magic.

For now, he contented himself with walking quickly back to Hogwarts, where he would at least shower, bathe, and shower again.

Chapter Seventeen

Gellert Grindelwald

Through Easter holiday week, Tom impatiently awaited Sunday, and the meeting that it would surely bring. Not that he neglected his search for the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, but that was admittedly getting a little tedious without any signs of progress or further clues, and he was running out of ideas as to how to check for hidden doorways.

Thus, he would take breaks from that and turn to his school coursework, before restlessly turning back to his increasingly detailed investigation of certain parts of Hogwarts Castle.

Distractions abounded also in the form of social invitations to dodge; Tom did not mind the company of Antonin and Marca, or of Jana, or even some of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs remaining at the castle over Easter, but entertaining the overtures of friends meant tolerating friends-of-friends (or at least, Housemates who might consider themselves such) who were sometimes, well, intolerable.

Owing to the tendency of those remaining at Hogwarts to band together, Jana would rarely be seen in the Great Hall without Hagrid around to bring any conversation down to the level of Trolls, and while there were a good number of perfectly tolerable Ravenclaws in the castle, Tom found himself resisting the urge to murder the little Mudblood Warren, not to mention that Hornby girl who constantly wound her up, making her more irritating than ever. Perhaps the only thing worse than her being in a bad mood, was her being a good mood; she had such a dreadful laugh that there were rumours amongst second-years that she was actually part Banshee.

Myrtle Warren could kill any pleasant or productive mood at twenty paces, and was exactly the sort of reason her kind should not be allowed in this place. Weaver, at least, knew when he was not welcome and got on with things in his own little way, which Tom could respect, despite the fact that all things being equally he'd still love to transfer him to another House.

In an ideal world, of course, Mudbloods would be examined and judged, before being either sent to a separate school for Mudbloods, or killed, according to merit; no need to leave in existence that kind of cancer of the Wizarding world.

To Tom's knowledge, Grindelwald wasn't yet planning any sort of extermination as an endgame, but any plan could be improved upon in time, naturally. For now, Tom was content that Grindelwald would at least put Muggles in their place, and help shape a society that allowed Witches and Wizards to go about their business without interference from such.

As such, when Sunday came along, it was with a glad heart that Tom readied for his meeting with the great Dark Wizard. He borrowed some larger robes from an older Slytherin who would not miss them due to being away for Easter like most of the House, and folded up his chameleon cloak to wear it like an invisible scarf; in such a fashion, he'd have it if he needed it, but he could hardly set off wearing it in the middle of the day without attracting far more attention than he would without it; in broad daylight, he'd be quite visible in it.

What he did do, however, when one o'clock approached, was complete the Polyjuice Potion by adding his disgusting sample of the Hog's Head barman, and drink it in the castle, before setting out. This way, he could attend to some of the necessary grooming, using the mirrors and such in the castle. On the flip side, this meant he had to walk through Hogwarts looking like a tidied-up version of the Wizard whose appearance he was borrowing, but there were not too many people in the castle, and if seen, he resolved simply to nod politely by way of greeting, and continue on his way, and hope they assumed he had a valid reason for being there. If not, well, he could always Curse any botherer who

tried to stop him, and it would be the barman who would be blamed for it. Better to avoid it if possible, of course, since an investigation could be irksome.

Noting that while his appearance wasn't going to turn any heads in a positive way even after the efforts he'd made, but that time was nevertheless growing short, Tom made his departure from the castle.

Grindelwald had said to not be in Hogwarts (or the Ministry of Magic, or Azkaban, the latter of which Tom agreed would be an especially good place for him to avoid), but Tom didn't know how far out he'd need to be; whether outside the door would suffice, or whether crossing the boundary of the Anti-Apparition Ward would be in order, or some other distinction. Erring on the side of caution, as he didn't know how far into the Forbidden Forest the Anti-Apparition Ward extended, he strode towards Hogsmeade, since he knew that by the point of Hogsmeade Bridge, at least, he'd be beyond the Anti-Apparition Wards.

Checking the time when he got there, he had a few minutes remaining to loiter, ideally unseen, but also ideally without attracting suspicion if seen, so rather than use the chameleon cloak, he took a detour down the grassy slope towards the river that ran below. There, he took the postcard-Portkey out of his pocket, held it in his hand, and waited. He felt slightly uneasy now; he wasn't sure whether it was doubt that the Portkey would work, or whether it was because if it did, then he was about to face the most feared Dark Wizard of the world, whom he planned to deceive and manipulate, and that there were many things that could go badly. But there was no time for concerning himself with that now, as the Portkey activated.

*

The grassy bank span away, and Tom was hit by a blast of heat. Momentarily unsure which way up the room was, he landed triumphantly on his feet with more stability than he expected. The room felt like an oven though; this was not a good place to be. He turned around, squinting as he looked for an exit, and saw the unmistakable figure of Gellert Grindelwald, who did not look at all troubled to be in the same blazing heat.

Upon seeing Tom, however, his face contorted immediately to a furious mixture of surprise and disgust, quickly followed by colder hatred.

"You!" he spat, and flashed his wand in Tom's direction - the Spell caught Tom straight in the chest, knocking him into a crumpled heap at the edge of the room, his head cracking painfully into the wall.

Tom felt sick, and also disoriented. He struggled to get his eyes into focus, and also to not throw up. The wall had moved. No, he had moved, he had been Stunned.

Definitely his worst duel ever.

He put his hands to his face to feel whether the Polyjuice Potion was still in effect; it was.

"What are you doing here?", asked a stern voice. Tom remembered he was not alone, and turned towards the voice, clambering to get back up off the floor as he did so. He came face to face with a lot of teeth in a reptilian mouth.

"*Who are you and what am I doing here?*" demanded Tom, stumbling backwards away from it in surprise. As he did so, he saw the snake had a lot of dark hair, which further confused him. Only it wasn't a snake, it was a crocodile. With a black lion's mane feet to match. It was a black lion with a crocodile's face? And truly horrifying breath. Tom backed away a little further.

"Well, I must say, you have surprised me. Congratulations", said the voice, sharply. It didn't come from the... thing, but from the Wizard behind it. Gellert Grindelwald stood there, wand in hand. Tom reached for his own, and the sick feeling returned as he couldn't find it.

"Where's my wand?" he demanded.

"Oh, are you looking for this?" replied Grindelwald, patting the wand that was stuck through the belt of his tunic-like robes. Tom saw that it was his. He snatched it back with his mind, but the wand only got as far as clattering to the floor before Grindelwald pinned it in place with a swish of his own wand, and summoned it back to his spare hand.

"I think I shall keep this for the moment. A new wand, I see", he said, appraising it. "And new abilities", he added with a nod to Tom. "Wandless magic, and was that... surely not Parseltongue, that I heard? Not that Parseltongue would do you much good here, not with... Ah yes, introductions are in order. How rude of me. This is Falohya. She is going to eat you if you fail to quickly explain why I should keep you alive".

Tom's anger would have to wait a little longer, as he had no useful way to express it without his wand; not against a powerful Sorcerer such as this, in any case. But anger gave way to confusion; why was he receiving such a poor welcome? Grindelwald was talking as though they had met already. Was Grindelwald expecting someone else? Was this a case of mistaken identity?

"Who do you think I am?", asked Tom.

"I think you're an idiot who will have to present something rather good very quickly indeed if he wants to leave here alive", returned Grindelwald.

"No, really", said Tom, "Who? I think you're mistaking me for someone, which is quite understandable if you are, since this isn't my body, I'm just using it for this meeting"

Grindelwald's mind showed a flash of images relating to a Wizard that at least bore a strong resemblance to Tom's current appearance; the figure in Grindelwald's mind was much younger and definitely better groomed.

"You are possessing this body? THIS body?" asked Grindelwald, raising his wand unnecessarily to point at him; Tom rather wished he wouldn't.

"After a fashion. I am Lord Voldemort, and I am using Polyjuice Potion to conceal my identity for my security, and by happenstance it would appear that this appearance is one that disturbs you. But I am not my appearance. Now that we have cleared up that misunderstanding, it would be good to return my wand to me", he concluded, now speaking with a tone of aggression perhaps a little bold for his currently wandless condition, "as I am your invited guest, not to mention a powerful ally not lightly cast aside. Do not make the mistake of thinking you can take by force the advantages I came to offer you. Furthermore, if I am not safely back to my own secret place by the first light of morning, machinations will already be set against you in my absence, to turn my offered advantage to your foes instead"

"You would threaten me so, you who professed to share my great goal?"

"It would pain me more than you can know, for these weapons to fall into our shared enemies' hands", said Tom. "However, there is nothing worse than death, so of course I had to protect myself against any threat you might make".

It was entirely a bluff, of course, as Tom had made no such arrangements, and furthermore the best that he could offer Grindelwald, such as selling out some of his enemies at Hogwarts, was not something he could offer to them in turn.

Gellert Grindelwald did not reply immediately, and Tom could tell he was going through the same mental race as Tom had gone through back in the forest with Jana, when needing to ascertain who she was. Unlike Jana, Tom wasn't babbling and pouring out information, and Grindelwald's mind went to this other Wizard's identity instead, but quickly became more scattered, and mixed with Tom's own thoughts, a moment later and Tom could not find any thoughts belonging to Gellert Grindelwald; the great Wizard had been caught off-guard initially (much as Tom himself had been), but now had caught up with himself and was paying more attention to Occlumency.

"I'm going to return your wand", said Grindelwald measuredly, "But when I do that, you're going to cast a Patronus Charm so that I can see it. Do not try to do anything else, or I will kill you. Clear?"

"Clear", said Tom, to get his wand back. He'd concern himself with the problem of casting his first ever Patronus once he had his wand. One problem at a time.

Grindelwald took Tom's wand out from his belt, and tossed it over to him. In catching it, Tom moved a little closer to the multi-creature monstrosity between them, and the thing's head moved slightly; it had been motionless for since he backed off from it.

"The problem is", said Tom, ready to defend himself as necessary now, "I've never cast a Patronus in my life. I don't have a Patronus"

Grindelwald looked stony-faced, and did not attack immediately.

"Me neither", he said, breaking into a slight laugh. "Pity, if you could have shown me any other Patronus, you would be in the clear. As it is, however..."

"Here", said Tom, moving his non-wand hand in an open gesture to avoid it being perceived as a threat. He slowly produced the small flask from his pocket. "Polyjuice Potion. You can try it. I warn you though, you don't want to know part of this Wizard went into it"

He sent it slowly, magically, over to the Wizarding Commander of a sizeable portion of the world. The latter, for his part, took the flask but did not open it. Instead, he flicked his wand, and a man appeared to the side of him, dressed in the robes of the region. Grindelwald spoke to him, and gave him the flask. The newly appeared man, be he Summoned, Conjured, or however he had appeared, took a swig of the potion, and quickly took on a slightly scruffier version of the appearance Tom was currently sporting. Satisfied, Grindelwald dismissed the man, who now left through a doorway some distance behind his commander.

"A strange choice of disguise, but I believe you", declared Grindelwald.

"Good" said Tom. "Now we can make progress, I hope".

"Well then. Offer your gifts, Lord Voldemort", said Grindelwald with a smile, and an open gesture.

This was not quite the negotiating position Tom had hoped for. He had rather expected such a powerful person to meet him with a small army of guards and advisors, any one of whom could give away secrets with their thoughts. And here he was, Gellert Grindelwald alone, giving him nothing, a walking Transfiguration accident of a pet, and the nearest other minds were... all around him; there were at least six others in the room, maybe more! Invisible, by whatever means. He had just not reached out with his mind to find them, until now. The man Grindelwald had had taste the potion was surely one of these too, merely unveiled when it became necessary that he be made visible. He dared not look in their directions, lest he give away this new knowledge of their presence, but he smiled.

"I know what it is you seek more than anything else", began Tom. Grindelwald's mind gave nothing, but those around offered a variety of suggestions: the Deathly Hallows, immortality, total dominion over the world. A Wizard after Tom's own heart.

"And I know how you expect to attain your goals", he continued. The guards were less helpful this time; their minds went chiefly to various quasi-military operations currently ongoing.

"What if I were to tell you there is a masterstroke, a key advantage that can be yours for the claiming, and the fools are trying to keep it safe in Britain's Hogwarts Castle?", he offered. The minds went to various places; the Hogwarts Founders themselves, the Philosopher's Stone, the Library, Dippet, and Dumbledore.

"I would ask you which you think it is", said Grindelwald. "There are many places in the world with many secrets, and that school has an ample share of them"

“It’s true there are a good number of things to be gained there”, said Tom. “As just one example, why do you suppose Armando Dippet is over three hundred years old, without looking a day over a hundred and two?”

“He is supplied with the Elixir of Life by his more talented friend, Nicholas Flamel, who in turn enjoys the protection of his more talented friend—” replied Grindelwald, who seemed to think twice about identifying the more yet talented friend. At least two of Grindelwald’s invisible guards thought of Dumbledore. Another thought of Leonard Spencer-Moon, who did at the very least seem a more imposing Minister for Magic than his predecessor.

“What would you give for access to those people?”, asked Tom.

“What manner of access?”, returned Grindelwald.

“What would you want of them?”, asked Tom in turn.

“Are you here to treat with me on their behalf?”, suggested Grindelwald.

“No”, said Tom, putting an end to the cascade of unanswered questions. “I am here to offer you the most valuable resource on this earth: information. In return I ask only a little of the same”

“This is a pretty policy indeed, but it has not escaped my notice, Lord Voldemort, that so far you have promised much and given nothing. Now would be the time for you to present your first honest token of goodwill”, said Grindelwald in a pleasant tone that no doubt belied his true sentiment.

Tom had prepared for such a challenge, and had a ready reply. It was something of a gamble, but if it worked, it would pay dividends.

“You’re here in Egypt looking for lost information to reveal ancient powers, and the keys to mastery over life and death itself”

“Obviously”

“I already have it”, said Tom.

“Tell me more”

“I can show you”, Tom offered, taking out the pyramid stone that he had brought with him for exactly this purpose. This time he offered it to Grindelwald directly, closing the gap between them. The crocodile-lion-thing took a few paces nearer, and stopped again.

Grindelwald took the stone in his hand, and turned it, his eyes roving over the carvings.

“Slytherin”, he read aloud. Evidently he had no need of a Pervodal Glass. This was hardly surprising now that Tom thought about it, for a Wizard of Austrian-Hungarian origins who was educated at Durmstrang before spending some time in Britain, who now had a headquarters in Bavaria and had spent the last however long here in Egypt, and before that, Yugoslavia. If anyone could be expected to not be baffled by a language barrier, it was Gellert Grindelwald.

“Salazar Slytherin, how came you by this?”

“It’s mine”, said Tom, simply. Grindelwald frowned.

“Parseltongue, when you arrived here”, he said. “I think, whoever you are, you are Slytherin’s heir, and this does indeed make you of interest to me”

Tom endeavoured to not react to this proclamation; it was an idea that of course Tom had entertained previously, but somehow it sounded a lot more credible when the world’s most renowned Dark Wizard simply announced it as though a fact.

“There’s a side missing” said Grindelwald, as he continued to examine the stone. “Did you think I would not notice?” He was holding the pyramid upside down now, and tapped its base with his wand. More glowing writing appeared, but not hieroglyphs this time, it was some more script-like form of writing that Tom nevertheless could not read. Whether or not Grindelwald could was not clear, from the Wizard’s response.

“Well, I’m most glad to see that you did notice”, said Tom. “It shows it’s not wasted on you. You’re not the only one who has knowledge to guard, Grindelwald”

Grindelwald glanced up at Tom, upon being addressed by name. He looked back at the stone.

“And this”, he said, handing the stone back to him and indicating part of the hieroglyphs, “perfect safety, the King safe inside the stone, is it? What is this, did Salazar Slytherin make a Horcrux, or perhaps his father before him? I am not interested in anything so reckless; I have my purer goals, as you should know”

“I don’t doubt your goals”, said Tom, wondering what a Horcrux was. From Grindelwald’s mind, of which Tom got a brief insight while he was momentarily distracted, it seemed to be about putting something in something else, but then, most forms of magic were, when it came down to it, about putting something in something else.

“And I don’t doubt your offerings”, said Grindelwald, “and your potential to offer much more. I will arrange for you to be transferred Nurmengard, where what you have to offer can be explored in much greater depth”

“I don’t think so”, laughed Tom.

“No?” replied Grindelwald, taking a step back, the better to use his wand if necessary. His guards did not miss this cue, and also became much readier for an attack.

Tom considered he had overstayed his welcome at this point, and hoped like Hell the Portkey was good for a return journey, and also that it was still in his pocket. He reached for it with his free hand, ready with his wand in his other hand to block any Curse that might come his way. As he did so, Grindelwald’s expression shifted in an instant of understanding, and he flicked his wand violently at Tom, uttering something that Tom quite hear as the Portkey activated; he felt the Curse hit his body all the same as he failed to block it, but the Portkey was already whirling him away into a dizzy vortex of nauseating disorientation.

Chapter Eighteen

Questions and Answers

When Tom caught up with his stomach, he found himself once again on unsteady legs, still disoriented, and this time he stumbled onto all fours, due to the unevenness of the ground as much as the momentum of his arrival and his unsteady state of mind owing to the sickening experience of the journey. He didn't stop there even a second, though; dropping the postcard, he Disapparated and re-Apparated perhaps twenty feet away, his wand levelled at the spot where he had arrived. His hand was trembling slightly, as though he were greatly weakened in some fashion.

It was dark. Why was it dark? It should be the middle of the afternoon. Tom felt confused, as though in a dream that didn't quite make sense. Perhaps he was dreaming. Perhaps the Portkey's action had been disrupted, resulting in him arriving hours later than he started. Resolving this would have to wait though, as right now the agents of Grindelwald might arrive to join him at any second.

Now seemed like a great time to put further distance between himself and his arrival point, or rather, less traceable distance. But where to go? He could not Apparate into the castle, and he could walk back into Hogwarts yet looking like this either. And if he Apparated somewhere far away to bide some time, he'd be wary of reappearing in Hogsmeade while Grindelwald's agents might still be on the lookout, not to mention how many rules he would be breaking if he were found out.

Opting for the lesser of many evils, Tom walked through what must be the borders of the Anti-Apparition Wards, and headed on foot into the Forbidden Forest, to wait for the Polyjuice Potion to wear off.

There were worse ways to spend an evening, he thought to himself, when his brisk retreat had settled into a more casual stroll, even if still a somewhat cautious one, given that it'd be very embarrassing to elude Gellert Grindelwald only to be bested by some lowly creature of the night in his own back garden.

Eventually, his flesh took on that unpleasant creeping feeling again; he put his hand to his face to feel whether the Polyjuice effect was completely gone, just in time to feel his beard recede under his fingertips, and his long hair pull short and become cleaner. His head seemed much lighter without it, and he felt somewhat as if he had lost a hat.

All in all, definitely a lot more manageable than the last Polyjuice reversal he had witnessed in this forest, as the worst he had to show for it was distinctly oversized robes.

He did face one small problem, however: he needed to get back into the castle despite having lost his chameleon cloak somewhere in Egypt, probably when he was first Stunned by Grindelwald upon arrival, and despite the fact he got out of the castle through the front door, which would now be locked, and now he was down here without any obvious way up.

Accio Broom, he essayed. It had worked for Ozzy, after all. He waited, and soon gave up. Perhaps she had had specific brooms in mind; knew somewhere that brooms would be stored and could be summoned from a distance.

There were those winged things, Thestrals, in the forest somewhere, and he could hitch a lift by means of the Imperius Curse, but that would require finding such a beast. A skinny black flying horse in the black forest in the black night. No, that was probably not going to be his best bet.

He thought back to the map of unknown-to-others tunnels and chambers beneath the Hogwarts Dungeons, and reflected on how really, some extra tunnels were in order: at the very least, one out into the Forbidden Forest, and one into Hogsmeade would be ideal. If that were ever to become a reality, though, it was almost certain that magically tunnelling out of a castle would be a lot easier than magically tunnelling into it. After all, castles were

broadly built to keep people out, not to keep people in, and Hogwarts was, notwithstanding all its rules against student wanderings, no exception.

Of course he could summon Ozzy, if the Charm bracelet would even wake her, but that would then need some explaining, or else if he wanted to Obliviate all memory of it from her, he'd need to actually accompany her back to bed, and Obliviate her there, which did not seem much more practical than his other ideas so far.

Eventually he settled for a much less exciting approach, and simply walked over to Broom Shed to borrow a broom to get him inside, and just hope that nobody looked. It was a risk to take, and the trip across the open expanse between the castle and the forest had most certainly never seemed so long, but he got there without incident, and soon he was landing in ramparts on a rickety old Comet 140, which he then pushed back off in the general direction of the Broom Shed.

It glided neatly for a short distance, before veering off out of sight and into the side of the castle; Tom winced at the distant sound of breaking glass; evidently it had found a window. Oh well, it was nothing to do with him anymore. Maybe they'd learn to lock the Broom Shed more securely one day, who knew. For now, Tom yawned, and headed in through and upstairs door, and began the long descent to Slytherin House.

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Lessons the next day were all but a blur for Tom, as he at most went through the motions of participation, doing mostly the bare minimum while focussing on his own curriculum, not only the hints he had acquired from Grindelwald directly, but also the peripheral lessons learned: to have more ways of being invisible and more ways of flying, at the very least.

Invisibility Cloaks, true ones, were rare and expensive, and Invisibility Potions were bulky and inconvenient. He now learned there was a Charm for it too. Why had nobody told him this before? In any case, he resolved to perfect the practice of the Disillusionment Charm, as it was called, which promised to save him a lot of trouble, once mastered. But that certainly wasn't the only thing he wanted to learn.

"Marca", said Tom, as they sat in a quiet corner of the Common Room, "I wonder, do you know what a Horcrux is?"

"I do not", said Marca, and looked at him expectantly.

"Nor do I" replied Tom, upon realizing she didn't know he didn't know either. "It has to do with immortality, and it's something even a reckless Wizard considers reckless. That's all I know"

"Well", observed Marca, "If even a reckless Wizard considers it reckless, then it is probably not a safe thing, in any case".

"No indeed, I seriously doubt it is a safe thing. But still, I'd rather know what it is; it irks me, to know of something that might lead to immortality, without knowing what exactly, or how. Even if I don't use the unsafe thing, it might at least give me ideas, ideas I can modify and make useable"

"I expect that if anyone will do such things, you are a good candidate for success", affirmed Marca. "However, as for what a Horcrux is, I cannot help. Have you asked—"

"No, I've asked only you. I'd rather know a little more before I go asking Healer Tegner or any of the teachers; I presume that's what you were going to ask?"

"Yes", confirmed Marca. "What harm can come of asking?"

"Well, I wouldn't like to have to discuss where I heard about it", said Tom, "And also, without knowing more about it, I wouldn't know which teacher to ask, making Tegner the only possible point of enquiry anyway"

"And the Library?"

"I wouldn't know where to begin, and I can hardly ask Madam Redmond without knowing at least enough about it to have a plausible reason as to why I'm asking"

“Ask a ghost? They might know something about immortality”

“They’re dead”, countered Tom. “They’re just shades of the people they used to be. They clearly know nothing of immortality”

“I have no further suggestions”, concluded Marca.

“I, on the other hand, have another question, though it’s something I’ll at least pass by Tiernan as well... What do you make of this?”

He placed the pyramid stone on the table, with the flowing lettering of the foreign script facing her. He handed her the Perevodol Glass.

“*Pesknauka*”, she read aloud. Obviously, the Perevodol Glass would translate into a semblance of Russian for her, not a semblance of English as it did for Tom. “It is about Geomancy, is it not?” she asked.

“You tell me”, said Tom.

“Well this” - she indicated - “is sand wisdom, sandlore perhaps one could say, the science of sand, maybe”.

“Yes, I got that”, said Tom. And the other one, I get “Sandstrike”

“A credible translation”, agreed Marca.

“What’s it about?”, asked Tom.

“It is Geomancy, and it is largely connected with Arithmancy. Connected with, or connected to?”

“Either will do”, said Tom, “But what exactly is it and what does it do?”

“It is the understanding of structures and spaces, the arrangement of patterns and shapes, the making of impossible things possible - Hogwarts Castle has many such Spells built into its walls”

“Maybe that’s how I beat the Anti-Apparition Wards, you mean?” wondered Tom aloud.

“Possibly. That, and rooms that move about, or are not always there, these sorts of things”, explained Marca. “Also certain routes that are made different than how they would otherwise be”

“Shortcuts?”

“Yes, shortcuts through the shapes that make up the Castle, by appealing to the ancient kind of magic that binds certain forms to each other, or else keeps them apart. With the right invocation, one can slip through the shapes, or cause them to be... disturbed? No, distorted is a better word, changed anyway, made to meet in places they would not already. It is the same kind of magic that allows Apparition in the first place - this appeals to the option of slipping through the cracks - and also the magic that makes Portkeys possible, which is actually the opposite thing, making parts of the shape meet that would not have met without tampering”

“Why am I just learning about this now?”, asked Tom, sharply. “Why has this not been included in our schooling?”

“It is discussed in some low amount of detail in Arithmancy”, said Marca. “So if you did Arithmancy, you would know these things. But it is not a lot of detail; not a big topic of learning”

Tom reflected on why Grindelwald would have such an interest in the topic, and did not wonder for long.

“It seems to me”, he said slowly, thinking out loud, “that a full mastery of this magic would allow one an incredible power, to enter and leave places with impunity; to access places that have been considered secure, to make places that no other can access, to keep oneself utterly safe - a fortress that others couldn’t even get to, let alone assail. And yet no enemy’s lesser stronghold would hold out against such a Wizard”

“Indeed, the applications could be of considerable importance”, agreed Marca.

“I will learn this magic”, affirmed Tom. “Can you point me any more specifically? Otherwise, I think I have enough to go raid the library on this topic at least”

“If you are going to the library, then I have nothing to contribute that you will not easily find there in greater abundance than will be found in our Arithmancy textbooks”

When he did get to the library, Tom saw that Madam Redmond was not at the counter, but then, it was quite late, and she didn't live there. Well, she lived close enough, granted - she had an office accessible from an upper level of the library, and Tom knew from her thoughts that her living quarters were accessible from that office. However, he didn't need her now; he knew where the Arithmancy section was, and could narrow it down quickly enough from there.

He hadn't been there more than quarter of an hour or so when he was startled by realizing Professor Binns was standing right behind him, having arrived as quietly as a ghost.

“Sorry Professor, didn't see you there”, said Tom.

“They're not doing Geomancy lessons anymore”, replied Binns.

“Yes, I know, personal project, Sir”

“What project?” asked Binns, frowning. Why did the old man have to be so curious? Why did he have to be interested in something now after showing nothing but disinterest for even his own subject these past four years?

“Trying to understand more about the castle's construction” answered Tom, honestly enough.

“You won't learn it here; this'll be quite beyond you without learned tuition, boy” Binns advised him. Tom felt hatred rise within him; the last person that had told Tom something would be beyond him, Tom had destroyed with fire, but granted, that had been a portrait, and not a flesh-and-blood teacher.

“I'll take my chances, Sir” said Tom, perhaps a little abruptly. “Goodnight, Professor Binns”, he concluded, before leaving the library with the books he'd selected so far, wondering what Binns himself had been doing in that part of the library.

Back in Slytherin House, Tom pored over the books through the night, cross-referencing ideas with the architectural plans he had, and his memory of where the main shaft for the Chamber of Secrets ought to be.

He was at the point of giving up, since the only points that would otherwise make sense were one of the girls' toilets up between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw Towers, and a part nearer to home, between the Slytherin and Hufflepuff Common Rooms, that he knew from experience was definitely an unused sewer duct; it led to the lake but was not connected to any actual sewers. Obviously Slytherin would not put the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets in such an ignominious place, twice.

Then he had a startling moment of realization, that the plumbing system had been modernized in more recent years; these features would not have been there when the Chamber was made. The renovations were made during Headmaster Black's time, and the portrait of him had clearly known something about the matter, as he knew it had to do with a secret, a key, and Parseltongue. Could the entrance have been in the way of the renovations, unknown to most, and now hidden by the same? And that is why that sewer duct wasn't used? And what of the bathroom, or toilets, or whatever it was, up near Gryffindor and Ravenclaw Towers?

He got up, resolving to go and investigate while everyone else was asleep, but upon checking the time found it was almost time that everyone would be waking up again and going about their morning activities — and so, a very bad time to be exploring bathrooms and sewers. It'd have to wait, but it wouldn't wait for long.

“What I don’t get”, said Emlyn over breakfast in the Great Hall, as they discussed the morning’s edition of the Daily Prophet, “is why Grindelwald’s so interested in Africa in the first place. It’s not like it’s the centre of any great power - they’re all in Europe or Asia”

“Or America”, offered Marca. “They too are not to be underestimated”

“America?” challenged Belinda. “But they’re so... unrefined”

“It’s true they have a lot of silly ideas of egalitarianism holding them back, at the very least”, agreed Abraxas.

“But... Africa?” repeated Emlyn. “What’s so special there? Is Egyptian magic really so special as to wage a war over it?”

“Yes”, answered Tiernan, Marca, Belinda, and Tom, almost of one voice.

“Why? All it has in the Prophet is this city lost, that city gained, forces moving East, forces moving West...”

“Salazar Slytherin came from where?” asked Marca, pointedly.

“Ireland... Oh wait, his father from Egypt though, right, of course. So Grindelwald’s seeking after heirlooms? Slytherin Senior’s forgotten notebooks?”, suggested Emlyn, half-joking, half serious.

“It wouldn’t be the first time that magical wars have been fought over such things”, observed Tiernan. “Remember the library of Alexandria”

“I’ve never been there”

“Well none of us have, but that’s the point. Competing nations fighting over the scrolls there, ended up burning the whole place to the ground; had to blame the Muggles”

“So... something survived?”

“We don’t know, do we?” interjected Abraxas. “It’s not like Grindelwald meets us for tea and lets us in on his plans”

“Must be a powerful weapon”, nodded Belinda to herself. “I mean, Africa has a lot of valuable resources and all, but would Grindelwald be there personally if it were just about that? Nah, I think he’d just send in his armies and sit back on his throne in Europe - it’s got to be something more personal - the question is: what?”

“Quidditch”, said Walburga, “Come on”

“Huh? Oh right yeah, that time already” said Belinda, finishing up her breakfast, and leaving the non-players to speculate about Grindelwald a little more before heading out to watch her play. Tom didn’t learn anything from their speculations though, and nor did he expect to; after all, he’d researched the matter heavily and had also recently met Grindelwald in the flesh and discussed it with him, and still didn’t have a clear idea what was going on over there, so what chance did these others have?

As for the more homely goings-on, Slytherin could not win the Quidditch Cup — even winning today’s game against Ravenclaw would only put them on an equal score with Gryffindor, but the start-of-season loss against same would mean the Lions being ahead in the standings by virtue of the head-to-head tie-break.

However, there was plenty to play for: if Slytherin won today, they’d be on an equal score also with Hufflepuff, and beat them on tie-break by the same mechanism. If Slytherin lost today, on the other hand, they’d be one for one with Ravenclaw; such a head-to-head loss vs Ravenclaw would of course put them at the very bottom of the standings table, not a shame that any Slytherin wanted to see.

To this end, today’s match had importance for all four Houses, as the final standings for everyone would be decided by the outcome today. It was not unexpected that inter-House tensions reached their usual end-of-season high, though incidences of attempted sabotage were minimal, if indeed extant at all - Tom was not aware of any plots going on, and Tom was usually more aware than anyone else who wasn’t directly involved in them.

Simply, there didn’t seem to be much to do in terms of sabotage. Peregrinus Hood had not exactly distinguished himself so far in the season, and Slytherin’s Beater duo were

already notably better than their Ravenclaw counterparts. Slytherin's Liam Wardgarren had proven himself a handy Keeper, albeit not a patch on Violet Selwyn, meaning the only likely spot for sabotage making any difference to the game would be to hobble the Ravenclaw Chasers. This had not, however, come to pass in any grand form, and while it was a fiercely fought game, Hood managed to equalize Belinda's season-long score of one, by catching the Snitch while she was the other end of the pitch.

The result, of course, was an inglorious win for Ravenclaw — this win scraped them from last place into third, and so was hardly worthy of celebration for them — but also a crushing loss for Slytherin, as while they could have been in second place, they were now relegated to fourth. Needless to say, Belinda was furious and she wasn't the only one.

Tom, however, was only too keen to get away from the pitch sooner than the others, easy as he wasn't in the main stands, owing to having volunteered to do Apprenticeship duties despite Slytherin playing, and go investigate the possible entrance while most were still out, and knowing that they'd be heading each back to their Houses fairly promptly, and all moving in a big mass, easy to avoid. Slipping off from the others, who were now seeking their own Housemates, he headed into the castle alone.

His pace quickened as he went, and so did his thoughts, racing now and swimming with the possibilities of what he might finally have found; now was his chance to find out.

Chapter Nineteen

The Chamber of Secrets

Of the two possibilities, Tom chose to go for the topmost entrance first, since the lowermost site would be the one easier to explore at nighttime, not needing to stray too far from Slytherin House.

After a quick glance around to confirm nobody was arriving in that stretch of corridor, Tom drew his wand and entered the girls' toilets, ready to Stun anyone who should happen to be in there, not that he expected anyone. The wooden door creaked closed behind him, and that was the only sound in the place. He quickly checked the stalls to make absolutely sure he was alone, then turned back to the door.

Colloportus.

There, that should keep at least casual would-be intruders from entering. If someone really wanted to get in, it'd hardly keep them out, but the most likely scenario would be that someone just wanted to avail themselves of the facilities here, and would simply consider the place was closed for some reason, and head off to a different girls' toilets.

Rounding back into the room, Tom tried various Revealing Charms, to no effect, and paced around the central hub of washbasins. One of them caught his eye, as it had a small snake motif on one of the taps. He turned the tap. Nothing. No secret doorway, not even any water, for that matter.

"*Open up*" he tried, first of all. To his surprise, it worked immediately. The tap glowed and spun; a second later, the sink sank into a sunken sump, revealing an uninvitingly dark hole behind it, between the other sinks of the hub; it looked to be a sheer drop.

Illuminating his wand and looking down the hole, he discovered that on the contrary, it appeared to bend away to the side slightly. On the one hand, this meant he would not plummet straight downwards if he went in; on the other, it also meant that it would be irksome to use a Momentum-stopping Charm here the way he had in the other shaft the night of Halloween last year. Resolutely, he prepared to climb down, as he should be able to wedge himself between the opposite sides easily enough, but this too turned out not to be a viable plan, as he found the pipe was coated in a thin slime.

"*Tergeo*" he muttered, and some of the slime retreated briefly, before returning to its previous position.

He considered burning it off, but he didn't really want to set fire to whatever was at the other end of the pipe without examining it first. If only he had some Fricshod Potion - or a broom, for that matter.

However, he was far too excited at having come this far, to go back now and get any of those things. Ready to magically save himself if necessary, he jumped in.

After some twists and turns and stomach-lurching drops, the pipe became more level, and Tom finally gasped as he sped out into an inches-deep body of water in a larger cavernous room, perhaps a wide hallway, from what he could see.

Suddenly, a torch flared up on the wall to each side of him, and two by two, more torches ignited along the walls. Evidently, this was the way forwards. He tested the floor carefully with his feet as he went, wary of a sudden drop-off since the floor was difficult to see on account of the patchy and flickery lighting, but the water remained shallow, and soon he was at the other side of it.

It occurred to him the entrance up at the top was probably still open, and anyone could follow him down here. It also occurred to him he wasn't sure how he'd get back up to get out, but one problem at a time.

"Serpensortia" - he cast a sizeable hooded cobra, which landed on the floor with a wet THWACK - *"Guard this area; don't let anyone past this point unless it's me - or someone wearing a tie like mine"*, he added, *"with the green stripes; can you see that?"*

The snake rose up smoothly and looked at the tie, its nose almost touching it. Tom wondered as to the quality of its vision, or its colour-vision, at least. Catching a brief glimpse through the snake's mind, indeed the colours were distinctly muted, but just about discernible. His throat, on the other hand, gave off an invitingly warm glow. He watched his pulse quicken and resisted the urge to bite it.

Tom's connection to the snake's mind was broken by this thought, and now the serpent now rose up further and backwards a little, so that it was face to face with Tom.

"I see it, and I smell... Death" hissed the snake, its tongue flickering as it spoke. The lamplight from the torches reflected in its beady eyes.

"Well I haven't killed anyone... recently" said Tom. The snake looked around, darting its tongue in and out as it tasted the air. Suddenly the snake recoiled with a hiss.

"Bassliissssk"

Tom froze, and dared not turn around.

"Where?"

"Somewhere", replied the snake, unhelpfully, *"I taste its scent"*

"Fantastic" muttered Tom irritably. *"Alright. Wish me luck, and remember, stop anyone who isn't wearing one of these green-striped ties"*

"Good luck, and goodbye" hissed the snake, coiling itself into a dark corner near the entranceway.

Tom walked slowly with his eyes uncharacteristically downcast, his ears alert for any movement. He recalled that Basilisk scales were as strong as a dragon's, and would cause spells to bounce off in a similar fashion. Like dragons, the eyes were a weak point, being covered by only a single scale, but it wouldn't be easy to aim at those without dying in the process. He stopped for a moment to think about this and reconsider whether it was a good idea to carry on without better preparation.

If he could have something else with him, to aid him, what would it be? Well, some more people to scout ahead of him would be great, but even then, a moment's warning would do little good. Maybe some broad attack with fire or another Curse that doesn't require careful aim; flames sufficient to fill up the tunnel would be likewise sufficient to give even a Basilisk a faceful of fire. But then, the Basilisk would be so very much better as an ally than an enemy, of course, and setting a creature on fire would not be the best of first impressions - although, Tom noted, that approach had worked fine with Jana.

Nevertheless, he couldn't count on a Basilisk being so good-natured and sporting as Jana, so getting the beast on his side would be more likely with... perhaps some show of power, still, but not one that might cause irreparable damage, or prompt an immediate counterattack, or both.

The legends said that the Heir of Slytherin could control the beast, so there must be some secret to that, perhaps something that he too could do. Perhaps Parseltongue would suffice, as it did with lesser snakes - and in any case, it was not at all lost on Tom that his ability to speak Parseltongue may well indicate not only a good Pureblood background and with its connections to the old Wizarding families, but also that it was not at all unreasonable to think he may have some of the last drops of Slytherin's own blood in him. There were, after all, not many Wizards known who could speak it, and Tom would certainly rather claim lineage leading back to Salazar Slytherin, than for example Herpo the Foul - much as this latter was credited with a rather strong mastery of Basilisks. On that note, thought Tom, now was probably not the best time to be daydreaming about ancestry, and perhaps it would be better if he focussed on the task at hand, putting his idea into practice.

"Basilisk? Are you there?" he called. No reply. Oh well, it was worth a shot. Before long, he came to a dead-end, or more accurately, the world's most obvious of secret doors. Two snakes were carved into the otherwise flat rock-face, with what must be the doorway between them.

"Open up", he essayed.

The rock in front of him split, and the divided parts moved aside just like the Slytherin Common Room doors. Tom smiled, in gladness that there had not been a password as such, merely the requirement to speak Parseltongue. He remembered to lower his gaze again as he walked through the doorway.

"Basilisk, if you're in here, show yourself without looking me in the eye. I will not harm you". Again no reply.

Putting a hand to his brow as though keeping the sun off his eyes on a summer day, Tom looked cautiously around the room, moving his eyes slowly, so as to be able to look away at the first sign up the beast.

He was in a large high-vaulted chamber, with vast stone pillars to the sides, with snakes carved onto them, winding upwards. At the far end of the room was a statue; he chanced looking up at the rest of it to find, unsurprisingly, it was a statue of Salazar Slytherin, quite recognizable from the painting in the Slytherin Common Room.

"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four" he hissed, in case the same trick would work here. Around Hogwarts, statues were not nearly so likely to talk as paintings, but it was always worth a try.

The statue's face moved, and its mouth opened, but it did not speak. It just stood there, mouth open, in a silent battle-cry, no words coming from the dark hole that this action revealed. Then words came, but as the mouth wasn't moving, it seemed the words came from the cavernous abyss therein, not the mouth itself:

"Who awakens me from my ssslumbering sssleep, is it time?"

Tom froze. The Basilisk of which the cobra had warned him was here, and was in all likelihood about to emerge from this hole any second now. He looked at the floor.

"A Slytherin of the Blood of Slytherin", he replied hopefully, *"And one who will give you great purpose"*

"Shshield your eyesss, or you'll be the first to fall", came the reply.

Tom did so, or rather, closed his eyes.

The bulk of the beast was obvious from the sound, the feel in the room, and the contact with its mind, though the latter was somewhat indistinct, and Tom had to work to improve it. As he did so, the Basilisk slid out of the gaping mouth, and circled around to draw itself up behind Tom, who now felt smaller than he had ever felt in his life. He also experienced something of an enlightenment on the concepts of trust and hope.

"You don't look like him... but your scent shows your blood to be true..."

"Him?", asked Tom

"I know not how many generations have passed while I slept. Does Corvinus live?"

"What did Corvinus do with you?" asked Tom, dodging the question, as he didn't want to have to ask who Corvinus was - he'd rather appear to be as in on the secrets of the Chamber as possible.

"Nothing" hissed the Basilisk. *"But the entrance was threatened, and he sured it against the outsiders"*

"How?"

"The entrance has a new aspect; it was Corvinus who gave it that, lest the outsiders find it, as they meddled with my sacred space"

"This place was in danger of being found?"

"Yesss"

"What new aspect did he give it?" asked Tom, thinking of the plumbing alterations, and wondering if his theory was correct, and that was why the entrance was where it was.

"I know not; I have not ventured forth; I have not been called. But he gave the entrance a disguise, so the secrets are kept safe. But speak quickly; what purpose have you here? Rises there a new threat in the castle?"

"Yes, the safety of Witches and Wizards is sacrificed on the altar of the worship of Muggles"

"Are they coming? Is it time? Time to kill, time to fell their armies, time to slaughter those who would threaten the House and the line and the pure of blood?", asked the Basilisk, its speech quickening in anticipation of the massacre it foresaw.

"It is nearly time", said Tom, who did not want to unleash the Beast already without a plan. Much as he may sometimes want to just destroy everything, for simplicity, it was usually the case that a little patience would pay dividends in the category of achieving one's ends without unnecessarily harming that which he actually wanted kept more or less intact, in this case, the Wizarding world.

"I will be ready", promised the Basilisk. Tom didn't doubt it.

"I wish to first learn the Secrets of this Chamber more fully before our counterattack is launched", said Tom. *"I'd also like to do so without risk of accidental death; if I leave and return, where will you be, that I might avoid your resting place?"*

"I slumber in my sleeping hide", said the Basilisk, perhaps a touch unhelpfully, but it at least meant that Tom could explore the main Chamber.

"And you'll come out only if I call to you, as I did today?"

"Yess"

"Good", said Tom. *"We will make our partnership work so well, Basilisk, that we'll cleanse this castle of filth and restore its beauty and perfection, and explore the secrets of the ancients, that I and the line of Slytherin will be forevermore. Until then, return to your sleep, and guard your strength and power, while I build my own in the castle above, and we can unleash our force together"*

The Basilisk's body slid heavily past Tom; he kept his eyes closed.

"Walk this way, son of Slytherin", said the Basilisk. Tom turned towards the sound. *"Here"*, continued the Basilisk, *"here you can find your way back to the world above, and I shall await your return"*. Tom followed the sound further, reaching out now with his mind to find the Basilisk's; it was easier than most, and it made the task of following the Basilisk with his eyes closed easier too. He walked cautiously, and came into what, if the Basilisk's mind was to be trusted, was a corridor, a turning, another turning, and small room, with... what was that?

"Open your eyes, Wizard" said the Basilisk, *"I am not before you"*

Tom opened his eyes slowly and cautiously, looking first at his feet. He opened them a little more, and looked up a little further.

In the floor of the room was what appeared at first to be a small pond, of the kind perhaps would one expect to find exotic ornamental fish. The water lapped clear green against the marble rim, and as Tom looked into it, he saw that it was not water at all, but some magical barrier in a constantly shifting state. There was, thankfully, no reflection. It distorted the view through the surface, but nevertheless the view was quite recognisable; Tom was now looking at the Slytherin Common Room, but upside-down, as though he were looking up from the carpet.

"Tell me what you know about this magic", said Tom.

"It allows you access to your sleeping hide", replied the Basilisk from behind Tom. *"You can leave the Chamber by this pool, but you can only re-enter the way you came in"*

"I don't want you to", began Tom, *"but could you pass through this portal, into our Common Room?"*

"Yesss"

Well, there was a sobering thought.

"Why is this portal here? Why would you be given access to our Common Room?"

"In case of need. In case I must strike. Through these pools I can strike to many parts of the castle, wherever the invaders have taken"

"There are more such portals?"

"Magical ways out into the castle, yesss, only the physical way in. This is a secret place, a safe place..."

"And it shall remain so", thought Tom out loud. It would be good to have his own secret space within the castle, that nobody else could access, and from which place he could access what apparently amounted to many places within the castle. Not to mention, as he now observed looking up at someone who walked across the floor below him in the pool, spying upon them without notice. This was going to be good. He just needed to work out how best to use it, without wasting his opportunity. *"I step in?"*, he double-checked. It'd be unfortunate to step in and then find he was supposed to use a Spell of some kind.

"You step in"

Waiting for a point when nobody in the Common Room seemed to be looking that way, he stepped in, letting himself meet the ripples face-first. In so doing he carried on all the way through, his momentum carrying him to being the right way up, stood in the middle of the Common Room floor.

Chapter Twenty

Letting Sleeping Serpents Lie

The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets had sealed itself by the time Tom got back up there to close it, making the long climb a wasted journey; or at least, wasted aside from its educational value, in that he now knew the thing would close itself after him. The principle task remaining, as Tom saw it, was to work out how best to use this great gift that had been sent to him through the ages from Salazar Slytherin himself. It was certainly not a thing he intended to squander.

To this end, in one of the annexes of the Slytherin Dungeons, Tom and Marca sat at a table that was covered with papers and books, long after most of their Housemates had retired to bed, the Quidditch loss not having inspired them to stay up late. The very few others who remained up seemed to be in similar situations, either doing last-minute revision, or else working on projects of their own, wanting to get as much done as possible while they still had access to the school's unparalleled resources.

Tom and Marca fell more into the latter category, and by this point in the night, the papers and books spread over the table were scening trappings, as much as anything else, that anyone who looked in might take a glance and conclude they were busy and not open to social overtures — and this they most definitely were not, as they spoke in hushed tones, about the Chamber of Secrets and the Beast within it, as Tom considered Marca the absolute safest of confidantes, what with her being impenetrable to Legilimency, and already having half of his secrets anyway; he might as well make use of her, even if her opinions weren't always to his liking.

"A Basilisk is not like most Beasts, Tom", she objected, once again, as she endeavoured to dissuade him from seeking to use a creature that could lay low an entire army with a single glance; a creature that was known to have an innate desire to kill, stronger in it than any other desire.

"And I'm not like most Beastmasters", replied Tom, with assured confidence. "It'll kill when I tell it to; not before, or it will suffer the consequences"

Marca sighed.

"So your plan is what, exactly? To have a giant snake as a pet and use it to impress people and win them to your side? I would say that you are compensating for something, if it were not for—"

"Nothing so puerile, Marca", interjected Tom. "Though I don't deny that may be an additional benefit, my primary goal will be to do with it exactly as was intended by the Wizard who left it there"

"Which was what purpose?"

"To kill the Mudbloods, obviously; for what other reason would he leave such a dangerous Beast in the school, a Beast that can only be controlled by me, in a place that can only be accessed by speaking Parseltongue, something no Mudblood could ever do?"

"To kill the Mudbloods? But why?" asked Marca, neither surprised nor accusing, merely with the tone of someone asking why a person might be going to the shops.

"To cleanse Hogwarts of them; you know as well as anyone that he never wanted them here in the first place", said Tom.

"He also never killed them all himself; why do you think that is?"

Tom hesitated, unable to immediately come upon a good answer. Why *had* Slytherin refrained from killing them all, when he obviously had the means to do so? What contingency was he waiting for?

"I don't know", Tom admitted, "but from history, legend, and the Basilisk's own word for it, he distrusted them, and knew that the time would come when it'd be necessary to unleash the Basilisk on them"

“Even if it is so that Salazar Slytherin *would* do that, why *will* you do that? You are not his puppet, after all”

“To do what I said I’d do”, said Tom. “Bring about Wizarding supremacy, instead of skulking about in the shadows, and that can start by cleaning house here at home at Hogwarts”

Marca thought about this for a moment.

“But if you start killing Mudbloods, you will need to finish the job very soon, perhaps the same night, or else they will simply evacuate the school. You are not ready to declare war on the world, I think”

“And I can’t reasonably do it in one night”, said Tom, “Not without unacceptable Wizarding fatalities - especially as it’d probably be a lot of the more powerful Witches and Wizards who’d try to fight it. No, I wouldn’t want that, not without giving them the chance to join me first”

“So, you do have a plan? But I cannot find it; what is it?”

“I have an idea at least; I need all the Mudbloods in one place”, replied Tom, with a smile.

“I do not think, that they will line up for you”

“Oh, they will, Marca; they will. They just need the right motivation”.

“A convention for Mudbloods?”, suggested Marca.

“A refuge for Mudbloods”, corrected Tom.

“Ah, frighten them, they gather, you attack”

“That’s right. And besides, it will almost certainly not be necessary to do much more than that. When Mudbloods realise the danger they are in here with us in the magical world, far fewer of them will bring their Muggle filth with them here. If they have worth, they could maybe be educated at a small special institution for Mudbloods. I am not needlessly cruel, after all; everything serves its purpose. It’s just an idea, mind. I could change it ten times before I actually implement it”

Marca nodded thoughtfully.

“For the Greater Good, indeed. Yes, it would be unfortunate to waste the talents of those, but also pleasing to have our own space free from such. Far better that those odd Witches and Wizards of no discernible magical origin be placed in an institution more appropriate for them, as you suggest. When will you do this? If you wish to make a reign of terror, there is not very much time that remains between now and the end of term, and then everyone will be away in many places”

“Yes, it’s clear that it will need to wait until September”, sighed Tom. “It’s going to be very frustrating, knowing that I have a Basilisk at my command, and a whole new secret headquarters for my personal use, and yet I’ll have to bide my time over summer, waiting”

“I am sure, that you will find a way to use it productively”, noted Marca.

*

Before he could do so, however, there was still a part to play here at school. Exam season came and went, and much of the little remaining time was taken up with the usual last-minute duelling for House Points, an activity now yet more strongly promoted to all students of all Houses, with the current state of the world being what it was. Everyone understood the importance of being a fighter, even those who had absolutely no wish to fight.

The House points received by Slytherin and Gryffindor for the finding of Ozzy Fame had set the Houses some way above the others, and had also unexpectedly taken the wind out of the sails of Ravenclaw efforts, as they seemed to feel indebted to them for the rescue. Consequently, the Snakes and Lions had been in the lead since then, with hard-working Hufflepuff some way ahead of more inconsistently focussed Ravenclaw.

To this end, the only question regards the House Cup of late had been whether Slytherin or Gryffindor would come out on top. At home in Slytherin House, confidence was strong but not devoid of concern for the possibility that Gryffindor made a last-minute comeback, since they had been so close.

“What’s the latest that points can be added?”, asked Tiernan.

“It must be up until the Great Hall’s doors are opened”, said Tom. “After all, that’s when we see the decorations in the colours of the winning House; they can’t exactly change it after that, can they?”

“No, I suppose not. I was just thinking that points-tallying might be closed the night before, after all, Dippet always has a speech to give about it, and I don’t expect he does that off-the-cuff; he must prepare it the night before”

“I suppose if he comes down and finds the wrong House is winning, he could always just add some extra points to the right House, before anyone else sees”

“Nah, what kind of Headmaster would fix the House Cup like that?”, objected Tiernan. “It’d make a mockery of the thing and completely take away any value - it’d kill the House Cup”.

“Well, if he did it, he’d certainly have to make sure to not get caught. No Headmaster could possibly be respected if he got caught doing that. And if a Head of House got caught doing it, that’d be worse, as it’d be a disgrace to the whole House. So I don’t think Slughorn or Dumbledore would throw in arbitrary extra points at the last minute either”.

“Yeah, I expect you’re right”, agreed Tiernan. “Speaking of last minuteness, shall we get going?”

“Yes, let’s”

There was a large assembled throng in the entrance Hall, and a great hubbub of voices; the outcome of the House Cup was being hotly debated by many, and everyone wanted to be near the front, as though getting the knowledge a couple of seconds earlier was really that important — if only they took the same attitude to learning throughout the year, Tom expected they’d all have done their NEWTs by now, and the school could use the extra time for yet further education, delving deeper and darker into the various disciplines.

As it was, classes at Hogwarts tended to proceed in accordance with the pace of the average student, not the top few, who would have to continue to content themselves with supplementary extra-curricular studies, something that Tom had of course taken upon himself ever since being a first-year.

The huge doors of the Great Hall opened, prompting grins and told-you-sos from the Slytherin students, as green and silver banners bearing the Slytherin emblem hung about the Hall. This year, all the staff had assembled in the Great Hall before the doors had been opened. Slughorn gave a cheery wave as the schoolchildren poured into the room - obviously he was as pleased as any other Slytherin to win back the House Cup after a couple of years of mishaps.

When they had finally all taken their seats, it was Dippet, however, who addressed the Hall:

“Firstly, all due congratulations to House Slytherin for a well-won House Cup this year”

A raucous cheer went up from the Slytherin table, with uncharacteristically strong applause also from the neighbouring Ravenclaw table.

“...and of course to Gryffindor, coming closely behind in second place under similar circumstances, hard-won in no small part by daring actions of the kind that set their House apart”

Loud jubilations erupted over at the Lions’ table, and again a sturdy support from Ravenclaw. Tom thought it a little inaccurate, as after all Jana had been no braver than he,

if it was that to which Dippet was alluding. But, they could have their moment — after all, Slytherin had beaten them anyway.

“In third place we have Hufflepuff, whose ability to soldier on through tumultuous times has impressed us all”

Distinctly less cheering in response to this, but the Badgers were clearly happy regardless. They had won the Quidditch Cup for the first time in quite some years, not that it had received a mention yet in Dippet’s address to the school.

“Last but not least, Ravenclaw House has had perhaps the most trying time of all this year, and yet still came out with clear top marks across the board in the N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. examinations, and in the majority of end-of-year examinations for the other years. Congratulations, Ravenclaw”

More cheering than there had been for Hufflepuff; perhaps pity was in order. Tom never quite understood pity as an experiential concept, but intellectually at least he had discerned that it often meant a person or a group giving to another something unmerited, or at least in unmerited disproportion, simply because the recipient had suffered in some fashion.

Dippet went on to talk about the war, and keeping safe over summer, despite the fact that there could not possibly be a single Witch or Wizard in the school who was not now very aware indeed of the dangers posed by the Muggle War, never mind the magical one. Ossapheme Fame’s return from the dead did nothing to undo the message that had been well-conveyed by her apparent demise in the smouldering ruin of a Muggle street, and it was quite certain that most were now keeping to Wizarding residences and business places as much as possible if they weren’t previously.

War, it seemed, had taught them a lesson they had been unable to learn in peacetime, and one that Tom would seek to hammer home yet more in the coming year:

Magical folk and Muggles would mix only at their mutual peril.