Victoria Potter

by Taure

Summary

Magically talented, Slytherin fem!Harry. Years 1-3 of Victoria Potter's adventures at Hogwarts, with a strong focus on magic, friendship, and boarding school life. Mostly canonical world but avoids rehash of canon plotlines. No bashing, no kid politicians, no 11-year-old romances. First year complete as of Chapter 12.

Notes

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Number Four, Privet Drive had changed very little in the ten years since Victoria Potter had appeared on the doorstep. Family photographs which once depicted a chubby baby boy were now home to a rather spherical ten-year-old, often squeezed between two proud parents. Those parents, Vernon and Petunia Dursley, were showing the signs of age: Vernon had grown larger still, with a correspondingly thicker moustache, while Petunia now dyed her hair to hide the faint beginnings of grey. In almost every other respect, the house was as it had always been: clean, ordered, and utterly lacking in character.

Out of all the photographs on display, only one revealed that there was a fourth occupant of the house. That picture was to be found in the downstairs bathroom, hanging on the back of the door, and it showed a young girl with long black hair and bright green eyes. She was standing between Vernon and Petunia, both of them wearing rather fixed smiles, with Petunia’s hand hovering above Victoria’s shoulder in an incomplete embrace.

Aside from the hidden photograph, you would have to go to Victoria’s bedroom to know she existed. It was the smallest bedroom, of course, and sparsely furnished. There was no carpet covering the worn wooden floor, nor pictures on the light pink walls. The creaky bed was small, the wardrobe second-hand, and the desk wobbled. The sole decoration was a long mirror leaning against a wall, any intention of hanging it up long since abandoned.

Victoria looked around her domain in satisfaction. As spartan as it was, her bedroom was her haven. So long as she was in her bedroom, Dudley and his friends wouldn’t bother her. It was the only place in the world, save perhaps the library at school, where she was free from his pestering.

“Girl, we’re leaving in ten minutes!” Vernon shouted up the stairs. “You better be ready!”

Victoria jumped in surprise. She hadn’t realised it was so late. It was summer, and though it was close to eight o’clock it was still light outside. She quickly opened her wardrobe and pulled out her best dress. It was green, to match her eyes. Like all her clothes, it was second-hand. That wasn’t to say the Dursleys were poor—a shiny new car in the driveway was testament to that—but they had always made it clear to Victoria that she was not really part of their family. As such she did not
deserve proper presents.

Victoria didn’t mind much. You could find some pretty good clothes in charity shops if you looked hard enough.

“ARE YOU COMING OR NOT?” shouted Vernon.

Any other girl would have had a mother to help with their hair, but Victoria was used to doing it on her own. She scrunched up her nose and pushed, as if to pop her ears. Suddenly her hair was alive: it straightened with a wiggle, and then began to braid itself into two fine Dutch braids, which tied around the back of her head like a circlet. It would have taken anyone else at least fifteen minutes and a lot of practice to put their hair into such a complicated style. She did it in fifteen seconds.

It was her secret. Her talent. She had first discovered it when she was seven-years-old, after returning from the hairdresser with a terrible haircut. In a moment of extreme regret her hair had restored itself to its previous style. She was stunned; the Dursleys tried to pretend it never happened, as they did every time something strange happened around her. But Victoria didn’t forget. She knew what she had seen. Most children stop believing in magic by the age of seven, but since that day Victoria had been convinced of its existence. She knew it because she could use it.

Changing her appearance was easiest, with her abilities appearing to grow as she did. By the time she was nine, she could change almost anything about how she looked on the surface. That was why her hair grew straight without her needing to brush it, and it was why her skin had a healthy glow to it throughout the winter. She’d even made her nose cuter, making it narrower and giving it a slight upturn at the end. Deeper changes, however, were much more difficult. Try as she might, she still couldn’t make herself taller. In fact, it had taken all her concentration and effort just to remove an ugly scar from her forehead.

She could do other things as well, though they were much harder. If she clapped her hands and stamped her feet, she could light a small fire. She’d learnt that objects would float if she stuck a feather on them and threw them into the air. And one time, when she’d been having a staring match with Dudley and focused hard on his pupils, she’d actually seen flashes of what he had been thinking.

Victoria shuddered at the memory. She hadn’t tried that one again -- Dudley’s mind was not somewhere she wanted to be.

“ONE MINUTE!”

She slipped her pumps on and hurried downstairs. The Dursleys were all waiting by the door. Petunia sniffed haughtily, her eyes lingering on Victoria’s hair. Victoria rolled her eyes: that was about as close to approval she ever got.

“T ook your time, didn’t you?” said Vernon, but he wasn’t showing any signs of exploding. This was just his normal level of grumbling.

They took the new car to the concert, which was being held at a local church. None of them actually enjoyed classical music, of course. Vernon thought it was “uppity nonsense” and Petunia wouldn’t know culture if it was sunbathing nude in next door’s garden. As for Dudley, he spent most of the car ride talking about the television he was missing.

But being “upstanding members of the local community” meant attending Stonewall’s junior concert. Victoria was indifferent about the whole affair. Classical music wasn’t her thing either, preferring Madonna and Michael Jackson, but it wasn’t as if there’d be much to do at home. She’d
already finished what little homework she had, Dudley always had control of the TV, and the Dursleys strictly controlled what books she was allowed to read. They didn’t want her getting any “dangerous ideas”, after all. The concert, therefore, was a welcome break from boredom.

As soon as they arrived they began to mingle, an activity which Victoria felt adults enjoyed far too much.

“Vernon, Petunia, it’s so good to see you!” said Mrs Williams, the woman who had invited them. Her eleven-year-old son was in the choir, and she had a tendency to gush about it.

“Oh Carol, of course we wouldn’t miss it,” replied Petunia, greeting her by kissing the air next to her cheek.

“And this must be Dudley,” Mrs. Williams continued, taking in Victoria’s cousin. She seemed to be struggling to find something positive to say, so eventually settled on a complete lie. “You’ll be a lady killer in a few years, I bet.”

Victoria struggled to contain a laugh while her aunt and uncle puffed up in pride.

It was then Victoria’s turn to be examined.

“And who’s this?”

“Victoria, ma’am,” she said. Unlike Dudley, Victoria had always been punished unless she was excessively polite. By now it was second nature.

“Well, you are a pretty one, aren’t you?” said Mrs Williams. Victoria couldn’t help but smile, even as she blushed— such praise was rare, and the scowl on Vernon’s face took the cake. “I never knew you had a daughter, Petunia! Where have you been hiding her?”

“Oh, she’s not our daughter!” Petunia said, extremely quickly. Victoria’s smile died.

“Petunia’s niece, you know,” said Vernon, trying to pass it off casually.

“Oh, I see! Visiting your aunt and uncle? I’m not sure if Little Whinging has much to offer a girl your age, but it’s always good to see family...”

Victoria swallowed. She’d never found a good way to explain that she was an orphan. Dudley came to her rescue. “Her parents are dead. Got drunk and crashed their car, didn’t they?”

Victoria scowled at him and Mrs Williams looked shocked. “Why, young man, that was not sensitive! You should apologise to your cousin.” The Dursleys looked like they were sucking lemons, forced to watch as their perfect child was told off.

“Sorry,” mumbled Dudley. It was music to Victoria’s ears, undoubtedly finer than anything Mrs Williams’ son was about to produce. It occurred to Victoria that she should attend these events more often. When they were in public, the Dursleys had to behave.

Mrs Williams soon moved on to mingle with Mrs Figg, the strange cat lady who lived a couple streets across from Privet Drive. “Well I never!” said Petunia, once she was out of earshot. “Telling Dudley off like that! The nerve of some people... we don’t tell her how to raise her son, do we?”

“What do I always say, Pet? The country’s—”

“—going to the dogs,” completed Victoria. Her uncle said it several times a week. Vernon turned a
beady eye on her.

“That’s enough out of you for one night, I think,” he said. “You’ve done enough damage already.”

Victoria was fuming as they took their seats. She had done enough damage? She’d done nothing! It wasn’t her fault that Dudley was rude, and it certainly wasn’t her fault that her parents were dead. But that had never mattered to the Dursleys.

The concert started not long after. The music was predictably boring, the seats uncomfortable, and the church far too hot. Victoria desperately needed something to drink. To make everything worse, Dudley spent most of the concert kicking Victoria whenever he thought none of the adults were looking. She was certain her shins would be black and blue the next day. “Knock it off!” she whispered after a particularly hard kick.

“Shhh!” hissed Petunia, giving Victoria a sharp look. Dudley smirked at her.

The intermission was a welcome relief. After gulping down three glasses of orange squash, Victoria excused herself to go to toilet, hoping to escape all the grown-up small talk as they downed as much free wine as they could during the short break. But avoiding the adults turned out to be a mistake, for Dudley was waiting for her as soon as she left the loo.

“Icky Vicky, Icky Vicky,” he chanted in a sing-song voice, using his favourite name for her. “I’m gonna get you tomorrow. First break.”

Victoria clenched her fists. Every so often Dudley would “get her” at school, and it was never pleasant. Sometimes he’d stick her head through the gap in the barbed wire fence and hold her close to the spikes. Another favourite was to spill milk on her.

“Oh yeah?” she said, bolder than she felt. “Well, maybe I’ll get you. You’re so fat, it can’t be hard.”

“I’m not fat!” he said—too loudly. Some nearby adults turned to look at him and he scowled. Victoria stuck her tongue out at him. “Fattie fattie Duddikins! I bet you can’t even see your toes!”

Smack!

Victoria gasped, stunned, and brought a hand up to her stinging face. She wasn’t the only one: all the grown-ups around them gasped too. “You... you hit me,” she said. Against her will, tears began to form in the corners of her eyes.

“Dudley Dursley!” a man said. He was tall, with black hair going silver, and he did not look happy. Dudley gulped audibly: the man was Mr Stevens, their headmaster. “What on earth do you think you’re doing?”

“She—” Dudley began, but Mr Stevens interrupted.

“I’m not interested,” he said, “you never hit girls, do you understand me? Never.”

“Yes, sir,” Dudley said to his shoes.

“Look at me,” said Mr Stevens. Victoria inwardly cringed, almost feeling sorry for Dudley. Dudley looked up, his face completely red from his public humiliation. Everyone was watching.

“We will discuss this tomorrow morning, in my office,” he said. “Vernon, Petunia, I would like you
to come too.” They nodded in agreement, not willing to speak, apparently sufficiently embarrassed by what was happening.

They didn’t stay for the second half of the concert, leaving as inconspicuously as they could, and drove home in silence. It was not to last. As soon as they got into the kitchen, Vernon turned on Victoria. “You!” he said, waving a fat finger at her. “To your room, now! And you can forget about any more concerts!” Victoria hurried upstairs, hardly daring to believe her luck. No chores, and no mention of losing her pocket money. She’d got away practically scot-free. But would Dudley? She paused on the upstairs landing to eavesdrop.

“Not you,” she heard Vernon say, “we’re going to have a talk about your behaviour.”

Dudley muttered something unintelligible, and then—

“It doesn’t matter what she said!” Vernon bellowed. “You don't embarrass us in public! I thought we had raised you better than that!”

“But—”

“No buts! No television for a week! And you have to be in bed by eight o’clock, every day!”

“Dad!” Dudley said, completely shocked. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

“Maybe you’ll remember this, next time you think to use your fists in front of everyone!”

Dudley came stomping out of the kitchen; Victoria wasn’t able to get to her room fast enough. Dudley saw her there, listening in at the top of the stairs, and he gave her a look of genuine hate.

They stared at each other for a moment. Then, unable to stop herself, Victoria whispered down the stairs. “Fattie fattie Duddikins!”

She ran to her room before she could see the result.

* * *

Dudley never did follow through on his threat to punish Victoria at school the next day. She supposed that he’d been sufficiently cowed by his long sequence of punishments. As it turned out, a week without television was just the start of it.

The day after the concert all three Dursleys had spent a long time in Mr Stevens’ office. Dudley had been forced to apologise to her in front of the whole school and had to spend his breaks in the library for a week. Those five days were pure bliss, with Victoria actually being able to play tag without being tripped over by Dudley every time she turned her back to him.

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It took a few weeks for things to return to normal, and by then the end of term was approaching. Sports day had come and gone (Victoria had managed to win the 800 metre race), and the swimming gala was coming up. That was rather less exciting than sports day, as swimming had never been Victoria’s forte, but nonetheless she was taking the opportunity to go to the pool whenever she could. Anything to get away from the Dursleys.

She was just finishing a length when she saw Annabelle, her current best friend, climbing up the
ladder to leave the water. “You’re going already?” Victoria called out, holding onto the side to steady herself.

“Gotta go,” Annabelle said, pointing through a large window to the figure of her father loitering in the lobby. “You wanna come? You could stay for dinner.”

Victoria was sorely tempted, but didn’t want to push things with the Dursleys. “Can’t. Vernon said I had to be back by seven.” Annabelle didn’t look surprised by this—Victoria was never allowed to go round her friends’ houses. What Annabelle didn’t know was that the Dursleys forbade it. If Victoria spent too much time with her friends, they might realise she was a “freak”.

“All right,” Annabelle said. “Don’t stay too long, you’ll go all wrinkly. See you tomorrow!”

Victoria stayed as long as she could, well past the point of wrinkles, but eventually she had to get out lest she risk Vernon’s wrath. She walked home with the summer sun low in the sky, her wet hair drying in its dying warmth, and was so distracted by the beautiful evening that it took her a surprisingly long time to notice the sound of hooting.

Victoria paused and looked around. To her great surprise, an owl was perched on a parked car nearby.

“ Weird,” she said, taking a good look, for she had never seen a live owl before. It stuck out its leg, to which an envelope was attached by a piece of string. How had she not noticed that before? She took a step forward, curious, but paused at the sight of the owl’s talons. They looked very sharp.

“Also on the news tonight: ten-year-old girl has her eyes clawed out by a crazy owl,” she muttered, turning away. “No thank you .”

She got another minute down the road before she heard the hooting again. She spun around, and there the owl was, not five metres away, perched on someone’s garden fence.

“You’re not going to leave me alone, are you?” she said with a sigh. She shuffled closer to it, ready to run at the first sign of an attack, and the bird stuck its leg out again. Victoria reached forward, trying to keep her body as far away as possible. The moment she touched the envelope, the string attaching it to the owl’s leg fell away and, with an impatient hoot, the bird launched itself into the air. Victoria shrieked and fell to the floor, covering her head with her arms, and when she looked up the owl was nowhere to be seen. The envelope, made of thick paper, sat on the ground next to her. On it someone had handwritten an address:

\[
\text{Miss Victoria Lily Potter} \\
\text{The Smallest Bedroom} \\
\text{Number Four, Privet Drive} \\
\text{Little Whinging} \\
\text{Surrey}
\]

There was no postcode, she noted, but then she supposed owls didn’t have any use for them. She giggled to herself at the ridiculousness of it all. It was amazing though; she wondered who had gone to all this trouble. And for her , of all people. She opened the letter and pulled out several sheets made of the same thick paper. Her eyes widened as she took in the front page.
Dear Miss Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on 1st September 1991. As you reside in a non-magical household, a representative from the school will visit your home on 29th June to assist in your preparations for the school year.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall
Deputy Headmistress

Victoria’s first instinct was disbelief, but that was quickly followed by the excitement of dawning realisation. Of course the letter was real! It explained so much! She had been right: it was magic, what she could do, and not only that—there were other people like her out there. And she could go to a school to learn more! She wondered if her parents had been magical too. It would certainly explain the Dursleys’ fear of allowing her near anything too fantastical.

Victoria scoured the letter like Dudley would a free buffet. Was Merlin real, then? Did that mean King Arthur was too? What on Earth was a Supreme Mugwump? The letter threw up far more questions than it answered. Eager for more information, she turned to the lists attached.

**EQUIPMENT**

One wand.

One telescope.

One cauldron, pewter, standard size two.

One set of brewer’s knives

One set of scales, brass.
One set of stirrers.
One set glass vials.

**GIRLS CLOTHING**

One black winter over-robe (open style).
Five winter inner robes, white.
Five summer dress robes, white, checkered with House colour.
Five plain tights, dark.
One winter cloak, black, silver fastenings.
One set flying robes.
One pair Dragonhide (or similar) gloves.
Black shoes, leather, with a heel of no more than one inch.
Underwear and other clothing suitable for leisure time.

All clothing should be clearly labelled with the student’s name.

**Books**

The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1 by Miranda Goshawk
A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot
Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling
A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration by Emeric Switch
One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore
Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger
The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection by Quentin Trimble

Students are permitted an owl OR cat OR toad. Should any other pets be brought, they shall be handed over to the Gamekeeper.
Victoria’s amazement grew as she read down the list. She had no idea where you’d buy any of it—except maybe brass scales—but she couldn’t wait to read the books. She’d smuggled *The Hobbit* out of the school library last year and loved it. But here was a *real* magical world, and she would get to know everything about it.

She walked the remaining distance home with her nose buried in the letter. It said someone would be coming to visit on June 29th... that was just a few days away. Would there be a test? Annabelle had needed to pass a test for the fancy private school she was starting next year.

Victoria considered herself intelligent, even if sometimes her test results didn’t show it (it wasn’t her fault that Mr Bradley, her maths teacher, couldn’t understand that the numbers seven and eleven didn’t like each other), but somehow she didn’t think a magic school would be interested in her marks in maths. Maybe she could show them the trick with her hair?

She returned home to find the Dursleys watching the television in the living room. It almost looked like they were hypnotised, the way they all sat there in silence, staring at the glowing screen. None of them greeted Victoria as she walked past the door, probably not even noticing that she was there. A plate of food waited for her on the kitchen table; the Dursleys had already eaten. She put the slice of pie into the new microwave and watched hungrily through the window as it rotated.

She would have to spend the next few days practising her magic. Hopefully it would be enough to impress the person from Hogwarts. She giggled: it was such a silly name! But there was something so unDursleyish about it that Victoria already loved it.

The microwave finished with a ping and Victoria wolfed down her pie, not even caring that it was still cold in the middle. She had other business to attend to.

She ran up to her room and began to practise her magic. She started by sitting in front of her mirror, changing how she looked. It was by far the easiest part of magic: it took only a moment of really wanting it, and her hair rippled from black to red to purple to black again. Her eyes were more difficult, but at least it didn’t hurt like it used to. Squinting her eyes, she shifted them to blue, to brown, and then to red. Victoria shuddered. She always thought there was something unsettling about red eyes, so she quickly returned them to their vivid green.

After her eyes, she moved onto more advanced changes. She extended her fingernails, gave herself a light tan, and, wanting to see how far she could push herself, tried to lengthen her fingers. She winced as a series of quite disconcerting cracking sounds followed as her bones rearranged themselves. That was **not** comfortable.

She stared at her left hand and wiggled her fingers. She’d never done anything involving her bones before. They still seemed to work okay, but the hand looked unnatural, almost skeletal. With another wince, her fingers returned to their previous length—or at least, what Victoria hoped was their previous length. She was never quite sure. The longer she kept a change, the harder it was to go back.

She yawned, and looked out the window to see darkness. When had it got so late? Normal children would have been put to bed by their parents long ago, but the Dursleys never tucked Victoria in. So long as she was in her room, they didn’t care if she was asleep or not. She quickly brushed her teeth before returning to her room and getting into her creaky bed. She would practise what little other magic she could do tomorrow. She had the whole day to prepare. In the meantime, she’d read the letter one last time…
She was asleep before she finished.
The witch from Hogwarts arrived at seven o’clock in the morning.

“GIRL!”

Victoria woke to the sound of Uncle Vernon shouting for her, and he didn’t sound happy. Rubbing sleep from her eyes, she sat up with a jolt when she remembered what day it was. Heavy footsteps made their way up the stairs and her door swung open.

“Downstairs,” Vernon growled, his face an interesting shade of purple, “now.”

Victoria leapt out of bed and threw on a dressing gown—she wasn’t about to meet her first magician in pyjamas! She then followed Vernon downstairs and into the sitting room, where a middle-aged woman was sitting primly in one of the armchairs.

At first glance you would have thought her dressed up for Halloween: she was wearing a dark green dress with voluminous sleeves (robes, Victoria supposed) and a pointy witch’s hat was resting on her lap. But as Victoria looked closer, she saw that it didn’t look like a costume at all. Something about the robes—the quality of their make, perhaps, or the complexity of the fine embroidery—gave them an air of authenticity which put any fancy dress to shame.

The witch stood up when Victoria entered. “Victoria Potter, I assume?” she said. She spoke with a refined Scottish accent.

Victoria almost felt like she should curtsy. The woman was rather stern looking, though not nearly so old as Victoria had first thought—surely no older than forty. Her hair was black, and her face held only the first signs of wrinkles. It was her rather conservative clothes that made her look older than she was.

“Yes ma’am,” Victoria replied politely. “Are you from Hogwarts?”

Petunia squeaked, having just entered the room, and almost dropped the teapot she was carrying.

“How in the blazes...?” Vernon muttered, glancing between the witch and Victoria.

“I got your letter a couple days ago,” Victoria supplied, mostly for her relatives’ benefit. She was rather enjoying their surprise.

“Indeed,” the woman said, sending a piercing look at Vernon. “I believe introductions are in order. I am Professor McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and Transfiguration Mistress at Hogwarts School.”

Excitement bubbled deep in Victoria’s tummy. “And what is Transfiguration?” she asked. She’d seen the word on the booklist.
Professor McGonagall offered her a brief smile. “First things first, Miss Potter. You still need to officially accept your place at Hogwarts School. You do wish to come to Hogwarts, I suppose?”

Petunia interrupted before Victoria could answer. “Tea?” she asked, and immediately began pouring from the teapot with shaking hands.

“Thank you,” McGonagall said, taking the cup and placing it on the table next to her. “But we shan’t be here long. We have a busy day ahead of us, assuming Miss Potter wishes to attend.”

“I do!” Victoria blurted out, just as Vernon seemed to recover from the surprise of it all.

“Now see here!” he said, puffing himself up. “I will not be paying for the girl to go off and learn how to pull rabbits out of hats! She’ll be going to the local comprehensive, and she’ll be grateful for it. You should see her school reports... the daft girl can’t even add properly. She needs a real education, and that’s that.”

McGonagall picked up her teacup and took a sip, looking at Victoria speculatively. She appeared completely unmoved by Vernon’s aggressive tone. “Miss Potter, is it true that you struggle with addition?” she asked, and Victoria felt her face heat up in shame.

“It’s not me, it’s the teacher—he does it wrong!” she tried to explain, as she had tried many times before. “He doesn’t even care about how the numbers feel, being shoved together like that.”

McGonagall raised an eyebrow. “That is basic numerology. You will study it at Hogwarts in your third year, should you choose to take Arithmancy.”

Victoria was almost shocked speechless. “You… believe me?”

“Complete hogwash,” Vernon said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“And as for payment,” McGonagall continued, ignoring their interruptions, “you will find, Mr Dursley, that the Ministry of Magic pays the fees of all students. And even if they didn’t, Miss Potter’s parents left her more than enough to cover tuition.”

Vernon’s eyes bulged. “What’s this? Ministry of what? You people are in government?”

But Victoria was far more interested in something else. “You mentioned my parents? They had magic too, then?”

McGonagall’s expression hardened.

“...explains so much,” Vernon continued, “the European Community, that’ll be one of yours, of course...”

McGonagall stood up and he fell silent. “Mr Dursley,” she said, voice cold, “am I to assume you have told the girl nothing?”

Vernon coughed. “Well, not nothing... that is to say, of course, we haven’t told her everything... such nonsense, stamp it out of her...”

“Enough,” said McGonagall, interrupting Vernon’s empty and aimless bluster. “I see now that we have much to discuss today, Miss Potter. We had best be starting immediately. Go and get prepared for the day—quickly now—and we shall be on our way. I shall... explain the situation to your aunt and uncle.”
Victoria ran upstairs and changed into a skirt and a t-shirt before fixing her hair into a ponytail. Not having any time for a shower, she quickly splashed some water on her face and gave her teeth a token brush before hurrying back downstairs. She found McGonagall waiting for her next to the door. The Dursleys were nowhere to be found.

“Ready?” McGonagall asked.

Victoria grinned, assuming Vernon had been bullied into letting her go. “Ready.”

They talked as they walked down Privet Drive, the pair of them enjoying the summer sun.

“Normally I would apparate to Diagon Alley, but since you will be unable to do so for many years, I think it best that I show you how to get there yourself,” McGonagall explained.

“Okay,” said Victoria, not really sure what apparition was. Perhaps her school books would tell her.

McGonagall pulled a long, thin piece of wood from her sleeve. It was clearly more than just a piece of wood: it had been crafted into a highly polished cylinder with a handle, and decorative vines were painstakingly carved into its length. “This is a wand,” she said, allowing Victoria to get a good look at it. “Now, watch closely. You may summon the Knight Bus at any time like so.” She held the wand out over the side of the road, and gave it an upwards flick.

BANG!

Victoria jumped in shock as a purple triple-decker bus hurtled around the corner at a ridiculous speed. It tipped slightly as it turned, before screeching to a halt in front of them. Victoria glanced around, expecting to see curious faces peeking out from behind net curtains, the street’s attention drawn by such a loud noise on a Saturday morning. But no faces were to be seen, curious or otherwise.

The bus was an old fashioned one, like the ones you sometimes saw in London, where you got on at the back and paid a conductor. “Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transportation for the stranded witch or wizard,” the conductor said, greeting them as they stepped on. He was an old, hunched man with a gruff voice. “Hogwarts business, Professor?”

“Indeed, Mr Owen. Two tickets for Diagon Alley, please. On the Hogwarts account.”

The old man turned to peer at Victoria and his eyes widened comically. “Galloping gargoyles!” he cried, “is that—mmmpmmph!”

Mr Owen’s mouth was still moving, but no sound was coming out. McGonagall’s wand disappeared back up her sleeve. “Thank you for your discretion, Mr Owen,” she said tartly, before leading Victoria to a pair of seats on the sparsely populated upper deck. With a lurch, the bus shot back into motion, the world blurring as they moved.

“What was that about?” Victoria asked once they were sitting. The man acted like he knew who she was.

McGonagall sighed. “Perhaps I should start at the beginning, as I would for all Muggleborns,” she said. “As you have no doubt noticed, magic exists. Those who can harness it are called witches and wizards, and we are sufficient in number to have developed our own society, completely separate from the non-magical, or Muggle, one. This society is kept a tightly guarded secret. In addition to witches and wizards, a number of other magical beings and creatures exist, such as goblins, centaurs, dragons, and unicorns.”
Victoria’s eyes widened in surprise. Though of course she had known she had special abilities, she had never imagined *this*. A whole society! And dragons! Just how big was this magical community?

“Do you have any questions at this stage?” McGonagall asked, allowing a moment for the information to sink in.

“Only a million,” said Victoria, unable to hold in a short laugh.

McGonagall offered her a warm smile. “You are remarkably like your mother. She was bursting with questions too.”

“You knew my mother?” Victoria asked, surprised. The Dursleys never spoke of Lily and James Potter. She’d never even seen a picture of them. “Did you go to school with her?”

McGonagall sniffed. “I’ve been teaching at Hogwarts for over forty years, Miss Potter. I taught both your parents, and let me tell you, better students are few and far between. Their deaths were a terrible loss.”

“Forty years?” said Victoria, surprised. “But that would make you at least sixty!”

McGonagall fixed Victoria with a look that told her that it was just as rude to talk about a woman’s age in the wizarding world as in the Muggle one. Nevertheless, she answered the unspoken question: “You will find that magical people live longer than Muggles, and, after reaching adulthood, age much slower. It is not unusual for a wizard to celebrate his 150th birthday.”

Something occurred then to Victoria. Something which filled her with hope. “But surely, if everyone lives for so long, I would have grandparents? Great grandparents? Some family?”

“Institute of Oriental Sorcery!” called the conductor up the stairs. A pair of elderly witches made their way off the bus.

McGonagall sighed. “I’m afraid not. And that brings us to less pleasant conversation.” The bus jerked back into full speed. “And an explanation of Mr Owen’s behaviour.”

Many times in her life Victoria had dreamt of some forgotten relative coming to rescue her from the Dursleys. With the discovery of the magical world, Victoria had thought that dream was coming true. But, with a sinking feeling, she already knew what McGonagall was about to tell her. It seemed she was as alone as ever.

“Understand, Victoria, that magic is a potentially dangerous skill. In the hands of a man like the Headmaster, it can be a powerful force for good. But not all men are so scrupulous.”

Victoria clenched her fists. She had survived for ten years on her own. She didn’t need anyone.

McGonagall continued. “One such man emerged in the seventies. Of course, there have always been wizards and witches who would misuse their talents, but this man was no common dark wizard. It began with people disappearing—powerful people, some of the greatest witches and wizards of the age. It wasn’t long before the papers started connecting the dots, but no one knew who this mysterious serial killer was. *You-Know-Who*, they called him. But even then we didn’t realise just how dangerous he was. As it turned out, he wanted nothing less than to seize control of the wizarding world.”

McGonagall paused and closed her eyes. Clearly the memory was still painful. “It was a close thing, Miss Potter,” she said. “Few truly know how close. The Ministry was almost under his
power. And then, on Halloween night, 1981, he went to kill the Potters.”

Victoria was completely still, listening to every word. So this man was the reason she had no parents. This man was the reason she had been denied her heritage for so many years. Still, she was confused. “But... how did the conductor know me?”

“Things did not go according to You-Know-Who’s plan. Completely devoid of humanity, and apparently unsatisfied with the deaths of your parents, he decided to finish off the Potters for good. He turned his wand on you and tried to kill you too.”

Without realising what she was doing, Victoria reached for her forehead, tracing the spot where her scar had once been. And somehow, though it had been years since she had removed it, suddenly the scar was there again, the skin rough beneath her fingers. Professor McGonagall’s eyes lingered on her forehead. Suddenly feeling self-conscious, Victoria pulled her fingers away and shook her head, concealing the scar once more with a brief moment of concentration.

McGonagall’s story was not yet complete. “Miraculously, that scar was all that he could do to you. Somehow, you survived where so many others had died. And more than survived: something about you undid him that night. At the height of his power, so close to absolute victory, you destroyed him. For that, you are famous. The story of the Girl Who Lived is known to every witch and wizard in the world.”

Victoria had often dreamed of being famous. For many years, she had harboured a dream of leaving the Dursleys behind to go and make a name for herself. That way, once the world knew her name, she would return to the Dursleys and let them know what they had missed by not loving her like a daughter. But this wasn’t quite what she had in mind. Famous because she had survived and her parents had died? What kind of fame was that? Not the kind she could lord over the Dursleys.

Her attention returned to the story. “Who was he, though? This You-Know-Who?”

McGonagall looked around the bus, as if You-Know-Who would jump out from behind one of the chairs. “His name was Lord Voldemort,” she said, clearly but quietly, not wanting to be overheard. “There are still many who are afraid to speak it.”

“Voldemort,” Victoria repeated, a bit louder, as if daring the world to challenge her. Nothing happened. It was just a name.

BANG!

Victoria started, her heart jumping to her throat, but it was only the bus. They had stopped on a narrow, cobbled street.

“Leaky Cauldron!” the conductor shouted, and quite a few people stood to get off.

“This is our stop,” said McGonagall, and they got off the bus to find themselves outside a run-down pub.

Inside, the Leaky Cauldron had a rustic look to it. Its low timber ceilings were old, and though it was sunny outside, none of that light penetrated the grimy windows. Here and there a few patrons in dark cloaks were nursing flagons of unknown concoctions, but the place was mostly empty.

“We may return for lunch later, but we have a lot to do first. Our first stop is the bank. This way.”

Victoria just had time to glimpse a wizard stepping out of the pub’s fireplace, appearing from nowhere in a burst of green flame, before McGonagall led her through a side door into a dirty alley.
It was a dead end, with a smelly bin up against the wall.

McGonagall ignored their unpleasant surroundings and walked to the wall at the back of the alley. She removed her wand and tapped one of the bricks. Victoria could only gape as the wall rearranged itself with a rumble, the bricks forming into an archedway and revealing a crooked street full of robed wizards and witches. Old fashioned shops lined the sides, and a great white marble building loomed ahead.

McGonagall smiled at Victoria’s expression. “Welcome to Diagon Alley.”

Diagon Alley was without a doubt the most amazing place Victoria had ever seen. As they walked down the street, she found herself whipping her head back and forth, trying to see everything at once. The road underfoot was cobbled and each shop was unique, with none of the mass-produced uniformity of the Muggle world. It felt like she had stepped back into Victorian times.

All the shops were fronted with painted wooden signs announcing their names, and their wares spilled out onto the street in stands and displays meant to tempt shoppers within. Victoria could see, as they passed by, the proprietor of Madison’s weighing sweets from glass jars, excited children waiting in line with their colourful paper bags. A group of older girls giggled together as they left Twilfitt and Tatting’s wearing rather more daring robes than McGonagall sported. And McGonagall had to practically drag Victoria away from Patil’s Perfumery, from which emanated the most extraordinarily powerful scents: for a moment, she felt like she was walking through a freshly mowed garden, before it was replaced by the distinctive smell of new leather shoes.

Slug and Jiggers Apothecary looked almost like Madison’s, only with animal parts and plants inside the jars instead of sweets. A chalkboard outside the front door announced “DEAL OF THE DAY: FROGSPAWN, ONE SICKLE PER SCOOP”. Next to the apothecary was Belle, whose windows displayed glass bottles and jars containing concoctions of every possible colour. Before they hurried by, Victoria was just able to glimpse one: a tiny thing, containing some kind of green liquid called Blemish Blaster. NEW RECIPE - G1 was plastered over the display. A pimply teenage boy was hovering outside the window.

Not everything was so unfamiliar. While it was advertising something called Diricawl meat, the butchers looked quite normal, as did the greengrocers, albeit with a certain predominance of pumpkin. Gringotts Bank, however, was quite different. It was a grand building, classical in style, and it had a certain solid look to it where the rest of Diagon Alley was rather crooked. Two creatures guarded the front entrance like statues, and they were unlike anything Victoria had seen before. They were short, about as high as Victoria’s shoulders, heavily armoured, and rather ugly, with long pointed ears, hooked noses, and brown-green skin.

“What are they?” Victoria whispered to McGonagall as they walked up the steps.

“Goblins,” she replied, barely sparing them a glance. “Vicious, treacherous creatures. I would avoid them whenever possible, if I were you. All they care for is gold.”

Evidence of this was to be seen the moment they entered the bank, for Gringotts was opulent well beyond the bounds of taste. The entrance led directly to a long marble hall. A red carpet extended down the length of the room, with a row of pillars either side. Each column was sculpted into the shapes of animals and twisting vines, with gold and jewels everywhere. Snakes had rubies for eyes, birds golden beaks, and every leaf was inlaid with silver. It was a glittering, gleaming monstrosity.

Beyond the columns were tall wooden counters, behind which robed goblins sat and looked down upon lines of witches and wizards queueing for attention. They joined the shortest, and Victoria couldn’t help but think that the tall counters were somewhat petty—obviously the goblins enjoyed
the novelty of standing above wizards. Soon it was their turn. “Next!” spat the goblin, and they stepped forward.

“Miss Potter needs to access her vault,” McGonagall said, her tone abrupt but not overly rude. Victoria looked up sharply, suddenly remembering what McGonagall had said earlier about her parents leaving her money.

“Key?” said the goblin.

McGonagall pulled a tiny, fancy looking, key from her pocket and handed it over. The goblin stroked it for a second, before nodding.

“Very well. Griphook!”

Another goblin walked over. Victoria had trouble seeing the difference between the two—all goblins seemed to look the same.

“This way,” said Griphook, turning to walk down the hall at a surprising pace. The goblin led them through a side door into a dark tunnel. Train tracks led down into the darkness, the tunnel lit only by the occasional torch. They clambered with some difficulty into a cramped cart, and then, without a word of warning, Griphook sent them hurtling down the tunnel.

“Aiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

The scream of delight escaped Victoria’s lips before she could help herself. Embarrassed, she clamped her hands over her mouth, her heart thudding in her chest as she ignored McGonagall’s disapproving expression. Victoria had never been on a rollercoaster before—the one time she had been to a theme park, it had been her job to carry the bags—but she decided in that instant that she loved it.

It was, in her humble opinion, the best bank ever.

The ride was surprisingly long, passing through endless tunnels and across cavern-spanning bridges, some of them large enough that it was too dark to see the bottom. Eventually they arrived at their destination. They rolled to a surprisingly gentle stop next to a raised alcove. Torches lit when they approached, revealing a huge wooden door studded with iron.

The goblin clambered out of the cart. “Key?” he said, holding out his hand. Victoria passed it to him, and he pushed the key right into the surface of the door. A loud clunk came from the other side, and the door swung open.

Victoria gasped. The vault beyond held piles upon piles of gold and silver coins, more wealth than she had ever seen in all her time at the Dursleys combined. She walked into the chamber and looked around. A wooden shelf hung from one of the walls, upon which were several stacks of bronze coins.

“This... is all mine?” Victoria said, somewhat dazed. She picked up one of the gold coins. It was very small, less than an inch across, and wafer thin. A goblin’s face surrounded by a ring of numbers and runes was printed on one side, a ship on the other. “Is this actually gold?”

McGonagall turned to the goblin. “What is Miss Potter’s balance?”

Griphook held her key up to a beady eye, examining it. “The vault contains the equivalent of sixty-two thousand, three hundred and sixty-seven galleons.”
Victoria felt slightly faint. Those were rather large numbers. “How much is that in pounds?”

“Do I look like an abacus?” the goblin replied with a sneer. Victoria rolled her eyes and turned to McGonagall for help.

“Around one and a half million pounds, I believe,” she replied. “Not that the Ministry would let you convert anywhere near that much at once. A gold galleon is worth seventeen silver sickles, and it’s twenty-nine bronze knuts to the sickle.”

“Yes, yes,” the goblin snarled, “now hurry up. This isn’t a museum.”

Victoria was still staring at the galleon in her hand. “That’s a lot of money.”

“You’ll find that the Potter family is an old one,” McGonagall explained. “While there are certainly wealthier families, your parents were comfortably well-off. You also own a family home in the Cotswolds, as well as a cottage in Godric’s Hollow, though both are in need of renovation.”

It was all too much to take in at once, so Victoria took the goblin’s advice and focused on the present. “How much do I need for today?” she asked, pulling out her purse.

“One hundred and seventy galleons should be sufficient. First year always costs the most, as you have to purchase a number of items which will last your entire school career.”

Victoria tipped her Muggle money out onto the floor and counted out the gold coins. Even as small as they were, her purse was bulging at the seams and she had to stuff some money into the pockets on her skirt.

“All done!” she said, and they returned to the cart. The goblin passed Victoria her key without a word, and then they were off, hurtling back up towards the surface. As they travelled, Victoria took a closer look at a coin.

“Why’s there a goblin face on the coins?” asked Victoria, having to speak loudly over the noise of the cart. “Why not a wizard?”

Griphook bared his teeth at her, but said nothing.

“Because the goblins mint all the coins,” said McGonagall, “Indeed, from a goblin’s point of view, the gold all belongs to them and wizards just borrow it.”

Victoria didn’t like the sound of that. “So the money isn’t really mine?”

“As I say, that is the goblins’ view. We wizards take a rather different view of things, but the system has worked for hundreds of years without either side conceding the point. That should be enough for today’s shopping, I think.”

Victoria looked down at the somewhat curt answer, and the remaining journey was spent in silence. Soon enough they disembarked and Griphook returned them to the lobby.

“I hope that’s everything,” the goblin said, and he walked off without waiting for their answer.

“I see what you mean about them,” Victoria said, watching the retreating goblin. “He’s not very nice, is he?”

McGonagall sniffed. “Quite. Now, shall we proceed?”

It was time to go shopping.
When Victoria and Professor McGonagall left Gringotts it was into painfully bright sunshine. It had been dark in the bank, and it took a few moments of squinting for Victoria’s eyes to adjust. “Where first?” she asked, clutching her purse eagerly. She’d never been on a shopping spree before, and suddenly she was extremely rich. She wanted to buy everything.

“Robes, I think,” said McGonagall, and she led them down the street towards Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions.

It was a large shop, spread across what used to be three buildings. The mannequins in the windows wore a wide variety of robes, and Victoria was secretly pleased to see that McGonagall’s tastes ran rather conservatively among wizards. The display showed off many different styles, some of them quite daring, and they were made of everything from heavy velvet to the lightest chiffon. Inside it was spacious and cool, not unlike a Muggle department store, with racks of clothes arranged into islands around the shop floor.

They were greeted by a bored-looking assistant as they entered. “Welcome to…” she began, but suddenly perked up when she saw McGonagall. “Professor! How can I help you today?”

“Good morning, Miss Warrington,” McGonagall said. “Miss Potter needs to be fitted for her Hogwarts’ robes.”

The assistant gasped, her eyes darting to Victoria's forehead. “But where’s—”

“—in private,” McGonagall interrupted, her voice quite firm.

The girl wilted. “Of course... this way, please.”

They were led through a side door to the fitting room. A boy was already being measured up, standing on a stool and wearing a baggy white robe that resembled little more than a bed sheet. A woman was hovering around him, sticking pins into various parts of the robe. Each time she added a pin, the robe would shift and change, adjusting its shape to something more form-fitting.

“Here you go!” said Miss Warrington, passing her a similar outfit. “Put that on and pop onto the block.”

She dropped the white robe over her head and stepped onto a stool, looking across at the boy while the assistant started the process of pinning her robe back. He looked about the same age as her, with neat platinum-blond hair and pale skin. For his part, the boy was looking warily at Professor McGonagall, who had taken a seat in the corner.
Victoria broke the silence. “You going to Hogwarts too?” she asked, making him jump in surprise. He turned towards her and cocked his head.

“Oh, of course,” he drawled. *Definitely* a posh kid. “How come you’re with old—” he cleared his throat “—I mean, Professor McGonagall? Where are your parents?”

“They died when I was young,” Victoria said, quite casually, as it was something she had explained many times. “Voldemort killed them, you see.”

Chaos followed: both assistants shrieked, dropping their pins all over the floor, and the boy gasped, his pale face draining of all colour.

“You said his name!” Warrington cried, her hand clutched over her heart.


“You’re her, aren’t you?” the boy said, now looking at her with a glint in his eye. “Victoria Potter?”

“So they tell me,” Victoria replied.

The boy held out his hand. “A pleasure to meet you. Draco Malfoy.” Victoria leaned over and gave his hand a firm shake.

McGonagall cleared her throat loudly. “Miss Potter,” she said, “why don’t you go and take a look at the other robes, while the young women calm their nerves?”

“All right,” she said, and she hopped off her stool. She’d been wanting to have a proper look around since she saw the mannequins.

“No leaving the shop, now,” McGonagall added, just as she was about to step through the door, “you still need to finish your fitting.”

“I promise!” Victoria called, before turning back to address the Malfoy boy. “See you at Hogwarts, I guess.”

She returned to the shop floor and headed straight for the women’s section, which was divided into three areas: dress robes, outer robes, and inner robes. The dress robes section was the largest, and the most familiar—they were very similar to Muggle dresses, the main difference being that dress robes generally had long, billowing sleeves. Like Muggle dresses, they came in all sorts of styles, from the frumpy type McGonagall was wearing to summer dresses designed to show off a lot of leg.

The other sections were rather newer to Victoria.

*Outer robes*, it seemed, were meant to be worn over clothes like a jacket, except they went down to below the knee. They came in two main types, being either open or closed at the front, and were generally made of a thicker, more durable material. *Inner robes*, on the other hand, included any clothes worn beneath your outer robes. There were plenty of recognisable items from the Muggle world like blouses and skirts, but the section was dominated by a kind of lightweight dress, almost like a slip, but from the embroidery on display it was clear that they were intended to be seen.

Victoria returned to the dress robes and selected a few summer dresses, before picking out a couple of colourful inner robes. Every item had at least one enchantment sewn into it, she noticed. Most of the dresses had Gust Protection Charms running through the hem of the skirt, and the more
expensive winter robes boasted Warming Charms. She was about to go investigate the men’s robes, which looked quite different, when McGonagall found her.

“Time to resume your fitting, I think.”

They returned to the fitting room to find the Malfoy boy gone. The process of taking measurements passed much more smoothly in his absence, and before long she was trying on her school robes. The winter robes consisted of a black outer robe, open style, beneath which was a white inner-robe with a blouse-like collar. A thick, woollen cloak finished the outfit off, enchanted to shield the wearer from any amount of rain and wind. The summer robes were rather more simple: white dress robes embroidered with a silver gingham pattern.

“The silver will change colour when your house is decided,” McGonagall explained. “Red for Gryffindor, green for Slytherin, blue for Ravenclaw and yellow for Hufflepuff.”

Victoria dearly hoped she did not get put in Hufflepuff. She paid for the robes—over fifty galleons! —and left clutching a single paper bag. Somehow everything fit inside, though Miss Warrington had warned her that the charm would fail after a day or two.

“Where next?” Victoria asked once they were outside. Shopping was fun.

McGonagall looked at a small golden watch on the inside of her wrist. “We need to buy your trunk, stationery and books before we can stop for lunch. Since we spent longer than planned in Madam Malkin’s, I suggest we do so with a minimum of dawdling.”

She certainly meant what she said, for she proceeded to steer Victoria through a series of shops at breakneck pace. They purchased a trunk from Wizarding Travel Co., a store devoted to all kinds of magical luggage. At McGonagall’s advice she bought one made from a magically light Brazilian wood, with an enchantment to make it bigger on the inside than it was on the outside, paying a good sixteen galleons for the privilege. But by the time they arrived at the next shop, Scribbulus Writing Implements, Victoria knew she would have paid twice the amount, for even hauling around a magically lightened trunk made her arm ache.

It didn’t take long for them to spend a handful of sickles on several long rolls of parchment, a quill set and a variety of inks. Then they were off again, this time heading for a shop simply called Agnes.

“Agnès Broadmoor makes the finest telescopes around,” McGonagall advised as they entered what looked like a junk shop. “If we’re lucky she’ll have one in stock.”

There didn’t seem to be any particular theme connecting the items sold by Anges, which ranged from lamps to cooking implements, but tucked away in the corner were a pair of telescopes on tripods. Victoria bought one of them for six galleons (“a special price for you, Miss Potter!”) and left the store suddenly keen on testing the thing out. According to Agnes, it was good enough to see where the Muggles had landed on the Moon.

Their final stop before lunch was the bookstore Flourish and Blotts, which was filled with shelves so tall that you needed ladders to reach the top, and had display tables near the door advertising new releases with colourful covers. Here, finally, Victoria was once again allowed to browse.

“No more than three extra books, mind you,” McGonagall warned her. “The library at Hogwarts will have everything you need.”

The variety of books on offer was surprising. Victoria had imagined that all magical books would
be thick, dusty tomes. But apart from a handful of such volumes kept in locked cabinets, most of the books at Flourish and Blotts were newly bound and small enough to hold open in a single hand. They didn’t look quite like Muggle books—there wasn’t a paperback to be seen, and the bindings were rather sturdy—but they nonetheless appeared surprisingly modern.

She quickly accumulated a pile of over ten books, bouncing between sections like a pinball while McGonagall waited in line to order the books on her school list. How was she supposed to only buy three, when there were so many to read? She mournfully whittled her selection down until just three books remained.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow at *Everyday Charms for Witches*, causing Victoria to blush as the assistant ran her items through the till, but her other two purchases, *The Art of Magical Origami* and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, were met with nods of approval. Victoria almost gasped when she saw the price—forty galleons!—and she left Flourish and Blotts with a considerably lighter purse.

Victoria’s stomach rumbled. “Lunch time?”

“Yes,” McGonagall confirmed. “Come, we’ll go to Florean Fortescue’s.”

She repacked her bags while they waited to order, moving all of her purchases to the inside of her trunk. Luckily it didn’t take long for their food to come and Victoria tucked in with gusto, watching passers-by as she ate. The shop opposite was called *Quality Quidditch Supplies*, whatever that meant, and it seemed to be extremely popular.

“What’s Quidditch?” Victoria asked, watching a man leaving the store holding a long case. Was it some kind of musical instrument?

“Britain’s main sport,” said McGonagall. “Played on brooms high in the air, with a variety of balls and positions. A rather violent game, yet it has its own beauty.”

Victoria giggled at the idea of McGonagall, already looking so much like a storybook witch, riding a broom. It was just so silly! But it did sound fun... perhaps more to watch than to play. What happened if you fell off?

Their waiter returned when they had finished, whisking their plates away before asking if they wanted dessert.

“No, thank you,” McGonagall said, just as Victoria was about to order a chocolate sundae. She tried not to sulk. They paid for their lunch before planning the rest of their shopping.

“There’s not much left to do,” said McGonagall, looking over the equipment list. “You can go and have a wand fitted while I collect your Potions equipment. Other than that... did you wish to purchase a pet?”

Victoria thought for a moment. She didn’t really have strong feelings one way or the other, though she knew she didn’t want a toad. But she also didn’t want to return to the Dursleys yet. “We could take a look?”

“Yes. First, a wand. I’ll drop you off at Ollivander’s... no wandering off now. If you finish before I return, please remain outside.”

They retraced their steps, heading back past Gringotts and towards the curtained windows of Ollivander’s wand shop (est. 382 B.C.), where they parted ways. The inside of Ollivander’s looked less like a shop and more like the design classroom at Victoria’s primary school. It was a long,
narrow room with a stone floor, cluttered with work benches and strange looking machines. Wands in various states of completion were spread over every surface, and hundreds of jars of potions ingredients sat on shelves on the walls.

"I'll be with you in just a moment!" called Ollivander, an elderly man with white hair. He was sitting at a bench with his back to her and was holding a cylinder of wood, turning it this way and that with great care. Eventually he picked up a small knife and proceeded to shave the tiniest sliver of wood from one side.

“Perfect!” he cried, putting the wand down before spinning on his stool to face her. He wore small, round glasses. “Well now. You’ll be wanting a wand, I expect.”

Victoria nodded.

“You’ve come to the right place.” He gestured towards the wand he had just put down. “Come see.”

Victoria walked over and, at Ollivander’s encouragement, picked up the wand. There was no rush of power, no tingle of magic. It might as well have been any old piece of wood to her.

“Feel the balance,” Ollivander said, smiling, “this wand is ready for a core, I think. The wood came from a particularly stubborn Alder, but I think I have tamed it. Don’t you think?”

She didn’t know what she was supposed to be feeling. “It’s, um, very nice.” She glanced around the shop and waved at the other wands. “How do I know what wand to buy? There are so many different ones.”

“That’s where I come in,” Ollivander said, and he picked up a wand from the bench next to him before flicking it. A tape measure shot across the room and started jumping around Victoria, measuring various parts of her body.

“Stay here, Miss Potter,” he said, and he left the room via a side door. For a few long moments, the only sound was that of the tape measure extending and shortening all around her like an annoying fly. Ollivander returned bearing an armful of long, thin boxes. “Every wand I sell has one of three cores: dragon heartstring, unicorn tail hair, or phoenix feather,” he explained. He put the boxes down on the bench and the tape measure fell to the floor.

“What’s the difference?” asked Victoria.

“Well, that is hard to say, as a wand is not just its core—the wood is important too. But to put it crudely, dragon heartstrings are the most powerful, unicorn hairs the most subtle, and phoenix feathers the most mysterious, often possessing unique qualities.”

“Can I have a dragon one?” she asked quickly. It was obvious to her that you should go for the most powerful wand.

Ollivander chuckled. “I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that. Not all wands work equally well for all wizards. We must find the wand which suits you best—whatever it contains.”

“I suppose,” she muttered, still hoping for a dragon heartstring core.

“Here, try this,” he said, passing her a very long wand made of a white wood. She grasped the handle, but before she could even get a proper look at it, Ollivander whipped it out of her hand.

“Hey!”
“No no, not aspen, not quite right,” Ollivander said. “Hmm... how about this? Black walnut and dragon heartstring.” He passed her another wand, this one made of a much darker wood. She took it quickly, wanting to hold it properly this time, but it blew itself out of her hand with a bang.

She shook her reddening hand in the air. "Ouch."

“A bit volatile, that one. But a step in the right direction, I think. How about something a bit more peaceful? Give this a wave: willow, with a unicorn tail hair.” He handed her a handsome wand and she gave it a flick. Nothing happened.

“Nope!” said Mr Ollivander, taking it from her with a growing smile. “Not enough power.... well then, let’s try something a bit more refined. Elm, with a unicorn tail hair. Give it a wave.”

Pointing the wand at the floor in case of an accident, she gave it a flick. The wand let out only a puff of smoke. Victoria began to get nervous: what would happen if none of the wands suited her? But Mr Ollivander just laughed.

“I don’t think it likes you! A good match in some ways, but a certain conflict in temperament remains.” He rubbed his hands together gleefully. “I do so love a tricky customer. The dragon heartstrings are too volatile, but unicorn hairs lack a certain oomph. Yes, I think a phoenix tail feather will do you nicely…”

His eyes drifted up to her forehead as he trailed off. “I wonder…?” he murmured, “yes, it would be poetic… one moment, please."

He disappeared back into the side room and was gone for quite some time. Eventually he returned carrying a single box with a thick layer of dust on top. He blew the dust off before opening the box and removing the wand. “Eleven inches, holly, with phoenix feather core. Give it a try.”

She took the wand, and the moment she touched it she knew it was the one. A warmth spread through her, and she raised the wand almost involuntarily. With a squark, a tiny red robin burst from the tip and began flying around the room, chirruping merrily.

“Oh bravo!” cried Ollivander in delight, clapping his hands. Victoria smiled at her wand. It didn’t have a dragon heartstring core, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. It was hers.

“Curious that you should be destined for that wand... curious indeed,” Ollivander said, his eyes returning to her forehead. It was almost enough to make her think the scar had appeared again, but a quick check with her fingers revealed only smooth skin.

“Curious how?”

“I remember every wand I’ve ever made, Miss Potter. I made your parents’ wands, and Mr Potter’s parents’ before him, and I can remember them all. The phoenix whose tail feather resides in your wand gave just one other feather… it is curious that this wand should choose you, when its brother was wielded by He Who Must Not Be Named himself.”

She didn’t know what to think about that.

Ollivander took the wand back from her and put it back in the box. Victoria frowned, wishing she could keep it on her, but her Muggle clothes had no place to hold an eleven inch piece of wood. It was no wonder that robes all had big, billowing sleeves. She paid Mr Ollivander forty galleons before leaving to find Professor McGonagall waiting outside.

Their last stop was The Magical Menagerie, which sounded (and smelled) like someone had tried
to cram an entire zoo into one large room. Dancing rats jumped around a cage by the counter, owls hooted from the rafters, and a variety of toads were hopping in and out of a small rock pool at the rear. To one side cats roamed around an enclosure with tall glass walls, and by the far wall, near the toads, a number of snakes slept quietly in tanks. There were even a few dogs roaming freely, their tails wagging enthusiastically as they investigated each and every customer.

“What do you think?” asked McGonagall, eyeing the dogs like they carried deadly diseases.

“Not a toad,” she said.

“No,” agreed McGonagall. “An owl would be useful. You can use them to deliver mail.”

While there was something quite funny about the idea of sending an owl to pester the Dursleys every week, Victoria didn’t think she’d find one very useful. And more importantly, you couldn’t cuddle an owl.

“I’d like a cat,” she said, giggling as a little black kitten came up to the edge of its enclosure and started swatting at the glass. “Ohhh, they’re so cute!”

“An intelligent, elegant animal,” added McGonagall, who seemed to find something amusing. A trio of cats came over to them and stared up at her intently.

“I don’t know,” said Victoria, still watching the black one. “Isn’t taking care of a pet a lot of work? I don’t really know how to look after a cat...”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that, Miss!” said a woman behind them. It turned out to be one of the staff, a toad sitting on her shoulder. “Charmed collar, you see. Makes them do their business outside, keeps them from wandering too far, and come when you call for them. All you have to do is remember to feed ‘em!”

That was all Victoria needed to hear. “I want that one,” she said, pointing to the black kitten that was now licking its own back.

McGonagall looked at her in surprise. “Are you sure? Perhaps a bit more thought would be beneficial...”

But the moment she had made the decision, she knew it was right. “How much is he?”

“For you, darling, I’ll go down to one galleon. Another three for the collar, since it’s enchanted an’ all.”

“All right,” Victoria said, and the lady smiled at her, before clapping her hands.

“Dumbledore!” she called, and McGonagall spluttered in surprise.

Victoria realised whose name it was with a giggle. The kitten bounded over to where they were standing, passing through the glass barrier as if it wasn’t there.

“Now, you pick ‘im up like this,” the lady said, showing her how to hold him properly. “Here, you take ‘im.”

Victoria grinned and took hold of him. “He’s so warm!” she said, surprised. She’d never really held an animal before. It was strange. She could feel his chest moving as he breathed. Dumbledore rubbed his head up against her arm and she giggled. “Hellooo,” she said in a sing-song voice, stroking his belly with a free finger.
“This way, please.” The lady led them over to the counter and gently put a red collar over Dumbledore’s head. “Would you like to rename him?”

Victoria knew that she should, seeing McGonagall’s thinning lips out of the corner of her eye. But it was too tempting to resist…

“Dumbledore’s good,” she said with a grin, and McGonagall’s eyebrows shot upwards. Before she had a chance to stop it, the lady tapped the collar with her wand.

“Dumbledore,” she said, and the name appeared on the collar in golden lettering.

After being persuaded to buy some cat food (and a box to carry him in, and a couple of small toys) they left the shop with Dumbledore in his new cage. He hadn’t liked it at first, but McGonagall cast a calming charm on him, and after that he was content to lie down and swat playfully at the bars.

Shopping complete, they caught the Knight Bus back to Privet Drive, where McGonagall gave her a ticket to the Hogwarts’ Express. “It leaves from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, Kings Cross Station, on the first of September,” she explained outside the front door. “The platform is easy to access: just walk through one of the barriers between platforms nine and ten. Oh, and please avoid experimenting with magic… not only is it dangerous, unsupervised underage magic is also illegal.”

And with that she disapparated with a quiet pop, turning on the spot and disappearing into thin air. Victoria pulled her trunk up to the door and used her key to get in. Vernon was waiting for her, sitting half in the hallway, half in the sitting room. He looked over her new stuff and his jaw clenched.

“Dinner’s at six,” he said with a grimace, as if he wanted to say a lot more. Victoria nodded, and dragged everything up to her room in a series of thuds.

What a day!

Chapter End Notes

Author’s note: Yes, I am aware that it is not optically possible for an earthbound telescope to see the landing sites on the Moon.

Resources: Please see my profile for links to a visual guide to (female) robes.
Victoria was already awake when the sun rose on the first of September. She had been fidgeting in her bed for hours, waiting for the dawn while the rest of Privet Drive slept. It was rather unusual, as it had never been difficult for her to sleep before Christmas, nor before her birthday. But today was different—today she would finally leave for Hogwarts.

The summer had passed quickly, much to Victoria’s surprise. She had thought she would be counting the days until she could rejoin the magical world, but it turned out there was more than enough for her to be getting on with at home. Her trunk was overflowing with magical paraphernalia, and over the last two months she had thoroughly explored it all.

She’d started with her books, of course. She devoured them like nothing she had ever read before, returning to them again and again. A History of Magic was a firm favourite, taking her all the way from the wizarding Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt to the fall of the dark wizard Grindelwald, yet it was A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration that Victoria found herself reading most often. Sometimes she wondered why wizards even needed money, if they could magic up any object they desired.

Victoria had also quickly realised that her ability to change her appearance was a kind of transfiguration which was not normal, even in the wizarding world. The introduction to A Beginner’s Guide was very clear: human transfiguration was so advanced, and so dangerous, that they wouldn’t touch it until years later.

When she wasn’t reading her books, she was trying on her robes in front of the mirror, or playing with her telescope (Petunia would have been quite jealous of her ability to see through the windows of all their neighbours), or trying to identify her Potions ingredients with One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi.

Most of all, however, she had practised her magical origami. At first she had worried about McGonagall’s warning against using magic, but she had been using magic for years without getting into trouble. She figured that so long as she avoided her wand she would be safe, though that didn’t stop her from occasionally just sitting and holding it, imagining that she could once again feel the warmth which had filled her at Ollivander’s.

Finally giving up on any attempt at sleeping, Victoria threw off her covers, opened her ratty curtains and moved over to her desk. It was littered with used bits of parchment where she had practised her handwriting with quills, having fun trying out different styles and attempting to copy the loopy writing on her Hogwarts letter. Scattered around the parchment were her previous attempts at origami, some of them more successful than others.

She found the process very relaxing. With a small smile on her face, she cut a piece of square parchment from a scroll and flattened it on the desk. Fold by fold she built up a paper model of a crane, not rushing, picturing the flutter of wings and the splash of water with every fold. Soon
enough it was done. A bit lopsided perhaps, but one of her best attempts so far.

Then came the fun part.

She took out a needle (which she had found in Petunia’s sewing kit) and, with a grimace, pricked her forefinger. A small bead of blood welled out and she flicked it onto the paper. The blood seemed to be absorbed into it, and a moment later the red splotch had faded back to white. She then picked up the crane, held it to her lips, and blew.

The model jerked in her hands as if it was waking up from a deep sleep, and she let it go with a flap of its little paper wings. Dumbledore lifted his head in curiosity from his position stretched out at the end of her bed, but he had long since learnt that her creations were no more than paper. It flew this way and that around her small room, making no sound other than the rustle of its wings, until a few minutes later the magic died and the crane floated to the floor. Never again would she be able to animate that model, for each one had to be made fresh. It was a small trick, but Victoria thought it was beautiful. She turned to a new page in her origami book, this one depicting—with moving images—a blooming flower.

Several hours and many screwed up pieces of paper later she made her way downstairs with her trunk, all of her things packed neatly inside. As usual the trunk thumped loudly on every step.

Vernon stepped out of the kitchen. “Girl, you’re going to break the stairs at this rate. Give me that—” He took hold of her trunk’s handle and pulled, stumbling back slightly at its surprising lightness. “Damn thing’s not as heavy as it looks,” he muttered, “made by the Japanese, no doubt…”

Victoria rolled her eyes and made her way to their new Japanese car. Her trunk was too big to fit inside the boot so, with a great deal of huffing, Vernon had to lay it across the back seat. She hoped that nothing would smash… knowing Vernon he’d brake hard deliberately, just to mess up her glassware.

The drive to King’s Cross station proceeded in silence and Victoria was quite happy with it that way. Vernon turned the radio to BBC Radio Two and she sung along quietly, head resting against the window, watching the world whizz by.

“Here, girl,” Vernon said when they arrived, and he passed her a crisp twenty pound note with a forced smile. “Why don’t you stay at that school for the holidays, eh? Best that you’re with your own kind, don’t you think?”

Victoria shrugged and took the money, even though it would be useless in the magical world. “All right.” It wasn’t like she had planned on returning.

Vernon didn’t take her inside the station, speeding off out of the car park the moment her trunk was out of the back, so she entered the concourse of the station on her own, pulling her enormous trunk with one hand while struggling with Dumbledore’s cat carrier in the other. King’s Cross was a large station with a low ceiling, giving it something of a squat look, and it was dominated by a large board listing all the departures. Every time the list changed, the station was filled with the loud clack-clack of the tiles on the board rearranging themselves. Victoria read the entries as she headed for the platforms:

*Platform 5 - Edinburgh*

*Platform 7 - Leeds*
She froze. The Hogwarts Express was right there, on the board! Couldn’t the Muggles see it? And Platform Seven and a Half—surely that was a wizarding train too, though she had never heard of Constantinople. She glanced around, wondering if she would see a Muggle staring at the board in confusion, but instead she realised she was surrounded by wizards.

It was a miracle the Muggles missed it, really. How common was it to see children wandering around with owls? Most appeared to have made a token effort to wear Muggle clothing—some of them about a hundred years out of fashion—but here and there Victoria could spot wizards and witches in full robes, proudly striding through the station as if they owned it.

She supposed the Muggles just thought it was fancy dress, or else weirdos from some cult. It would take a lot more than some strangely dressed people to make Muggles think magic existed. As for the departure board, there must have been some magic hiding it from Muggle notice, like the Great Pyramids of Memphis she had read about.

Remembering McGonagall’s instructions, Victoria made her way to platforms nine and ten. She knew you had to walk through the barrier, but she wanted to see it first, unsure if there was any special technique. She didn’t have to wait long. A man and a girl approached, both of them red-haired, and she watched as they walked right into the brick wall. None of the Muggles seemed to notice.

It didn’t look so difficult. She walked over to the wall and prodded it. Her hand went right through, feeling the cool air on the other side. She grinned and stepped through backwards, pulling her trunk in after her.

“Oof!” someone said as she bumped into them.

“Oh, sorry!” said Victoria, turning around. She tried not to gape. The barrier had given way to a large outdoor platform at which a scarlet steam train was waiting to leave. HOGWARTS EXPRESS was painted along its side.

“Hi! I’m Susan,” said the girl she’d walked into, the same red-haired girl she’d watched go through the barrier a moment before. She was a bit shorter than Victoria, and not quite as thin, with a heart-shaped face and large blue eyes.

“Victoria,” she replied. Susan’s eyes flicked predictably up to her forehead, but to her credit she said nothing, instead leaning in for a kiss. Surprised, Victoria quickly brushed Susan’s cheek with the corner of her mouth. How old fashioned! Yet she thought it was nice. Shaking hands seemed so business-like.

“In the future, I’d recommend going through the barrier forwards,” said the tall man with a smile. Susan’s dad, Victoria supposed.

Victoria blushed. “Yes, sir.”

“Hah! We probably lingered too long by the entrance. Speaking of…” They moved away from the portal to King’s Cross, dragging their trunks towards the train. “And none of this ‘sir’ nonsense,” he continued, “call me Bruce, Miss Potter. Now, why don’t you and Susan find a compartment on the train?”
Susan hugged her father warmly. “Bye, Dad!” she said, kissing him on the cheek, and then she was pushing her trunk (which was on a trolley) towards the carriage door. “Come on, Victoria!”

Wizarding trains were very different to the Muggle trains Victoria had seen. Instead of carriages full of forward-facing seats, the Hogwarts Express had private compartments for groups of six or so, each one looking through sliding glass doors onto a long corridor which ran the length of the train. Victoria loved it immediately. It reminded her of the Victorian trains she’d learnt about in school.

“These are all full—let’s try further up,” said Susan as they made their way down the corridor. Dumbledore hissed every time his box was jostled, which was often, as the train was extremely busy. Excited chatter and the occasional shout filled the train as long-separated friends caught up, exchanging stories about their summers.

“Watch out, firsties!” someone called, and they jumped out of the way just in time. An older boy ran past them, a pretty girl chasing him.

“Zach!” she shouted as she ran, laughing. “I’ll jinx your balls off!”

“Let’s not be hasty!” the boy shouted back, still running, “what’s a little smack between friends, Moon?”

“How’s this for a smack?” the girl called, brandishing her wand, and a pinprick of red light shot at the fleeing boy’s backside.

Victoria turned to look at Susan in surprise, and they shared a giggle before moving on.

“Oi! Stebbins!” shouted a stocky red-head, a little further down the train. “Jordan’s got a Tarantula, come see!”

They eventually found a compartment, reaching it just as a boy and two other girls entered.

“Hi!” Susan said cheerfully. “I’m Susan Bones. Can we sit here too?”

“Sure,” said one of the girls. She was very pretty, with wavy golden blonde hair and a healthy tan. “I’ll just move my trunk. I’m Daphne Greengrass, by the way, and this is Pansy.”

“Pansy Parkinson,” the second girl corrected. She was the opposite of Daphne: pale, with black hair and a button nose that might generously be described as distinctive. “Neville, help Daphne with her trunk.”

The somewhat pudgy boy jumped at being addressed, but nodded, and together he and Daphne managed to hoist the trunk up onto the rack.

“Thanks, Neville,” Daphne said, but the boy just reddened.

Boys.

“I... I think I’ll, er, look around the train,” he mumbled, and he ran away before any of them could say another word.

Pansy laughed. “What a duffer.”

“He’s not so bad,” Daphne replied. “Good family, at least.”

“But did you see his grandmother’s hat? I think I’d die of embarrassment.”
Daphne hummed in agreement before turning to Victoria. “Here, let me help you with that,” she said, moving to lift one side of her trunk.

“Oh! Thanks,” Victoria replied, moving Dumbledore’s carrier onto the seat, and together they managed to get her trunk up into the rack. “I’m Victoria. Victoria Potter.”

A moment of silence followed.

“Well, of course you are,” Pansy said, as if she had known all along, “here, why don’t you sit next to me?” She took a seat next to the window and patted the cushion next to her.

Victoria shrugged and took the seat while Susan and Daphne struggled to get Susan’s trunk up into the increasingly-full rack. “So you guys know each other already?”

Pansy nodded. “Daphne and I have been best friends since forever,” she explained. “We had the same tutor, you see.”

Daphne and Susan, having finished with Susan’s trunk, took the seat opposite.

“Tutor?” Victoria asked.

“Mrs Malfoy,” Daphne explained, the name seeming familiar to Victoria.

“You’re so lucky,” Susan said with a groan. “I was stuck with old Mrs Graves. Never shuts up about Grindelwald…”

Pansy snorted. “Well, Mrs Malfoy is the best. She’s just so…”


Pansy nodded. “That’s it. I don’t think I ever saw a hair out of place on her head. And she taught us French.”

“That Potion was disgusting though,” Daphne added. “Not sure I’d do it again.”

Victoria was beginning to feel rather lost. “Hey, do you guys mind if I let Dumbledore out?” she said, gesturing at the carrier.

All three girls’ eyes widened and they turned to look at her cat in awe.

“What… what did you do to him?” said Daphne.

Victoria frowned, before remembering that their Headmaster was called Dumbledore. She burst out laughing, trying to speak but only managing to giggle even harder when she saw the looks of consternation on their faces. “He’s not actually Dumbledore, she gasped out, “he’s just a cat.”

The girls looked stunned for a moment, then Susan started laughing too, the others following immediately after. Hearing them set Victoria off again, and soon enough the four of them were stuck in a seemingly endless cycle of giggling. As soon as it looked like they’d stop, they’d share a look, and start anew.

“My tummy hurts,” groaned Daphne, wiping a tear from her eye.

“My too,” said Susan, still grinning from ear to ear. “I can’t believe you actually called your cat Dumbledore.”
“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” said Victoria. “So, can I let him out?”

The girls all nodded, and she flipped the lock on the cage door. Dumbledore scampered off, out of the door before she could say anything.

“Oh!” Susan said, looking disappointed. “I wanted to hold him.”

“He’ll be back,” Victoria said with a shrug. “I can always call him later if he isn’t.”

Susan’s reply was interrupted by the sound of a shrill whistle.

“At last!” Pansy said.

The train jolted and began to move. As they crept out of the station, Susan, Daphne and Pansy all stood to wave by the window, calling goodbye to their families. Victoria stayed sitting. She had no one to wave to.

It didn’t take long for them to leave the station behind, and the girls returned to their seats. Pansy held out her hand in front of her and examined her perfectly polished nails. “So, Victoria, tell us about yourself. I’d heard you’d been sent to live with Muggles... but that can’t be right, can it?”

Victoria blushed. “It’s true,” she said, causing all three girls to gasp.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Daphne said, looking like Victoria had just announced she was dying.

Susan was similarly aghast. “Was it awful?”

Victoria opened her mouth to reply, but Pansy beat her to it.

“Obviously it was awful,” she said, putting a hand on Victoria’s knee, “but at least it’s over now. Really, you’re lucky they didn’t manage to steal your magic.”

“That’s just a children’s story,” said Susan, but Pansy shook her head.

“It’s not,” she said firmly, “Daddy told me it was true. A few of them come to Hogwarts every year, didn’t you know?”

Susan rolled her eyes. “That’s silly. Muggleborns don’t steal magic.”

Victoria looked between Susan and Pansy, not sure who to believe. Certainly she couldn’t imagine the Dursleys ever being able to steal magic.

“Well, I don’t know about any of that,” she began, cutting off Pansy’s reply, “but they didn’t steal mine.”

“But you must have so much to learn,” Daphne said, “I bet those Muggles didn’t teach you anything.”

Daphne’s statement confirmed Victoria’s worst fear. “I suppose everyone else knows so much magic already,” she said glumly, “I haven’t even cast a proper spell yet.”

Susan snorted. “Neither has any—”

“So much to learn,” Pansy interrupted, “luckily, you have us to teach you!”

Victoria smiled. “Will you tell me about it? Growing up in the magical world?”
“Of course we will!” Daphne said, clapping excitedly, “but where should we start?”

The three girls shared a look, before speaking as one:

“Robes.”

And so began Victoria’s education. They closed the blinds on the glass door, took their trunks down from the luggage racks and before long the room was filled with discarded clothing as they changed from one outfit to another. There was no shortage of advice given along the way.

“No, no, you have to sit like this,” Pansy instructed, showing off a rather stiff-backed pose with her hands resting on her knees.

“Stand with your hands tucked inside the opposite sleeve,” Susan advised.

“Just do whatever’s comfortable,” Daphne suggested, which was met with a roll of Pansy’s eyes.

“Don’t listen to her,” Pansy said, “she’s annoyingly natural at this... Mrs Malfoy’s favourite. The rest of us actually have to try.”

Finally they each ended up wearing their Hogwarts robes, the rest of their clothes folded up and returned to their trunks.

A knock came at their door, followed by a woman’s voice: “Anything to eat, dears?”

Susan opened the door to reveal an old lady pushing a trolley laden with strange sweets and snacks. Victoria leaned forward for a better look: Pumpkin Pasties, Liquorice Wands and Chocolate Frogs... she had no idea what any of them were.

“Chocolate Frog, please,” Susan said, handing over a few knuts, and Daphne bought the same.

Pansy declined to order, and then it was Victoria’s turn.

“Er...”

Susan came to her rescue. “She’ll have a Chocolate Frog too.”

After the lady had moved on, Victoria watched the others open their Chocolate Frogs with fascination. Susan took hers firmly by its midsection as the chocolate animal tried to wriggle free, much like Victoria’s origami. Daphne ate hers more delicately, keeping the frog trapped in the box and reaching inside to snap off small pieces.

“Go on,” Susan said, licking melted chocolate from a finger, “try it!”

Victoria untied the ribbon around the box before lifting the lid carefully. The frog leapt out, making her jump in surprise, but she managed to snatch it from mid-air before it escaped. The frog struggled to get free for a moment, but the animation died the moment she broke off a piece from a leg.

“Cool,” she said, before taking a bite of the chocolate. It was delicious.

“What card did you get? Daphne asked.

“Card?”

“Inside the box.”
Victoria fished the card out from the bottom of the box. On one side was a moving portrait of a stern-looking wizard wearing robes with lots of ruffles. The other side held a short biography:

*Brandon Swann*

1571 - 1698

*Known as the Father of the Ministry, Swann is best known for his leading role in overthrowing the Wizards’ Council in 1649, as well as his strong support for the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy. The Swann family continues to enjoy prominence, with three Ministers for Magic and a Supreme Mugwump to their name.*

Daphne groaned when she saw the card. “Boring,” she said, though Victoria thought it was interesting enough. “He’s probably the most common one, after Dumbledore.”

“What’s a Supreme Mugwump?” Victoria asked, remembering that it was on Headmaster Dumbledore’s list of titles.

Pansy waved a hand. “Some political thing. Like Daphne said, boring.”

“It’s to do with the International Confederation of Wizards,” Susan said, somewhat more helpfully. “Don’t really know what they do though.”

Victoria was about to ask about the International Confederation of Wizards when the door to their compartment slid open once more. It was the blond-haired boy from Madam Malkin’s.

“Draco!” Pansy cried, beaming at the boy, and suddenly it clicked—that was where Victoria had heard the name ‘Malfoy’ before. Pansy’s and Daphne’s tutor must have been related to this boy.

Draco stepped into the compartment. He was carrying a rectangular wooden case under his arm. “Finally,” he said, with a long-suffering air, “finding you was a nightmare.”

“Sit next to me,” Pansy commanded, before turning to Victoria. “Move up, would you?”

For a moment she was tempted to argue, not liking being told what to do, but Daphne caught her eye and gave a little shake of her head. Victoria forced a smile. “No problem.” She moved to the end of the seat.

“So, Draco,” Daphne began, and there was a mischievous glint in her eyes, “weren’t you telling us, just last month, that you were going to Durmstrang? Yes, I remember it very well… something about how you were going to go and learn ‘real magic’… don’t you remember, Pansy?”

“Oh, pish posh,” Pansy said, “Draco was just joking, I’m sure.”

“I was invited,” Draco said, puffing up slightly, “Father was all for it… he goes back with Headmaster Karkaroff, you know… but Mother didn’t like it. Said Durmstrang is a school for brutes.”

“Speaking of, where’s Crabbe and Goyle?” Daphne asked.

Malfoy shrugged. “Left them in the dining car. Knowing them, they’ll stay there the rest of the way.”
Susan erupted into a loud laugh, drawing everyone’s gaze. She blushed a deep red and looked down at her lap. Draco looked to Pansy.

“This is Susan Bones,” she said, and Susan gave Draco a brief smile before looking back down at her lap. She didn’t kiss him like she did everyone else, Victoria noticed. Why was she acting so strangely? “And this,” Pansy continued, now turning to Victoria, “is—”

“Victoria Potter, I know,” said Draco. “We’ve met.”

Pansy frowned at Victoria, apparently somewhat deflated by the loss of her big surprise. “How…?”

“Madam Malkin’s,” Victoria said, and her answer seemed to satisfy Pansy, who smiled once more.

Daphne leaned forwards. “Is that Beyond the Veil under your arm?”

“I thought we could play,” Draco said. “Here, let’s make a table with a trunk.”

Pansy groaned. “I hate Beyond the Veil,” she said, but nonetheless she helped them pull Daphne’s trunk out to use as a surface. Draco took the wooden case and unlatched a hinge on its side, unfolding it to form a board. A crystal ball sat at its centre, and the board itself was covered with carvings depicting various scenes.

“I call goblin,” Daphne said, picking up a pewter figurine.

“Vampire,” Pansy said, taking another. Susan then took the werewolf.

Victoria hesitated. “I don’t really know how to play.”

“You’ll pick it up,” Draco said. “Basically you have to solve the murder by going to different locations for clues.”

“Each time you reach a location, the crystal ball will give you a vision,” Daphne explained. “Here, just watch.” She took her wand out of her sleeve and tapped the crystal ball. “Begin.”

The lights in the compartment darkened and cold smoke coalesced around the board like fog. Daphne placed her goblin on the edge of the board, took hold of a pair of chicken’s feet—made of pewter like the figurines—and threw them into the air. They floated down to the board, and then the goblin began to move, walking towards a carving of a cave.

“No fair,” said Pansy, “you can’t go to the cave first.”

Daphne smirked. “Tell that to the Fates. No interrupting, now.” She then leaned forward and stared into the crystal ball. It happened in a moment: her eyes glazed over, turning a milky-white colour, before suddenly she was back with them again, sitting up with a smile on her face. “Interesting.”

The game proceeded in much the same way, with Susan, Pansy and then Draco taking their turns. Pansy had a bad throw and didn’t make it to any location, her vampire stuck half-way between an overgrown cottage and a tower, but the other two both had their first visions. And then it was Victoria’s turn.

She placed her piece, a mermaid, on the edge of the board, and threw the chicken’s feet. She had no idea what they meant but Pansy’s groan probably meant it was good.

“Beginner’s luck,” Draco said, and her mermaid made its way past Pansy’s vampire all the way to the tower. “Now stare into the crystal ball.”
She looked at the ball, feeling quite silly, but the moment her eyes met its centre she could not look away. There was just something so fascinating about the way the inside swirled and shifted… her focus narrowed, the rest of the compartment barely even registering at the corners of her vision, and suddenly she saw it: a bloody dagger etched with runes, resting on top of a tombstone.

The vision ended and the room returned.

“Woah,” Victoria said, feeling slightly dizzy, but the feeling passed quickly. She looked around with a grin on her face. *This* was magic. She handed the chicken’s feet over to Daphne. “Your turn, I guess.”

It was at that moment that someone burst into their compartment, the bright light of the corridor piercing the darkness. The newcomer was a girl their age with bushy brown hair. “Has anyone seen a… what *are* you doing?”

Pansy glared at the new girl. “Who are you?”

“Hermione Granger, pleased to meet you,” the girl said, “are you playing a game? I was looking for a toad, have you seen one?”

Pansy and Draco shared a look. “No,” Pansy said. “Go away.”

Hermione huffed. “Well, no need to be so rude. I was just asking… I’m new to all this, you know, and it’s terribly fascinating. Maybe I can join your game?”

“I’m afraid we’ve already started,” Draco said with a tight smile. “Good luck with your toad.”

Daphne giggled.

Hermione stared at them for a moment longer before spinning away and closing their door with a loud thump.

“What did I tell you?” Pansy said the moment she was gone. “They steal magic.”

Susan looked like she wanted to say something, but instead looked back down at her lap when she saw Draco nodding.

“Let’s just play,” Daphne said, and the game resumed.

The game turned out to be a long one. The visions they were given in each location constituted clues, but Victoria quickly found that there wasn’t really any structure to them. She grew quite frustrated as her visions became a succession of nonsense. A ring, a dark mirror, a gold coin, a mirror again… what did it mean?

The others seemed to be having a better time of it, because as the game progressed they began taunting each other with their knowledge. At one point Pansy and Draco even traded a clue, which didn’t seem very fair to Victoria, but ultimately it turned out to be pointless.

Susan won the game. “I’ve got it,” she said at the end of her turn. Everyone looked at her in surprise.

“Are you sure?” Daphne asked, “if you guess wrong, you’re out of the game.”

“I’m sure,” Susan replied, “The victim was murdered by his wife.” The werewolf figurine took a step towards the crystal ball. “The motive was vanity.” Another step. “The method was a Muggle
assassin.” The werewolf reached the centre. Suddenly the smoke was sucked back into the board and the compartment lights flickered back to life. The sun was much lower in the sky than when they had started.

“I was so close!” Daphne said. Victoria was just baffled by the whole thing.

“I’m starving,” Pansy declared, “shall we go find Crabbe and Goyle in the dining car?”

But at that moment someone once again knocked on their door. It was an older boy with long, sandy-blond hair. He looked very tall to Victoria, and he had a shiny badge clipped to his robes.

“We’re approaching Hogsmeade,” he said. “You should change into your robes if you—oh, never mind.” They were all in their robes already.

It was not long before the train slowed down with the squeal of brakes and pulled up to a small, deserted platform. The cool air was refreshing after so long inside, and for a moment Victoria just closed her eyes and breathed it in. The Dursleys never went to the countryside. The station was in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by mountains, with a cobbled road leading off into a forest. A long line of horseless carriages were waiting on the road, enough to take all the students. It was beautiful.

“Firs’ years, this way!” someone shouted, and they looked to see a huge man with shaggy black hair stepping up onto the platform. He was easily eight feet tall and wide enough to match. He counted out loud as a crowd of first years began to gather around him, many looking up at him with something like fear.

“Alright, looks like everyone’s ‘ere,” he said at last, holding up a lantern. “Follo’ me.”

They walked off into the trees in nervous silence, broken only by the occasional excited whisper. Feeling the tension of anticipation, Victoria found herself whispering too.

“Is he human?” she asked. She hadn’t known people could get that big.

“No clue,” Susan replied, mimicking her whisper. “I’ve never seen anyone like him.”

After ten minutes’ walk the trees thinned to reveal a rocky shore, no more than a small cove on what looked like a truly massive lake. A group of boats were bobbing on the water.

“Come on then, four to a boat!” the man said, taking one entirely for himself. He looked ridiculous in it, hunched with his knees up, but Victoria quickly moved to follow, trying not to get too wet. Susan followed her, but Pansy, Daphne and Draco got into the boat next to them.

“Race you to the other side!” Daphne called, just as a the big man raised a pink umbrella.

“Forward!” he called, and the boats began moving of their own accord, sailing out into deeper water.

They got their first sight of Hogwarts as they turned out of the cove. Victoria gasped along with all the others, looking up at the glittering lights of her new home. It was magnificent. A huge castle stood atop a tall outcrop across the lake, an eclectic mix of towers, ramparts and keeps made of dark grey stone. Facing them was a long hall with arched windows, a warm glow coming from within.

Their boats headed towards the castle, and Victoria craned her neck to keep looking at it as they got closer, before they eventually passed through a rocky archway into a small sheltered dock.
They got out of the boats and followed their guide up a flight of steps, where they encountered a massive wooden door with metal bracing.

The giant raised his huge fist and knocked three times. They had arrived.
The door opened to reveal Professor McGonagall, dressed in high-collared robes of dark green and wearing her pointy witch’s hat. “Thank you, Hagrid,” she said. “I’ll take them from here. Follow me, everyone.”

She led them into the castle, where their long ascent began. Victoria didn’t even try to hold back her amazement at the sheer magic around her. The large, airy halls were full of living portraits that could speak, moving staircases, and elaborate suits of armour. Their way was lit by what at first appeared to be gas lamps, each one giving off a warm yellow glow from behind its glass housing, but closer inspection revealed the source to be not gas but rather a fluttering cloud of tiny motes of light.

“Fairies,” whispered Susan at her questioning look.

McGonagall spoke to them as they walked. “In just a moment, you will be sorted into your houses: Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, or Hufflepuff. Your house will be like a family to you while you are here, and it is expected that you will do your utmost to represent that family to the best of your ability.”

They passed into a large antechamber where McGonagall stopped in front of another door. “Every house,” she continued, turning to face them, “has a long and rich history, and in time you will come to add to that history. But first, you must be sorted.”

And with that she opened the door and beckoned them into a cathedral-like hall lit by a multitude of floating candles. The floor was made of granite flagstone and the far wall was dominated by tall stained-glass windows. But it was the vaulted ceiling that took Victoria’s breath away, for it had been enchanted to show the sky above, as if there were no ceiling at all.

They were not alone in the hall. Hundreds of students sat at four long tables running the length of the room, and at the far end were the teachers, sitting around a long semicircular table on a raised dais. An old man with a long white beard sat at their centre, his wooden chair grander than the others.

“The first years, Professor Dumbledore,” said McGonagall, stopping in front of the teachers’ table, next to a ratty old hat which rested on a stool.

“Then let the sorting begin!” Dumbledore replied. His voice was surprisingly strong and clear for such an old man. All eyes turned to the hat and Victoria could only look on in amazement as, with a shudder, It began to sing:

*Oh you may not think I'm pretty,*
But don't judge on what you see,
I'll eat myself if you can find
A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat
And I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head
The Sorting Hat can't see,
So try me on and I will tell you
Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
if you've a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You’ll make your real friends,
Those cunning folks use any means
To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don’t be afraid!
And don’t get in a flap!
You’re in safe hands (though I have none)
For I’m a Thinking Cap!

The hall erupted into applause and the Sorting Hat bent several times as if bowing. Eventually, McGonagall raised her hand and the clapping stopped.

“When I call your name,” she said, turning to the first years, “come forward and place the hat on your head.” She flicked her wand and a long scroll of parchment appeared from nowhere. “Abbott, Hannah!”

A plump blonde girl stepped forward and McGonagall lowered the Sorting Hat onto her head. There was silence for a moment, and then:

“HUFFLEPUFF!” the hat shouted, causing applause to erupt from the Hufflepuff table. Hannah rushed over to them, where a plate popped into existence at the end closest to the teachers.

“Bones, Susan!”

Susan took a bit longer than Hannah, but it wasn’t long before the hat shouted “Hufflepuff!” once more. Susan joined Hannah with a grin on her face.

And so it went. Some people were very quick, others took much longer. Victoria watched only with detached interest, not yet knowing many of her year-mates. After that Hermione girl took forever, finally a name was called which she recognised:

“Greengrass, Daphne!”

Victoria perked up. She had quickly come to like Daphne (much more than she did Pansy) and so she watched curiously for the result.

“SLYTHERIN!” shouted the Hat, somewhat to Victoria’s surprise. Daphne had not struck her as particularly cunning, but nonetheless the blonde girl went to join the students wearing robes trimmed with green. Draco joined the Slytherins not long after, the Hat deciding before it even touched his head. Pansy followed him there, and then—

“Potter, Victoria!”

A wave of hushed chatter crossed the hall at her name. A camera flashed, and then the hat was on her head. It was so large it covered her eyes, but she could still hear the murmuring hall beyond.
“Hmm... interesting,” a voice said, whispering right by her ear. “Very interesting. Talent the likes of which I rarely see. My goodness, yes. And a certain thirst for knowledge to suit it. A desire to prove yourself, and to be seen doing so... Oh, the founders would have fought over you, there’s no doubt about it... but who would have won?”

Victoria wasn’t sure if she was meant to reply. None of the other students had, so far as she could tell.

“Slytherin, perhaps? The ambition is there, the desire for recognition,” the hat continued. She thought of Daphne, Pansy and Draco. They weren’t so bad. “No objections? Most curious... One suspects that the next seven years shall prove quite entertaining. Yes, you most definitely belong in SLYTHERIN!”

McGonagall whipped the hat off Victoria’s head. For a moment the hall was silent, staring at her incredulously, before the Slytherin table roared with approval, many of them rising to their feet in standing ovation. Daphne was beaming at her from her position at the end of the table.

“Good show,” Draco said when she walked over. He was one of those standing to clap. “I knew you had it in you.”

“Settle down, now,” called McGonagall, and the Slytherins rapidly returned to their seats.

“Budge up!” Pansy hissed to the boy sitting next to her, and everyone shuffled down the bench to make a space for Victoria. A set of cutlery, a plate and a goblet appeared on the table the moment she sat down.

The rest of the sorting went along quickly. Lisa Turpin went to Ravenclaw, right before Hufflepuff received their last member. Finally they reached the end of the alphabet, with Blaise Zabini heading for Slytherin.

Dumbledore stood. He was tall, thin, and wearing flamboyant purple robes unlike anything Victoria had seen at Madam Malkin’s. “To students both old and new, welcome to Hogwarts! Before we are all befuddled by the feast, I have a number of announcements to make.” He allowed a moment for the students to groan in good-natured complaint. “Yes, yes, I shall endeavour to be as concise as possible,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “In addition to my annual warning regarding the dangers of the Forbidden Forest, first and second year students are reminded that the town of Hogsmeade is off limits... alas, the delights of Honeydukes shall have to wait. Personally, I am rather partial to their fizzing—”

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

“—yes, well, enough of that. My next announcement will no doubt sadden you all. I must inform you that a true Hogwarts institution, Professor Binns, passed on over the summer.”

Someone at the Gryffindor table whooped, and the hall erupted into laughter. Victoria looked around in confusion. Why were they laughing at someone dying?

Dumbledore’s lips twitched. “Yes, it seems that Professor Binns was so shocked by a student desiring to continue his class to N.E.W.T. level that he departed this world, some three hundred years after his death. That, of course, means that we shall need a new History Master. Please give a warm welcome to Professor Flamel.”

A middle-aged man stood up from his seat at the teachers’ table to polite applause. He had a kindly look about him, with black hair streaked with silver and a rather striking handlebar moustache.
Victoria couldn’t help but notice that the teachers were clapping for him with unusual enthusiasm… and now that she looked around, why were the older Slytherins whispering to each other so frantically?

Professor Flamel gave a small bow in recognition before taking his seat once more.

“Wonderful,” said Dumbledore. “I look forward to hearing all about Professor Flamel’s lessons. But now, lest we face a revolution from our hungry Gryffindors, let the feast begin!”

And suddenly, to Victoria’s amazement, the tables were heaving with food. It looked like there was something of everything. There were meats of every kind—roasted, grilled, cured and smoked—and enough vegetables to feed an army. But that was just the start: there were stews, a giant shepherd's pie, and pastries of many kinds. Sitting right in front of her was a perfectly pink beef Wellington.

“Potatoes?” Daphne asked, offering a platter piled high with perfectly crisp roast potatoes glistening with goose fat. Victoria took several before passing them on to the boy to her right.

“Blaise, wasn’t it?” she asked as he took the platter. He was a handsome black boy with very short hair.

“That’s right,” he said, “no need to ask who you are, of course. Bit of a surprise to see you here, though.”

Victoria started cutting into the beef Wellington. “Oh? And why wouldn’t I be at Hogwarts?”

Draco, sitting opposite, snorted. “Not Hogwarts. In Slytherin.”

“And what’s weird about that?”

Draco suddenly looked very uncomfortable. “Well, you know…” he said, focusing entirely on placing a slice of chicken and leek pie onto his plate, “it’s You-Know-Who’s old house.”

Victoria’s hand paused half-way towards a boat of gravy. “You-Know-Who went to Hogwarts?” It was a strange thought. She’d been picturing him like some kind of monster, not someone who had once been a kid.

Draco shrugged. “That’s what they say.”

“Well, she’s here now,” Pansy said, joining their conversation. “No take-backs!”

“I’m sure Victoria’s perfectly happy to be in Slytherin,” Daphne added. “After all, we’re here!”

Victoria smiled at Daphne in thanks.

“Oi, Potter!” a girl’s voice called from further down the table. It came from a large, powerfully built girl with a troll-like face. “You done with the gravy?”

Pansy rolled her eyes and daintily picked up the gravy before passing it down. “A ‘please’ wouldn’t hurt, Millicent.”

“Do you all know each other already?” Victoria asked. Pansy seemed to know everyone.

“Not all of us,” said Daphne, glancing down the table at the other Slytherin first years. All in all there were around twenty of them. “But most, yeah. Our parents are friends so we kind of grew up together.”
Meanwhile Blaise had got into an argument with a small, mousy-haired girl over which class was the best. “How can it be anything other than Charms?” he was saying, “most of magic is Charms.”

“Yeah, but in Defence you get to duel,” the girl replied.

Blaise snorted. “And what’s a first year going to do in a duel? Shoot sparks? Face it, Tracey, Charms is just the most fun.”

Draco shook his head. “You’re not thinking about this properly. The best class is obviously Potions—it’s taught by Professor Snape.”

Another name Victoria didn’t know. “Snape?”

“Our Head of House,” Draco said, pointing up at the teachers’ table. “The one with the long black hair, see?”

Victoria looked at a man with greasy hair, pale skin and yellowing, crooked teeth. He was talking with a man wearing a purple turban.

“Him?” Victoria asked, “he’s a bit, uh…”

“Ugly?” suggested Daphne with a grin. “I’m with Blaise on this one. Charms is best.”

“I think Transfiguration looks interesting,” Victoria said, daring to offer an opinion. The others all pulled faces.

“Are you insane?” Pansy asked. “Transfiguration is the worst. It’s supposed to be the hardest by far.”

Victoria shrugged. She’d read their Transfiguration book multiple times and it all made sense to her. Her retort was interrupted, however, by a series of gasps around the hall. She looked around to see that a number of silvery, translucent figures were coming through the wall and floating towards the various tables.

“What…”

“Ghosts,” Daphne supplied, apparently completely unconcerned, just as they were joined by the apparition of a man covered in chains and wearing blood-stained robes.

“Well met, Baron,” Draco said, drawing the ghost’s piercing gaze. The ghost said nothing, the moment stretching to the point of discomfort, then turned and floated down the table towards the older years.

Daphne giggled once he was gone. “Well met… you’ve been reading too many novels, Draco. I’m pretty sure that’s not how they spoke in Anglo-Saxon times.”

A faint blush appeared across Draco’s cheeks. “Well, I didn’t see you saying anything!”

“I have no desire to speak to the Bloody Baron, thank you very much.”

Pansy nodded in agreement. “He’s rather creepy, isn’t he? And no one knows where that blood came from… it doesn’t look like it’s his, does it? It’s not like he’s injured.”

At that moment the food on the table before them disappeared without warning—a cry of dismay coming from a bulky boy a few seats down from Draco, who had been spooning more mashed potato onto his plate. The spoon had disappeared from his hand, and a moment later his plate
vanished too, along with all the others.

His dismay did not last long: not a second later the plates were replaced with dessert, similarly abundant to the main course. Within reach Victoria could see an apple crumble, chocolate torte, and a tower of profiteroles, with jugs of cream and custard to accompany them. Suddenly she didn’t feel so full. They dove in, and for a few minutes the talking in the hall was largely replaced with the concentrated silence of food being served.

“You know, I think I’ve changed my mind,” Draco announced once their bowls were suitably overflowing with pudding. “Potions isn’t the best class.”

Daphne waved her spoon in victory. “Hah! Told you, Charms is—”

“Let me finish,” Draco said, holding up his hand, “Potions isn’t best because obviously the best class is Flying.”

“That doesn’t count as a real class, Draco,” Pansy said with a groan.

“I heard that!” called a boy some way down the table. He looked like his nose had been broken at least three times.

Pansy glared at him. “Mind your own business, Bletchley.” Her statement caused a wave of laughs from the third years, many of them turning to taunt the boy.

“He’s right though,” Draco said, “you had better get used to it, because we have Flying every week for the next five years!”

The feast didn’t so much end as slowly peter out. As the evening drew on and people finished their dessert, the older years slowly began leaving in dribs and drabs, and before long the hall was feeling rather empty.

A pair of older students, a boy and a girl, walked over to the first years. They each wore a shiny badge engraved with a “P”.

“Everyone full?” the boy asked. He was answered by a series of satisfied groans. “Don’t expect food like this every day, now. The start-of-term banquet’s special. But if you’re all done, then up you get and follow me!”

They left the Great Hall through an archway the size of a lorry, which led them into the cooler air of the castle’s cavernous entrance hall. Hogwarts’ main entrance was to their right, and a grand staircase to their left led into the castle proper.

“I’m Gemma Farley and this is Joseph Deverill,” the girl explained as they took a side-door beneath the main stairs. It led to a spiral staircase going down. “We’re your fifth year prefects, so if you need anything in these first few weeks, just ask. Try to remember where we’re going now: it’s the way to the common room, and it’s a secret. You can’t tell anyone from the other houses.”

The way was complicated but Victoria thought she could remember it. There was a trick to it: just keep going down. They were in a lower part of the castle now, with fewer airy landings and smaller, gloomier corridors.

“Here we are,” said Joseph, stopping next to an remarkable stretch of wall. “To enter, you need only speak the password: potentia rectum facit.”

A smattering of giggles ran through the group at the unfortunate wording, but Victoria was more
interested in the magic: the wall was parting with the sound of stone grinding on stone, just like the entrance to Diagon Alley. The resulting archway revealed a long room of granite, filled with leather couches grouped around coffee tables. The room was lit by lamps giving off a green glow, and at the far end was a large, ornately carved fireplace, a strong fire already roaring in the hearth. It was around this fireplace that the oldest students seemed to have gathered, clustered in a semi-circle of armchairs.

The common room was in fact already quite full, with the older students sitting around the tables and talking merrily. Swing was playing softly from a gramophone in the corner and several tables were littered with bottles holding brightly coloured drinks.

“Come on, then,” Gemma said, and she led them inside. The portal sealed itself behind them. “Time for the grand tour.”

She marched them past the chatting students to a pair of spiral staircases near the fireplace. Joseph took the boys up the stairs to the right and the girls followed Gemma to the left.

“First years are closest to the common room,” she explained as they climbed, “so the older students can be further away from the noise. Here we go.” The reached the first landing. It held a single door, on which was a plaque reading ‘ADDER DORM’. “We’ve got five of you in here, and the other four on the next floor up. Pansy, Daphne, Victoria, Millicent, and Tracey, you’re in here. The rest of you, follow me.”

They entered the dorm, Pansy leading the way. It was a large, circular room with four-poster beds arranged around the edge. On the far side of the wall, where a window would normally sit, was a large porthole looking out into the gloom of the lake.

“We’re underwater?” Tracey asked. “Uh, can we be resorted?”

“Don’t be such a pansy,” Millicent said, barging past. “That’s her job.” She jabbed her thumb at Pansy, who rolled her eyes.

“Mine,” Pansy said, claiming the bed closest to the door. Her trunk immediately appeared at the foot of the bed with a pop.

“That’s okay, I wanted this one anyway,” Daphne replied, taking the bed closest to the porthole.

Victoria ignored them both. “What’s through here?” she said, opening a door. It led to a long, tiled bathroom. There were three doors marked ‘TOILET’, and opposite them a line of sinks and mirrors. At the end of the room were the showers, which to Victoria’s dismay were separated only by alcoves—no curtains.

Daphne’s followed in behind her, looking around curiously. “No bath?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“Well, your trunk just appeared by the last bed. You’re next to Pansy. Good luck.”

Victoria laughed and they returned to the bedroom. She opened her trunk and began moving her clothes into the wardrobe next to her bed, but was interrupted by Gemma’s return.

“You’ll have time to unpack later,” she said. “For now let’s continue the tour. Up the stairs, now. Last one to the top’s a squib!”

They raced up the stairs, laughing and shouting, and by the time they reached the top they were
breathing heavily. It was then that Victoria noticed the sound of water. The stairs led to a long
tunnel carved into the rock, the stone here much rougher than downstairs, the trickling echo of
running water bouncing off the walls. The air became damp as they went in further, the sound of
water getting louder, approaching a roar, and then they turned a corner to see the tunnel blocked by
a wall of rushing water.

“You’ll like this,” Gemma said, before walking through the water without hesitation. The first
years hesitated.

“No way,” said Pansy, her eyes widening. “I’m not getting wet.”

Victoria laughed, giving Daphne a grin before walking through. To her great surprise, she didn’t
get wet at all: though she certainly felt the cool of the water hitting her, it seemed to just lack
wetness.

When she saw what was beyond, she knew exactly why there was no bath downstairs. They were
in dark cavern lit only by swarms of the same tiny fairies that were inside wizarding lamps, each no
larger than a mosquito, each giving off a softly glowing light. She and Gemma were standing on a
stone walkway bisecting a deep pool, and behind her the waterfall fed into a gully, which then ran
along the wall into a series of smaller overflowing pools before feeding into the water below.

The boys, led by Joseph, were standing on the other side of the walkway. Daphne came through
from behind her and almost knocked Victoria off the edge.

“Clear the way!” called Gemma over the sound of the water, and they walked further along the
walkway to make room for the others. Gasps followed as the others passed through the waterfall
one by one.

“So you see, there are advantages to being under the lake!” Gemma said. “No other house has
anything like this!”

“All right, tour’s over!” Joseph shouted. “Everyone back to the common room! It’s time for your
first test!”

Victoria shared a nervous look with Daphne. No one had said anything about a test. When they
returned to the common room, the music was no longer playing, nor was it filled with the hubbub
of a dozen conversations. Everyone—and there must have been more than a hundred of them, from
the size of the crowd—had gathered around the fireplace, where they stood in silence.

A few of the older students were sitting in the armchairs around the fireplace, but the seat at the
centre, the one facing the fire directly, was empty. A tall, olive-skinned girl with dark hair stood up
from one of the armchairs. Like the prefects she had a badge pinned to her robes, but hers read ‘
HEAD GIRL’.

“Welcome to Slytherin. For those of you who don’t know, my name is Stephanie Fawcett.” She
stepped forward and rested her hand on the empty chair. “You are about to participate in a little
tradition we have here. It’s quite simple, really—I want each of you to come forward and sit in this
chair.”

The first years exchanged glances, confused. That was it? They just had to sit in a chair?

Stephanie smiled, reading their expressions. “There’s no trick. You just have to sit down.”

“Well, then,” Draco said, stepping forward, “what are we waiting for?”
He went straight for the chair, walking with a swagger, and sat down. A moment later he was launched into the air, a high-pitched shriek escaping his lips, as the chair ejected him with great force. The crowd erupted into laughter and cheers, and a group of burley older boys caught Draco just before he hit the ground.

Applause followed and Draco got to his feet, red-faced but looking quite pleased with his reception.

“Well done, Draco,” Stephanie said, smiling. “Never let it be said that bravery is a Gryffindor trait alone.”

Pansy grimaced; Draco’s smile became somewhat fixed.

“Now,” Stephanie, said, “who’s next?”

Victoria went to step forward—she might as well get it over with—but found her arm caught. She turned to find Gemma holding her wrist firmly. “Wait,” she whispered.

She’d missed her chance. Daphne had gone forward, and then, just like Draco, she was flying through the air with a scream. Cheers and applause followed. One by one they took their turn, but Gemma’s hand never left Victoria’s wrist, holding her back. At last only she remained.

Stephanie turned to look at her, but she wasn’t smiling. There was something calculating in her eyes. “Your turn, Victoria.”

The room changed, became more focused. The students in the armchairs leaned forward, looking at her intently. The crowd went silent once more. Victoria walked towards the chair on inexplicably wobbly knees. It was just an enchanted cushion, wasn’t it? A game? She hesitated. The chair didn’t look special. It was, in fact, the same as all the others.

She sat down, bracing herself for a sudden jolt.

Nothing happened. Stephanie’s eyebrows shot up; gasps filled the room.

Then: a lurch around her navel, a rush of air, the walls and floor spinning. She was flying just like all the others, a scream ripped from her throat before she could control it, and then limbs were everywhere as the boys caught her, cheers filling the air. Victoria scrambled to her feet, her heart beating fast.

“Well done, everyone,” Stephanie called over the cheers. “Now, music! Pumpkin juice! Butterbeer! And, for the seventh years, firewhiskey!”

The party resumed, the crowd dispersing back to the couches around the common room. Every so often a student would slap a first year on the back as they passed, congratulating them.

Gemma approached them. “Well, now that’s over with, why don’t you help yourselves to a bottle and relax? Classes start tomorrow, after all! Here, we’ve made sure a space was kept free.”

She gestured to an empty group of couches and cushions around a table, which was stocked with bottles of pumpkin juice, board games and playing cards. The others rushed over to get a drink, but Victoria hung back.

“Gemma, what was that about?” she asked, glancing at the chair. It was still empty. “Why didn’t you let me go?”
The older girl cocked her head, her red hair shifting. “Always save the best ’til last, Victoria. We figured that if anyone could do it, it’d be you. You are the Girl-Who-Lived, after all.”

“But why does that matter?” Victoria asked. “It’s just a chair, right? With some kind of charm on it?”

Gemma sighed. “No, not exactly. No one’s been able to sit in that chair for decades, you see. It’s not an enchantment, it’s a curse.”

“A curse? But why? Who would curse a chair?”

“Oh, I doubt he did it intentionally,” Gemma said gently, “but sometimes, people are just so powerful that objects remember their presence. Not so long ago, one such individual came through Slytherin... even now, years later, we feel the echo of his footsteps.”

With a sinking feeling, Victoria realised who she was talking about. Their eyes met.

“I think you understand,” Gemma said, correctly reading Victoria’s expression. “That chair... it was where he used to sit. The Dark Lord.”
Victoria’s first days at Hogwarts went by in a rush of lessons and impromptu explorations. It was all too easy to get lost when trying to navigate the castle, which had a tendency to spontaneously rearrange itself. She and the other Slytherin girls were almost late for their first ever class, Herbology, when they had climbed up a staircase only to find themselves down in the boathouse.

Herbology was held in a number of long greenhouses to the rear of the castle and was taught by the matronly Professor Sprout, who was also the Head of Hufflepuff. Pansy hated the whole affair—it was far too much manual labour for her delicate hands—but the rest of the girls got stuck in. While poor Tracey did Pansy’s work for her, Victoria took great joy in manning the line of pumps just outside the greenhouse, having to use all her weight to pull down their giant metal handles, filling buckets with not just water but milk and quicksilver too. Magical plants, they were to learn, drank some very strange things. Meanwhile, Millicent wrestled with the Boxing Knotweed so that Daphne could clip off a few of its leaves. Then Professor Sprout would call “change places!” and they’d rotate around, everyone (except for Pansy) taking their turn.

It was with broad grins and dirty fingernails that the girls proceeded to Defence Against the Dark Arts, which turned out to be much more disappointing. Professor Quirrell wore a turban that smelt strongly of garlic, and stammered so much that it was difficult understand a word he was saying. But Victoria doubted the class would have been much better, even without the stammer—they didn’t take their wands out once, instead spending the entire class talking about the different kinds of dangers they might encounter, from poisons and curses to dark wizards and creatures. She already knew all of that from their textbook. It didn’t help that Professor Quirrell’s advice was always the same: run away.

“Well that was rubbish,” Tracey said as they left. Victoria remembered she had been looking forward to Defence most of all.

The girls all grumbled in agreement.

“Maybe we’ll get to use magic next time,” Daphne suggested.

It soon became clear, however, that using magic was not among their teachers’ priorities. Victoria already knew from her reading that there was much more to magic than waving a wand around and saying a few words, but she quickly became frustrated that their teachers were just repeating the information from their textbooks.

“To cast magic, you must first understand what it is you are doing,” explained Professor Flitwick.
in Charms after lunch. He was a small, elderly man, not more than four feet tall, and of a cheerful disposition. “You can pronounce an incantation beautifully, move your wand with exquisite precision, and yet nothing will happen if your head contains no more understanding of magic than does a Muggle’s!”

Susan raised her hand from her place next to Victoria. “But sir, what about accidental magic?”

“An excellent question!” Professor Flitwick exclaimed. His voice ascended in pitch when he got excited, almost to the point of squeaking. “In truth, all wizards can cast some rudimentary magic without training. Think of it like a conversation with someone who doesn’t speak English. You might be able to get by, a little, with pointing at things. If you have a mind for languages, you may even pick a few words up. But to have a proper conversation, you need to learn their language. So it is with magic.”

They spent the rest of the class taking notes on Aristotle’s elements. At least Professor Flitwick made it fun: between drawing diagrams and having group discussions on the nature of fire, the Professor would conjure blue flames and make them fly through the air in different shapes, much to the class’s delight.

“Remember, when we talk about fire we do not just mean literal fire,” the Professor explained. “It’s much more than that. According to Heraclitus, who we will meet in chapter two, fire is the power of change! That’s why almost all charms invoke the power of fire.”

There was something that was bothering Victoria, though, and had been since Herbology. “Professor?” she asked, raising her hand as he walked past. “Where does quicksilver fit into all this? It’s a metal and a liquid, isn’t it? Earth and water?”

Flitwick raised his bushy eyebrows and Susan and Tracey looked up from the mind map they were drawing. “Quite the insight, Miss Potter. You’re right, of course—quicksilver doesn’t fit. It is both volatile and stable. It’s that mystery which alchemy seeks to solve, but I’m afraid that is quite beyond the subject matter of this class.”

“Oh,” Victoria said, looking down. For a moment she had thought she might learn something new. “Does Hogwarts teach alchemy, sir? It sounds interesting.”

There was a contemplative look in Flitwick’s eyes. “It’s not normally offered, no… lack of demand, you see. But you might approach Professor Flamel... I dare say he knows a thing or two about it!” He chuckled at that, though Victoria didn’t get the joke.

“Thank you, Professor.”

Every day, after classes were finished, they had to attend a supervised homework period. Each year group had their own homework hall, and the first years’ took place in the Hall of Remembering. It was much smaller than the Great Hall, since it only had to seat seventy or so students, and was full of huge picture frames containing only blank canvas. Every evening they would sit there in a silence riddled with whispers, looked over by Gemma, Joseph, or one of the other prefects, and try to complete their homework while daydreaming of dinner.

And so the week went, Victoria quickly falling into a routine. In class, she sat next to Daphne or Tracey, unless the class was with Hufflepuff, in which case she would sit next to Susan. In the evenings she returned to the Slytherin common room, where she liked to curl up with a book, Dumbledore on her lap. Sometimes she’d let the other girls drag her into playing Gobstones, or Exploding Snap, or with Madam Derwent’s Fantastic Facepaint (if you did it well enough, your
head actually turned into the animal’s), but most of the time she was content to sit quietly and read, letting the sounds of the girls’ conversation wash over her.

On Tuesdays, just before midnight, they had astronomy with Professor Sinistra, a woman who always had a pair of binoculars hanging from her neck. Her class took place at the top of Hogwarts’ tallest tower, where the pyjama-clad students poked their telescopes between the crenelations to chart the heavens with sleepy eyes.

“Quickly now, track your telescopes on Mars,” Professor Sinistra said, pointing with her wand at a mass of stars. “The Ministry was only able to arrange thirty minutes of clear skies tonight, so we have to push on.”

“I can’t find it!” Tracey said, swinging her telescope wildly from side to side.

Professor Sinistra walked over and jabbed her finger at the same patch of sky. “There, girl, can’t you see? It’s bright red!”

Tracey looked in the direction of the Professor’s finger and frowned. “They all look the same to me, Miss.”

Professor Sinistra sighed, raising her wand again to point into the night’s sky. “Let’s not tell the centaurs I did this, eh? Lumos!”

Mars immediately shone brighter, a clear red dot in the sky.

“Now, has everyone found Mars? Good. Next, we’ll find the North Star…”

It was on Wednesday that they finally had Transfiguration, Victoria’s most anticipated class. Her faith was immediately rewarded, because Professor McGonagall was the first teacher who actually let them use their wands.

“Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will practice while at Hogwarts,” the Professor began, before turning her desk into a pig with a single jab of her wand. The class sat up eagerly and Victoria exchanged an excited look with Daphne. Now that was magic. McGonagall smiled at them before tapping the confused pig on its head, turning it back. It happened so quickly that Victoria only just glimpsed the way the pig seemed to flow into the shape of a desk.

“With one mistake you could seriously injure yourself or your classmates. Always remember, Transfiguration is not like Charms. It does not wear off, and the reversal of a transfiguration is an advanced skill which few master. As such, if I see any tomfoolery in my class, the perpetrator will be punished most severely.”

What followed was a long hour of taking notes as Professor McGonagall lectured them on the basics of transfiguration, a piece of No-Squeak Chalk writing definitions and drawing diagrams on the blackboard under the direction of her wand. They learnt of the two substances, physical and aetherial, discovered that Transfiguration could only change physical substance, and deduced that for every object there existed an ideal Form. To illustrate this final point, McGonagall had them all trying to draw a perfect circle.

“Notice how all these circles have imperfections, and yet we can still recognise them as circles,” Professor McGonagall explained, “this is because objects in the world are but imitations of their true forms. We perceive that these imperfect circles share features with the perfect circle, even though none of us have ever seen it. The perfect circle is a form which exists only as an ideal. It is
these true forms which the magic of transfiguration calls upon. When you perform transfiguration, you are pushing an object towards one of those forms recognised by magic."

Eventually, McGonagall told them to put their quills down, only having scratched the surface of transfiguration theory, but nonetheless ready to try their first spell.

“I don’t expect perfection,” she said as she distributed a matchstick to each student. “Do not expect to wave your wand once and be finished. For most wizards, transfiguration is something that must be done in stages, first focusing on one feature, and then another. But I hope that you will, at least, get a feel for the magic.”

Their task was to transfigure a matchstick into a steel needle, first by changing its shape, then by altering its substance. Victoria was aware that the latter wasn’t even introduced until the middle of their textbook.

McGonagall described the bare minimum of the spell, leaving some notes on the blackboard for reference, and then they were off, waving wands and chanting incantations. For a moment Victoria just enjoyed watching the others. Everyone had their own approach to spellcasting. Hermione Granger, rather than pick up her wand, had apparently decided to re-read half of the book. Pansy was poking her matchstick gingerly, as if it might explode. And on the other side of the room, Ron Weasley was practically shouting the spell, mangling the words in the process.

She didn’t quite understand why they were having so much trouble. Everything McGonagall had explained had been obvious, hadn’t it? She lifted her wand and held it over her matchstick.

“Mutatio Lignum!”

The matchstick shimmered and flowed, as if it were made of a viscous liquid, shifting to become pointy at the end. Victoria smiled: her first ever piece of wandwork! Shaping seemed easy enough, but she knew that transubstantiation was supposed to be more difficult. She raised her wand again.

“Lignum Verto!”

The wood darkened before her eyes, becoming a dirty, brownish grey. She frowned. She could still see the grain of the wood in the metal. Why hadn’t it worked?

“A commendable attempt, Miss Potter,” McGonagall said, suddenly looming over her shoulder. “Five points to Slytherin. Next time, try it with a firmer grip. You’ll learn that living materials such as wood don’t like to be turned into dead metal. It will resist the change, so you must overcome it with a strong will.”

As the lesson drew to a close, Victoria was the only one who had managed a complete transfiguration. To her annoyance, however, Hermione Granger also came very close, making her matchstick grey and pointy and sending Victoria a smug look. Nonetheless, Victoria left the class feeling like she could float away with happiness.

The feeling didn’t last. If Transfiguration was her favourite class, Potions had to be the worst.

She had actually been rather looking forward to Potions, which was their only class in wandless magic. There was just something about it that felt so arcane, like the magic you read about in stories. Not only that, it was also taught by their Head of House Professor Snape, who was famous for favouring Slytherin over the other Houses.

That may well have been true, but their first class made one thing clear: Professor Snape did not like Victoria.
The class took place in a cold, stone laboratory with narrow, grimy windows and shelves lined with jars of strange potions ingredients. Professor Snape wasn’t there when they arrived, so they took their places at the tall benches, unpacked their table-top cauldrons, and waited.

The door slammed shut. The sound of heavy footsteps echoed from the rear of the classroom, and then Professor Snape swept into view, his robes billowing impressively behind him as he made his way to the front of the class. For a moment there was complete silence as Snape looked them over with a piercing gaze.

“What,” he began, his voice low and clipped, soft yet easily heard, “is a potion?”

Hermione Granger’s hand shot into the air, but Snape didn’t call on her immediately. “You,” he said, pointing a long finger at Neville Longbottom, a pudgy Gryffindor boy with scruffy blond hair, “what is a potion?”

Neville’s face went bright red. “It’s, um… it’s something you, ah, drink?”

“How astute,” Snape drawled, and Neville wilted. “Let me be clear: I am not here to hold your hand. I will not waste time summarising your textbook. Under my tutelage, those who apply themselves will flourish. Those who do not…” his eyes settled back on Neville, “…well, regretfully you will be here for five years. But I assure you, I will tolerate no fools.”

The class was, if it were possible, even quieter than when Snape first entered. All the Gryffindors were now taking a keen interest in the desks in front of them, clearly terrified of being selected as Snape’s next target.

“We return to the question,” Snape continued. “I doubt many of you even grasp that potions are magic, so accustomed are you to the foolish waving of wands. But make no mistake... whether holding a wand or ingredients, the magic does not come from the instruments you hold. Always, the magic comes from the wizard. If it were otherwise, there would be no Muggles.”

He paused to look around the class, his lip curling at what he saw. “Of course, most students never properly perceive the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron, nor the power of its products. It takes a certain subtlety of mind to truly understand Potions, a subtlety which some—” he turned to look at Victoria “—lack.”

She frowned. Had she done something to offend him?

“Potter!” Snape said, making her jump, “tell us, if you can… why is it that potions ingredients must be prepared with great care?”

For a moment her mind went blank, so terrified was she of being the focus of Snape’s attention, but a moment later the answer came: “Because a potion isn’t just what’s inside the cauldron, sir. What you’re doing matters too.”

For a moment he stared at her, his dark eyes boring into her own. “A basic answer, but essentially correct… five points to Slytherin.” He turned to face the blackboard, chalk floating up to write under his direction, though he had not removed his wand.

*A POTION IS A RITUAL.*
“Perhaps Miss Potter can give an example to the class.”

It didn’t seem very fair to ask her two questions in a row. “Um, the Draught of Clear Sight?”

Snape turned back around—there was that piercing look again, like she was the only person in the class. “Elaborate.”

Victoria ran a hand through her hair, glancing at Daphne next to her, who sent her an encouraging smile. “The, er, key ingredient is a blindfold that you have to wear for ages.”

A small, nasty smile crossed Snape’s face. “Congratulations, Potter, you just blinded yourself.” Victoria felt heat in her face, suddenly finding the table as fascinating as did the Gryffindors.

 Fortunately, Snape turned his attention back to the class. “Take note! Precision is vital when it comes to potion-making. Descriptions such as ‘ages’ are not good enough. For your information, Potter, the potioneer must walk blindfolded for a year and a day. Even a small variation will cause the magic to fail, with devastating effect.”

Snape’s wand appeared in his hand, and a moment later fires sprung up beneath their cauldrons. “Now, let’s see what you can do.”

They proceeded to brew a potion to cure boils—or at least, they tried to. But despite certain similarities, making a potion was very different to cooking. Though she followed the directions precisely, Victoria found that the potion just didn’t do what it was supposed to, something which Snape delighted in pointing out every time he passed her desk.

“Tut, tut… clearly, fame isn’t everything.”

“What colour do you call that, Potter?”

It was all very unfair. It wasn’t like anyone else was doing any better.

By the time the class was over, some four hours later, Victoria felt completely frazzled, so much so that she struggled to focus in Transfiguration later that afternoon. She loved magic, but it was undeniable that studying it was exhausting. It was with a small measure of relief, then, that the week’s final class arrived: History of Magic, with Professor Flamel.

Victoria and Susan were the first to arrive, managing to secure seats near the back of the classroom in anticipation of a boring class. History of Magic had a fearsome reputation for its soporific effect. Indeed, it seemed that Professor Flamel had already fallen victim to its power, for as Victoria secured her ink pot within the desk inkwell, she noticed that he was already there, slumped in an armchair in the corner of the room. He was fast asleep.

She pointed him out to Susan and they giggled quietly, trying not to wake him up, but they need not have worried: even as the others arrived, filling the classroom with the noise of their post-lunch chatter, Professor Flamel did not stir.

At half-past-two exactly, his eyes snapped open. “Good afternoon,” he said, standing up. His accent was almost perfect, but just the slightest hint of a French lilt remained. He then walked with great deliberation to his desk at the front of the class, where he picked up a book and began to read.

Victoria shared a look with Susan—as the minutes stretched on, the Professor showed no sign of intending to continue, even turning the page of his book several times. The class grew restless. Just as Ernie Macmillan raised his hand, Professor Flamel snapped the book shut.
“My name is Professor Flamel,” he said, looking over the class with kind eyes. He paused, staring out of the window, and idly tweaked his absurd moustache. “It shall be my pleasure, this year, to introduce you to the history of our world… and therein lies our first, and most profound, question. When I say ‘our world’, what do I mean?”

Pansy raised her hand. Professor Flamel seemed not to notice.

“You might think that I mean the history of wizards,” he continued, still looking out of the window, “but we must remember that the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy only recently came into law. For most of history, the story of wizards is intermingled with that of Muggles, and vice versa.”

“Recently, sir?” said Draco, blurting it out without raising his hand, “didn’t the Statute pass in 1692?”

Professor Flamel blinked owlishly at Draco. “Yes.” He picked up a piece of chalk and began writing on the board by hand. “This, then, shall be our first topic. We begin not, as you might think, at the start, but rather with the most dramatic. The separation of worlds.”

The title on the board read: REASONS FOR SECRECY. The class hurried to copy it down, quills scratching on parchment.

“Please form yourselves into groups of four and, together, try to think of reasons why wizards would hide themselves from Muggles.”

And with that the Professor put his chalk down, returned to his armchair, and fell asleep. For a moment the class just looked on in stunned silence, before rushing to form groups with their best friends. Victoria went with Susan, of course, and they were joined by Tracey and Hannah Abbott, a blonde girl who was one of Susan’s fellow Hufflepuffs. Soon the class was full of the sounds of lively conversation. Surprisingly, most of it was actually about the Statute of Secrecy.

“I reckon it’s just easier for everyone, you know?” suggested Susan. “If Muggles knew about us, they’d constantly be pestering us for help with stuff, wouldn’t they?”

Tracey nodded. “Oh, for sure. My dad’s Muggleborn, so I’ve been to the Muggle world a few times, and everything there’s just so… dirty. You know they have this stuff called plastic, like bendy glass, and they just leave it everywhere? I don’t fancy spending all my time cleaning up after that, thank-you-very-much.”

“What about witch burnings?” Victoria added, scribbling down their ideas on her parchment. “Didn’t a load of Muggleborn children die?”

Ten minutes later they had an impressive list of reasons. They probably could have kept going, if Professor Flamel had not woken up.

“I think that should be enough,” he said, his voice cutting through the noise even though he was speaking softly. Susan, Tracey and Hannah returned to their own desks. “Now, tell me some of your ideas.”

They called out suggestions, each one being added to the board:

“Too many wars!”

“Disease!”
“Dragon hunting!”

“Stupid Kings!”

Professor Flamel smiled at the last one. “Always a roll of the dice, monarchy,” he remarked, “some are quite insane, but others… well, you may not know this, but for some time I served as court wizard to Queen Elizabeth, and a finer woman I have never met.” He paused. “Aside from my wife, of course.”

Tracey raised her hand. “Queen Elizabeth, sir? Isn’t that against the Statute of Secrecy?”

“Oh, not Elizabeth the second,” he said. “You’re quite right, these days it wouldn’t be allowed. I was court wizard to Elizabeth the first.”

Victoria shared an incredulous look with Susan. Back at Little Winging Primary they had memorised all the Kings and Queens of England… Elizabeth I had lived hundreds and hundreds of years ago, far longer than even wizards lived. The class fell silent as it absorbed the knowledge that their Professor was at least four hundred years old. He didn’t even look as old as Professor McGonagall.

“Now,” continued Flamel, apparently oblivious to their shock, “let’s see if your ideas were right, shall we? Please turn to chapter five and begin reading.”

He then returned once more to his armchair and fell asleep.

The class continued in much the same vein, with the Professor speaking for a short time before setting them tasks, during which he would sleep. Soon enough the clang of the North Tower bell rang and they all rushed out, eager for the weekend. All of them except Victoria, who lingered behind.

“Professor?” she asked, just as he sat down in his armchair. He started, as if he hadn’t noticed she was still there.

“Miss Potter, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.” She fidgeted under his gaze, which, for all his sleepiness and slow movements, was clear and penetrating. “I was wondering… that is, Professor Flitwick said, well, do you think you might teach me alchemy?”

He sighed and leaned back into the chair, cradling his fingers. “Tell me, Miss Potter, what are the Three Primes?”

She ran a hand through her hair. “Um…”

Flamel made a humming noise, as if she had confirmed his suspicion. “Another, perhaps. What is the alchemical significance of the number seven?”

He sighed and leaned back into the chair, cradling his fingers. “Tell me, Miss Potter, what are the Three Primes?”

She ran a hand through her hair. “Um…”

Flamel made a humming noise, as if she had confirmed his suspicion. “Another, perhaps. What is the alchemical significance of the number seven?”

Victoria remained silent.

“Did you know that you are the sixth person this week to ask this of me?” Flamel said. “And you are the sixth who could not answer my questions. I think not, Miss Potter. I reserve tutoring for those who show promise, like young Mister Dumbledore. If you wish to learn the basics, I recommend the library. Have a good weekend, now.”

Victoria fled the classroom, cursing her own stupidity. Of course he wouldn’t just teach any old
person who asked. But she would show him.

She *would* become Professor Flamel’s apprentice.

Chapter End Notes

Resources:

Please see my profile for a map of Hogwarts and surrounding area, as well as Victoria’s timetable.
Chapter Seven: Snape’s Challenge

As September drew to a close, the long summer finally gave way to the rainy days of autumn. The high Scottish sun was setting earlier and earlier each day, and the canopy of the Forbidden Forest was turning into a sea of brown, red, and gold. The gloomy weather seemed to affect the castle’s mood. Victoria was beginning to feel the twinge of impatience with their classes, which remained wholly academic, and her peers had reached that point weeks ago. Even Transfiguration was heavily focused on theory, their practical first class apparently no more than a teaser for what would come later.

That was not to say that Victoria was growing tired of magic. Indeed, it was not at all unusual to find her in the library during her lunch break, picking out a new book to take back to the dorms.

The library was far and away her favourite place within Hogwarts. It was a huge, sprawling maze of shelves and cubby-holes, so big that it took up three sides of the central courtyard, and the bookcases themselves were tall enough that you needed ladders to reach the middle of them, never mind the top. But it was more than just size that made the library special, for the room itself was beautiful. Tall, stained glass windows pierced the dusty air with multi-coloured shafts of natural light, and in the evenings it was dark and eerie, each visitor carrying their own fairy lamp. Sometimes Victoria imagined what they must have looked like from above, little pinpricks of light weaving their way between the shelves, not unlike the fairies within their lamps.

There were secrets there too. Some shelves were mysteriously inaccessible, isolated on viewing platforms high above, like theatre boxes. There was a rune-engraved door made of rusting iron near where Madam Pince, the grumpy librarian, had her desk, and Victoria had never seen it opened. And then there was the Restricted Section: a large expanse of the library roped off from fifth years and below, filled with texts deemed too dangerous, or mature, for their young eyes. According to the older years, there was another, smaller section at the back of that, which they jokingly referred to as the Really Restricted Section. It contained books which only the teachers were allowed to read.

Victoria looked longingly beyond the rope into the Restricted Section, the forbidden knowledge calling to her. It was within the Restricted Section that the alchemy books could be found, but more than just rope protected them: a glowing age line crossed the floor, preventing those below sixth year from passing unless they had a signed note from a teacher.

She sighed. Staring at the Restricted Section would not gain her access. So she crossed into the library proper and began wandering the shelves idly, eyes roving across the titles, not looking for anything in particular. She had forty minutes of break remaining, more than enough to find herself a good book.

*Stupefaction: An Introduction to the Stunning Charm* looked interesting, but after flicking through...
the contents, Victoria knew it was far too advanced. *Unnatural Philosophy by Adalbert Waffling* had clearly been left in the wrong section, and sounded awfully dry besides. *Simply Smashing Spells* was devoted to blasting charms and curses, but joined the list of books to read in a few years’ time.

She wandered away from charms, and made her way towards her favourite section: *MISCELLANEOUS*. You never knew what interesting books you might find there, waiting to be sorted, or too exotic to fit into the filing system. She was just settling down in an armchair to look through *Iron Will*, a book about transfiguration of metals, when Susan found her.

“There you are!” she said, her voice far too loud for the quiet library. Victoria jumped and almost dropped the book. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

“And you came to the library last?” Victoria whispered back, “I’m here basically every lunch.”

Susan rolled her eyes. “Well, come on! We’re playing Muggle Hunt!”

Victoria looked at *Iron Will* longingly. She’d never played Muggle Hunt before, but transfiguration was so interesting…

“Oh no you don’t,” Susan said, grabbing Victoria by the wrist. She began pulling her towards the exit, ignoring Victoria’s whispered protests. “You can read it later, whatever it is. Probably some boring essay written by a boring old man.”

“No it’s not!” Victoria protested, before looking down at the cover. “It’s written by a woman.”

Susan laughed, attracting a dozen glares from working students, and then they were out of the library and into the courtyard, where it seemed that half of the first years had gathered. Pansy was at the centre of the crowd, standing on the edge of the fountain so that she rose above everyone else.

“… Parvati, Zach, you’re wizards too,” she was saying, “the rest of you are Muggles.”

A loud groan went up from those apparently selected as Muggles.

“We’re Muggles too, I guess,” Susan said, looking disappointed. “If only I could have found you earlier…”

Victoria shrugged. “So how do you play?” She hoped it didn’t involve too much running around—she was still holding *Iron Will*, and while it was not a large book, she dreaded Madam Pince’s reaction if she damaged it.

“Oh, it’s easy. The wizards hunt the Muggles, who have a minute to run off and hide. If they catch you, you’re out. But if you manage to get back to the fountain without being caught, then you’re safe.”

“That sounds like a lot of running,” Victoria grumbled, “maybe I can leave my book on the—”

“GO!” Pansy shouted, and suddenly everyone scattered, only the wizards remaining by the fountain, their hands covering their eyes, counting the seconds loudly.

“Come on!” Susan called, and suddenly they were running too, their robes billowing around them, following a group of Gryffindors into the castle. They ran and they ran, past the Charms corridor, up the wailing stairs, through the second floor armoury… and almost into Percy Weasley, a red-haired prefect.
“No running in the corridors!” he called, but they were already past him, entering the central stairwell. It was a tall, open column that went through the centre of the keep, criss-crossed with moving staircases and lined with portraits.

A boy’s voice echoed from behind them, back towards the armoury: “I think they’re this way!” The voice belonged to Blaise Zabini—a wizard.

“Quick!” shouted Lavender Brown, one of the Gryffindors ahead of them, and she jumped off the side of the stairs, plummeting two storeys down with a scream. She bounced as she hit the bottom, the stone floor having turned soft like a trampoline, and then the others were jumping after her. Ron Weasley flopped down, his robes acting like a parachute, and Dean Thomas—his yell becoming increasingly high-pitched—smacked into the ground at full speed, only to get up a moment later, apparently completely unharmed.

“No running in the corridors!” came Percy’s voice once more, echoing from behind them, and Victoria shared a look with Susan. Blaise was getting closer.

“Jump!” Susan cried. Victoria seemed to have lost control of her legs, or else her mind, because she actually did as Susan suggested, and then she was falling, the floor getting closer and closer—

Suddenly she sprouted wings, like those of a butterfly only much larger, and they fluttered so quickly that they buzzed, allowing her to float the last few metres of her fall, landing gracefully.

Susan followed a moment later, her long braid whirling above her head like a ginger helicopter.

Victoria looked up. They had fallen from a dizzying height.

“Well I never!” shouted Professor McGonagall. She had seen them all the way from the entrance hall, and was now striding up the main stairs towards them. “In all my years, never have I witnessed such foolishness… accidental magic, at your age…”

Victoria’s heart thumped in her chest, the possibility of getting detention suddenly much scarier than losing Muggle Hunt. But there was still a chance... was McGonagall really close enough to see their faces?

“Run?” she suggested.

“Run!” Susan agreed, and they scattered again, this time separating from the Gryffindors, who headed towards the east wing. Victoria and Susan ran west, through the Transfiguration corridor, and were dismayed to hear footsteps following behind.

They passed a classroom.

“In here!” Victoria cried, and they burst through the door into the empty room. For a moment they stood in a silence broken only by their heavy breathing, leaning against the closed door.

“Whose class is this?” Susan whispered, much quieter than she had been in the library.

Victoria looked around. It was much more colourful than McGonagall’s classroom, with posters depicting wand positions and stances. “Professor Winters’, I think. Come on, let’s hide in the cupboard.”

They made their way into a walk-in cupboard full of quills, parchment and ink, holding the door just ajar so that they could peek out. They entered not a moment too soon, because a few seconds later the footsteps paused outside the classroom door.
“In here, you reckon?”

It was Blaise. At least it wasn’t McGonagall.

“Might as well check.”

That was Parvati.

As Blaise and Parvati opened the door slowly, no doubt scared of walking in on a teacher, Victoria had a terrible, wonderful idea.

“It’s empty,” said Parvati, before checking underneath Professor Winters’ desk. “I could have sworn I saw them run this way…”

“Hang on,” Blaise said, “what about that cupboard?

It was now or never. Victoria screwed up her eyes, pushed, and walked out of the cupboard with her head held high.

“Oh!” Blaise said, his eyes wide, “Professor McGonagall!”

A gasp came from the cupboard behind Victoria.

“Mr Zabini, Miss Patil,” she said in her best Scottish accent, which was quite awful, but apparently Blaise and Parvati were too shocked to notice it—nor the fact that she was much shorter than the real McGonagall, and wearing student robes besides.

“Sorry, Professor,” Parvati said, and she glanced in the direction of the Entrance Hall. She looked very confused. “Weren’t you just…”

Victoria fought the urge to giggle, a sound so unlike McGonagall that it would surely reveal her as a fraud. “Off you go, children.”

They practically fled out the door, which they slammed shut behind them. Relief flooding her, Victoria shook her head, her face and hair returning to her own. She was getting better at that—turning into McGonagall was more than she could have done before Hogwarts, even if it was still far from a complete transformation.

“Oh my god,” Susan said, emerging from the cupboard. She was staring at Victoria with something like awe. “You’re a metamorphmagus!”

“A what?”

“You can transfigure yourself however you want!” Susan explained. “It’s meant to be really rare. I’ve never met one before, but my Auntie says the Aurors just recruited one… I can’t remember if I said before, she’s the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

“I think you may have mentioned it, once or twice,” Victoria said with a smirk. “Or three times. Or maybe four. Or—”

“—okay, okay,” Susan interrupted, holding up her hands, “you know, Aunt Amelia says sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.”

“Your aunt?” said Victoria, “isn’t she the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?”

Susan scowled. “Oh, shut up.”
She wasn’t really annoyed, judging by the ghost of a smile she was clearly trying to suppress, but Victoria thought it best not to push her any further. “Anyway,” she said, returning to the topic of her powers, “I can’t really change whatever I want... just my face, hair and skin, really.”

Susan’s eyes lit up with excitement. “That’s so cool though! No wonder you’re so pretty…” Victoria wasn’t sure if she should be flattered by the compliment, or offended by the accusation that she had cheated her way into good looks. “Can you show me more? I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

She had never shared such a big secret with someone, but quickly found that it was liberating to show off her powers. For her part, Susan made appropriate noises of amazement as Victoria turned her hair multi-coloured, imitated Snape’s large nose, and copied Professor Flitwick’s bushy eyebrows. Each of Susan’s excited gasps urged her on, and soon she even tried her finger-lengthening trick, her bones making cracking and popping sounds as they reshaped themselves beneath her skin.

“That’s so gross,” Susan said, but her face showed fascination, not disgust. “How do you do it?”

“It’s not like the magic we’re learning in class,” Victoria explained, “I don’t know any theory or anything like that... I just think about what I want, and if I want it hard enough, it happens. But I’ve been getting better recently... maybe it’s not so different, after all? I wonder if the stuff we’re learning in Transfiguration is helping me along.”

Susan shrugged. “Or maybe it’s just ‘cause you’re getting older. Human transfiguration’s meant to be really advanced; I dunno if anything we’re learning would help you with it.”

The bell rang, announcing the end of lunch break.

“Oh, Victoria said, “I guess we lost Muggle Hunt?”

Susan laughed. “Well, we didn’t lose... they didn’t catch us, after all. We just didn’t win either.”

“A draw, then,” Victoria replied. “That’s good. I’m not sure I could stand Pansy if she beat me. She wouldn’t shut up about it for a week.”

“I don’t know how you stand her anyway,” Susan muttered. Victoria pretended she hadn’t heard.

They left the classroom and started walking down to the main entrance. As they walked, Victoria began to worry. Had she told Susan too much? What if she told the other girls? “Do you really promise?” she said quietly, afraid of being overheard now they were in the corridors. “To keep it a secret?”

She wasn’t sure why it was so important that no-one know she was a metamorphmagus, but the thought of Pansy teasing her about it was enough to make her worry. It was private.

Susan smiled. “Hufflepuff’s promise.”

They had Flying that afternoon, which took place on Hogwarts’ front lawn. It was the one class that the entire school participated in at once, with only the sixth and seventh years excused to study for their N.E.W.T. exams. It was also something of a misnomer, as the first years had yet to even touch a broom. While the older students got to soar through the air, practice their duelling, or go Hippogriff riding, the first years were forced by Madam Hooch to run around the lake, before splitting into groups to learn archery and fencing.

There was another reason Victoria dreaded Flying, worse than having to run around the lake in the
rain and wind: the changing rooms. The first class had been quite the shock. She had gone down to
the quidditch stadium with the others, excited to fly for the first time, and entered into the changing
rooms only to find them full of boys.

Hogwarts had unisex changing rooms.

The wizard-raised girls hadn’t blinked, and proceeded to get changed into their flying robes
without a care in the world. Meanwhile, Victoria was left hovering nervously, fiddling with her
robes without actually taking them off, spending a lot of time lining her flying robes up on the
bench in front of her. She wasn’t alone—for once, she had reason to sympathise with Hermione
Granger, who was red in the face and rooted to the spot.

Eventually, when Pansy started to comment on how long she was taking, Victoria had been forced
to work up her courage and change at record speed, her blush extending all the way to her toes.

It took some getting used to, but Victoria was determined to adapt. Witches, it seemed, were just
less shy than Muggles about that sort of thing, and she was a witch. She wasn’t going to hang back
like Hermione, waiting for everyone else to leave before she started to change.

“...this is the day, I know it,” Tracey was saying when Victoria and Susan arrived, “Hooch is going
to give us a go on the brooms.”

“Yeah, right,” Daphne replied. She had already changed and was now seeing to her hair, putting it
up into a messy bun. “This whole place is a joke, I swear. We go to magic class but don’t cast
magic. We go to flying class and don’t fly. I’m surprised they even serve food at dinner…”

Pansy huffed. “I still don’t see why you want to fly. I wish we could do dancing, or hippogriﬀ-
riding. So much more practical. When am I ever going to fly, once I’m older? I’ll be able to
apparate by then.”

“Only you would consider dancing practical,” Daphne said, causing Victoria and Susan to laugh as
they laid out their flying robes, all buckles and bracers and padding. “What about you, Vicky?
Think we’ll get to fly today?”

Victoria frowned at her newly-acquired nickname. It reminded her of Dudley’s Icky Vicky taunt,
but she knew better than to ﬁght it. The more she protested, the more they’d use it. Those were just
the rules of the playground.

“Probably not,” she replied, and Tracey groaned. “Hooch wants to ‘toughen us up’, doesn’t she? I
don’t know about you, but I don’t feel very tough.”

Victoria’s prediction turned out to be accurate. When Tracey asked Madam Hooch if they’d be
flying that day, her question was met with an explosive “Hah!” of amusement.

“You think you could keep hold of a broom at a hundred miles an hour, girl?” Hooch said, looking
down at Tracey, who suddenly looked very small. Madam Hooch was a tall women, with a wiry
strength to her and hair flecked with grey, and Tracey was the smallest of the Slytherin girls. “You
think you’d have the stamina to even stay on for ﬁve minutes before your thighs cramped up?”

“No ma’am,” Tracey mumbled, speaking to her shoes.

Hooch thumped Tracey on the back in what appeared to be an attempt at affection. “Oh, cheer up!
We’ll toughen you up, just you see! You’ve the build for a seeker; I have an eye for these things. A
couple of years and who knows, maybe it’ll be you on the Slytherin team.”
Tracey proceeded to spend the afternoon telling everyone that Madam Hooch thought she’d make a good seeker.

“At least one of us is having fun,” Victoria panted as she and Susan passed the halfway point in their run around the lake. They didn’t go the full way around, of course—that would have been miles and miles. They just ran a “small circuit” of around forty minutes.

Susan, who was not quite as fit as Victoria, just made a vague sound of agreement. Her face was already splotchy from the exercise. “At least… now I know… why you always… look so good.”

Several hours later they returned to the changing rooms, wet and sweaty, and changed back into their school robes. The changing rooms did have showers, but no one used them for obvious reasons (though, through a fit of giggles, Daphne passed on some scandalous gossip about the Gryffindor quidditch team) so they all returned to the castle to shower in their dorms before dinner. Thankfully they didn’t have a homework period on Tuesdays, no doubt in recognition of Madam Hooch’s demanding programme.

Later that evening, fed, washed and thoroughly worn out, the first year Slytherins gathered in front of the common room fire, slouched on large cushions and staring into the flames in a daze. Now came the long wait before Astronomy, when all they wanted to do was sleep.

Victoria let the sounds of the older students’ conversation wash over her as she watched Draco and Theodore Nott make a half-hearted attempt at chess, her own book forgotten in her lap. It was then that Professor Snape paid them a visit.

“Hard at work, I see,” he drawled, making the first years jump. None of them had even seen him approach. Victoria noticed a hush had come over the room. Even the older students were intimidated by the Potions Master, and no surprise: he loomed over them in the flickering light of the fire, his long, lank hair casting his face in shadow, his dark eyes piercing as ever. “I’ve a mind to set you additional homework, seeing you so idle, but as it happens I already have a task for you.”

Tracey sighed loudly and Snape’s eyes flicked in her direction. She froze. “Am I interrupting something, Miss Davis?” He didn’t wait for her to reply. “No matter, I shall be brief. Every year I set the first year Slytherins a challenge. The first student to complete this challenge will earn themselves not only honour, but also a prize of great value: a pass, signed by myself, permitting entry into the Restricted Section for one year.”

Victoria sat up, suddenly alert. The Restricted Section! If she could get that pass, all of Hogwarts’ books on alchemy would be open to her. It was the perfect way to prove herself to not only Professor Snape, but also Professor Flamel.

She wasn’t the only one to have taken notice, however. Draco and Theo were looking up at Snape with hunger in their eyes, and Pansy was whispering at Daphne in excitement. The lure of forbidden knowledge was a powerful thing.

“Your task is simple,” continued Snape, something like satisfaction in his face as he saw their interest, “you must enter each house’s common room and retrieve an object I have hidden there. You must do this without being caught. It is not enough to bring me the object, for if anyone notices your trespass, you shall face instant disqualification. Questions?”

Theo raised his hand. “What’s second prize?”

“The prize for second place is failure,” said Snape, his eyes boring into the lanky boy. “I will only say this once... there are no points for effort, no commendations and no grades. Nor are there rules,
beyond those which I have already described. You succeed, or you do not. So it is in the world beyond these walls, and so, while you are under my tutelage, this is how you will learn.”

And with that, quite abruptly, he turned and walked off. The game was on.
It took several days for Victoria to accept that Snape’s challenge was more difficult than it sounded.

Her first plan was to follow Neville Longbottom from the Great Hall back to the Gryffindor common room. He wasn’t the most observant boy, and even if he did see her, he’d be far too timid to confront her about it. The perfect target. But as it turned out, she should have been less worried about Neville and far more concerned with the castle itself. Victoria was quickly learning that Hogwarts guarded its secrets jealously, with her every attempt to follow Neville ending in failure. It was always the same: she’d be sneaking along behind him, the blond boy quite oblivious to her presence, and then the corridors would change, leaving her lost in a remote part of the castle and Neville nowhere to be found.

So much for that plan.

True to form, her second plan was to barricade herself inside the library and read every book about Hogwarts that she could find. *Hogwarts: A History* was a dry, ponderous tome, considered by many to be the authority on Hogwarts, and yet it held no clue as to the location of the common rooms. *The Tale of Rowena Ravenclaw and Eric Bloodaxe* was a rather more lively affair, and Victoria found herself quite engrossed, but by the time the book ended with expulsion of the Vikings from England, she was still none the wiser about where Ravenclaw’s common room might be.

It was perhaps inevitable, given her lack of progress, that Victoria would begin to lose interest in Snape’s challenge as the weeks slipped by. She fell back into her comfortable routine of studying magic and hanging out with Susan and the other Slytherin girls. It wasn’t until Halloween that Victoria’s mind turned once more to finding the common rooms.

The Dursleys had never really celebrated Halloween, which was not a major occasion in the Muggle world and was even less so at Number Four, Privet Drive. Each year, Vernon would stick a notice on their front door—*NO TRICK OR TREATERS*—and that would be that.

At Hogwarts, however, Halloween held special prominence in the calendar, with a grand feast planned for the evening. The smells of baking filled the castle from the moment Victoria woke up, with pumpkin, sage, apple and cinnamon following her around throughout the day. The castle had been decorated too, not with the tacky, plastic imitations that Muggles used, but with a rather more macabre touch. Real bats hung from the ceiling in dark corners, real skeletons could be found chattering in alcoves, and the sounds of moaning and groaning echoed from the direction of the dungeon.

Most exciting of all was that their teachers were finally letting them use their wands. In Charms, Professor Flitwick split them into pairs to practice the Levitation Charm, the theory of which they had been studying for the past two weeks.
“Wingardium Leviosa!” Susan said, moving her wand with a swish and a flick, just like Professor Flitwick had shown them. The feather resting on her desk wobbled, but did not float up into the air like it was supposed to.

Victoria clapped, the sound joining the hubbub of excited students calling incantations. “Oh, it moved! Just a few more tries and you’ll have it for sure.”

“You said that last time,” Susan grumbled, before looking pointedly at Victoria’s untouched feather. “Besides, it’s your turn.”

Victoria pulled out her wand and made sure her grip was light. “Wingardium Leviosa,” she said, swishing and flicking, and before she was even finished with the incantation the feather began to move, floating upwards gently as if it had been caught in a draught.

Susan snorted. “Figures,” she said, “was that really your first go? I don’t understand what you’re doing that I’m not…”

Victoria shrugged and Susan turned back to her own feather. As she practised, Victoria gazed up towards the ceiling. The spell was fun, no doubt about that, but it didn’t seem as good as it could be. Why limit yourself to just floating something upwards? Wouldn’t it be better to send it any place you liked?

Curious, she pointed her wand at the feather and yanked sideways, almost like a fishing rod. The feather jerked in place slightly, but otherwise remained unmoved. She was sure she was missing something about the spell. It couldn’t just be this, could it?

“Something troubling you, Miss Potter?”

It was Professor Flitwick. He’d approached her desk without her noticing, so focused was she on her spellwork, and was now admiring her levitating feather. “I dare say it looks like you’ve got the spell down!”

“But why won’t it go sideways?” she asked. “Look.” She performed the wand motion again, demonstrating the feather’s distinct lack of movement.

“A fine demonstration of the reeling motion,” Flitwick squeaked, “but no amount of reeling will move that feather, I’m afraid. Can you think why? Consider the definition of levitation.”

Victoria drummed her nails on the desk, thinking back to her reading. “Levitation isn’t the same as flying,” she said, thinking aloud, “it’s a simple concept, but flying is a lot more complicated.”

“Go on,” Flitwick said, nodding along, “what would you need to add, to turn the charm from levitation into true locomotion?”

“Well, a sense of direction for sure,” Victoria replied, “one of the four winds?”

Flitwick smiled. “Well done! Now, you don’t want to upset the rest of the spell too much. Can you remember which of the winds is the friendliest?”

“The west wind,” Victoria said with confidence, before continuing her train of thought. “But it needs more than just direction, doesn’t it? It needs to want to move… some kind of will.”

“Goodness me,” Flitwick said, his bushy eyebrows raised, “you have your mother’s instinct for charms. The concept you’re looking for is ‘impulse’, my dear, but I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of it. We don’t introduce it until next year. Put simply, the charm must invoke an animalistic
will to give it impulse, in this case that of an avian form.”

Victoria was stumped. “I have no idea how to do that.”

“Thank god,” Susan interrupted, taking a break from her levitation attempts, “how do you know all this stuff?”

Victoria stuck her tongue out in response. “I read.”

Flitwick sighed. “If only you’d been in Ravenclaw… but no matter. Come to me after class and I’ll give you some extra reading on the topic. In the meantime, let’s see if we can figure out the final component of the Locomotion Charm. Here’s a hint: it’s not required for flight itself, but serves another purpose.”

Victoria was forced to think hard on that one, the moment stretching out as she looked around the room for inspiration. Why would the Locomotion Charm have anything in it that wasn’t a component of flight? Her eyes landed on Millicent, who was swearing at her feather in an attempt to get it to move.

“Obedience,” she said, the answer coming to her in a flash, “there’s no point giving an object flight if it doesn’t go where you tell it.” Flitwick nodded slowly, clearly expecting her to elaborate further. “So.. the shackles? No, that would go against the whole idea of flight… the whip, then.”

“Marvelous! Simply marvelous!” Flitwick exclaimed. “Ten points to Slytherin for outstanding magical deduction! Now, let me find that book…”

Susan watched him potter off towards a bookshelf. “Do you think he’s okay? He looks like he might explode out of excitement.”

“Oh shush,” Victoria said, looking at the retreating Flitwick with fondness, “now, do you want help with your feather or not?”

It didn’t take long for Susan to get the spell, once she had Victoria helping her properly.

“See? Easy peasy,” Victoria said, looking at Susan’s newly floating feather. She was one of the few in the class who had managed it. “You were just thinking about air too literally.”

“Good work, Miss Bones!” Flitwick called from across the room, “five points to Hufflepuff!”

Susan beamed, and something clicked in Victoria’s head. “Susan, you’re a Hufflepuff.”

“Well, duh.”

Victoria rolled her eyes. “You’re a Hufflepuff! That means you can just show me your common room, can’t you?”

“Why on earth are you looking for the Hufflepuff common room?” Susan asked. “This isn’t about Fred and George Weasley, is it? I’ve heard things about those two and their practical jokes.”

“No, not them,” Victoria said. “It’s supposed to be a secret… but I’m sure Pansy and Daphne are working together, and Snape did say that there weren’t any rules, so I guess I can tell you…”

“You have to tell me now,” Susan said. “You can’t mention a secret then not tell me, that’s just cruel.”

So Victoria explained all about Snape’s challenge, as well as her many failed attempts to crack it.
“Well, of course I can show you the common room,” Susan said when she was done, “but the way I see it, that’s not your problem. How am I going to get you in without anyone else seeing? There’s always someone in there.”

At that moment the bell rang and all thoughts of Snape’s challenge left their minds.

“Lunch!” said Victoria.

“Forget lunch,” Susan replied. “Quidditch!”

In addition to the evening feast, Halloween also heralded the opening of the Hogwarts quidditch season. The match was to be quite the event, with parents invited to watch, and the Great Hall had been magically expanded to allow families to share a light lunch at the house tables. Meanwhile the great and the good gathered in the entrance hall, surrounded by journalists and photographers.

As she and Susan left the Great Hall, Victoria heard someone calling her name. She turned to see Draco standing by the front gate with a pair of grown-ups, both of them tall and immaculately dressed. She knew who they were without needing to be told. The resemblance was striking: the same platinum hair, that same haughty look.

The girls parted ways and Victoria approached the Malfoys.

“Ah, the young Miss Potter,” said Mr Malfoy, inclining his head ever so slightly. He had long hair, tied back in a ponytail with a black ribbon, and was extremely handsome, with a strong jaw and straight-edged nose. But his most striking feature was his precise, refined voice.

“Mr Malfoy,” said Victoria, curtsying. It was not a familiar movement. “Mrs Malfoy.”

“So polite!” said Mrs Malfoy, offering her a small smile. “But please, call me Narcissa.”

Narcissa Malfoy was absolutely stunning. A woman in her prime, she could have walked straight off a catwalk. But there was a certain hardness about her, Victoria thought. Her face had the sharp, delicate lines of a model, not the soft curves of a mother.

“And I, Lucius,” said Mr Malfoy, before hefting his cane to gesture at the clock. “Your appearance is well-timed. We were just about to depart for the stadium.”

“And of course you must accompany us,” said Narcissa, holding out her arm. “Draco’s been telling us all about you in his letters.”

Victoria glanced at Draco, who was blushing deeply and glaring daggers at his mother. What had he been telling them? “I’d love to,” she said, and she took Narcissa’s offered arm as they left the castle.

The late October chill was biting. Victoria pulled out her wand, remembering her manners just in time. “Can I offer anyone a Warming Charm?” she said, eager to show off one of the spells she had taught herself.

“No, thank you,” said Narcissa, lifting her wrist for Victoria to see. She was wearing a silver charm bracelet—no doubt one of the many charms was for the cold.

“But I’m sure Draco would be most grateful,” said Lucius.

Victoria flicked her wand at both Draco and herself. A pleasant warmth surrounded her, turning the chilling wind into a summer’s breeze.
“A fine charm,” said Lucius, who had watched her casting closely.

Narcissa raised her eyebrow. “Perhaps your criticisms of Dumbledore are ill-conceived, husband,” she said, her voice teasing. “Hogwarts’ tuition has evidently improved since our time.”

Victoria didn’t know what to say to that. Who would criticise Dumbledore? Wasn’t he supposed to be the greatest wizard of the age?

Lucius sent his wife an amused look. “Perhaps,” he allowed, “or perhaps young Victoria here takes after her father, who was, after all, a distinguished wizard.”

“Blood will out,” Narcissa agreed.

“You knew my parents?” said Victoria, looking between them in surprise. “Draco never said!”

“We were... acquainted,” said Narcissa, “but not close.”

“Your father was quite the quidditch player, you know,” Lucius added, “A chaser, if I recall correctly.”

“Really?” Victoria said. No one had ever told her that. “I don’t really know what that means, though. This is my first quidditch game, you see.”

That was all it took to prompt Draco into an eager recounting of the rules of quidditch. There were seven players on each team: three chasers, who tried to put the quaffle through a set of hoops to score points; one keeper, who guarded the hoops; two beaters, who used large bats to hit the iron bludgers at opposing players; and one seeker, whose sole job was to catch the golden snitch.

By the time Draco was finished they had reached the stadium, which was located in a depression near the outer walls of the castle. It was a tall, timber structure in the shape of an oval, the lower parts little more than scaffolding. The stands were high above, at flying level, but the crowd could be heard even from the ground. Several thousand witches and wizards were in attendance, with the residents of Hogsmeade, the nearby wizarding village, making up a large part of the spectators.

“So let me get this straight,” Victoria said as they climbed the stairs up to the seats, “when the seeker catches the snitch, that’s it? The game could be over in, like, ten minutes?”

Draco nodded. “That’s right. The game ends right there, and whoever has the most points wins.”

“So the seeker only wants to catch the snitch if his team is ahead, then.”

“Most of the time, yeah,” Draco confirmed, “but sometimes you might be okay with losing, if the point difference is right. A few years back, in the last game of the season, Puddlemere United just needed to avoid losing by more than forty points and they’d win the league. So they caught the snitch and deliberately lost the game, but still won the league.”

Victoria laughed. “Not the most glorious end to a season, but I guess a win’s a win.”

They took their seats just as the players were emerging from the tunnel onto the pitch. First came the Gryffindors in their robes of red and gold, causing an eruption of cheers and applause across the stadium, while Victoria’s section, full of Slytherins, jeered and booed. The Gryffindors were quickly followed by the Slytherin team, and Victoria was nearly deafened by the sudden noise around her. The Malfoys, ever composed, simply applauded politely.

“WELCOME!” came the booming voice of Lee Jordan, the third year Gryffindor who was to act
as commentator. “Welcome one and all to the first quidditch game of the year: Slytherin versus Gryffindor! Let the game begin!”

And then they were off, the players rocketing into the air faster than Victoria believed possible. They didn’t waste any time, with both teams immediately racing for the quaffle, swooping and banking like Muggle fighter jets. One of the Gryffindor chasers, Angelina Johnson, got to the ball first, and then she was charging forwards towards the as-yet unguarded Slytherin hoops.

“No!” gasped Victoria. They couldn’t concede in the first ten seconds!

But then the hulking Marcus Flint rammed right into Angelina, snatching the quaffle from her hands and sending her broom into a barely-controlled spin. He passed the ball to another Slytherin, who swerved upwards over a Weasley twin, dodged a bludger, and—

*Ding ding!*

“Ten-nil to Slytherin!” cried Lee Jordan, and half of the stadium groaned. Meanwhile the jubilant Slytherins were chanting: “Sly-ther-in! Sly-ther-in!”

The players didn’t take time to celebrate, for quidditch did not allow breaks in play. Now the Gryffindors were on the offensive, their chasers soaring across the pitch in an arrowhead, bouncing the quaffle back and forth between them whenever a Slytherin got close.

“Hawkshead attacking formation,” Draco explained, “looks like they’ve practised it a lot.”

“HEADS!” someone shouted, and Victoria ducked instinctively. A bludger whipped past overhead, close enough to feel the backdraft—just as she started to sit back up, she was forced to duck again: a Weasley whizzed by, quick on the bludger’s heels and mere inches away from the woodwork of the stands.

*Thwack!* Wood on metal: Weasley had caught the bludger. The iron ball was sent flying at Marcus Flint, the Slytherin captain and current holder of the quaffle. It caught him right in the nose, almost knocking him out, and he dropped the quaffle in a daze.

“Oh, poor Marcus!” said Narcissa, but she was leaning forward with a glint in her eye.

“Do you know,” Lucius said, amusement in his voice, “I don’t believe I’ve ever been to a game where that young man didn’t get hit with a bludger.”

The Gryffindors clearly agreed. They began singing out a well-practised chant, which was quickly taken up by the other Houses:

*He took a bludger to the face, to the face, to the face,*

*He took a bludger to the face,*

*Dumb old Marcus Flint!*

Now it was Katie Bell with the quaffle. She was a petite girl, more seeker material than a chaser, but she was weaving between the Slytherin players this way and that, leading them all on a merry
chase. The Gryffindors were calling on her to pass, but Katie had other ideas, heading straight for the Slytherin hoops. She didn’t get far. A Slytherin chaser flew interference, cutting off her path again and again until Marcus Flint came back for an aggressive tackle.

“Foul!” cried half the crowd—Flint’s foot had made contact with Katie’s face.

“Foul!” confirmed Jordan, and Madam Hooch blew her whistle for a penalty shot.

The crowd’s chants were becoming increasingly personal. The Slytherins around Victoria had greeted Katie’s injury with glee, shouting:

*Katie Bell, Katie Bell,
Her parents are Muggles,
She might be as well!*

Victoria didn’t join in—it was all rather *unseemly*, as Aunt Petunia would say—but she noticed Lucius’ lips curl into a smile. The Gryffindors gave as good as they got, launching into another rendition of *Marcus Flint*:

*His mother dropped him as a child, as a child, as a child,
His mother dropped him as a child,
Dumb old Marcus Flint!*

Angelina Johnson took the penalty and scored, bringing the teams level. Worse, Gryffindor still held possession, since there had been a foul, and Alicia Spinnet was already zooming towards the Slytherin hoops. Marcus Flint was a foot behind her, too close to see Katie Bell coming right towards him, a bludger close on her tail. Alicia swept to one side, Katie to the other. Flint was too slow: the bludger that had been following Katie smashed right into his face. Again.

The Slytherins groaned; the Gryffindors cheered.

Victoria couldn’t help but feel some admiration for Flint as he once again recovered and got back onto his broom, his smashed nose streaming with blood. He was a thug, but if she’d taken a bludger to the head she’d have been out for a week.

The game continued in the same vein: fast paced, violent, and thrilling. Victoria began to understand why Tracey was so eager to start flying—it just looked *cool*.

As they passed the thirty minute mark, play began to turn against Slytherin, with the Gryffindor chasers scoring thirty points in quick succession. Marcus Flint was slowing down, the hits to his head clearly fatiguing him, and Gryffindor was exploiting the gap in their defence.

“And Higgs has seen the snitch!” Lee Jordan called excitedly, and indeed Terence Higgs, the Slytherin seeker, was diving towards a tiny golden ball hovering near the ground. The Gryffindor
seeker, the second year Cormac McLaggen, was looking on with a dumbfounded expression from the other side of the stadium.

“But we’re losing!” Victoria said.

Terence caught the snitch and Gryffindor roared with approval. The Slytherins clapped politely.

“Better to end it there, with a small point difference,” Draco said, “we’ll be able to make it up against Hufflepuff, for sure.”

“Well, that’s that,” Lucius said, standing to leave. “And you had better hurry to your next class. What do you have this afternoon?”

“Flying, normally,” Victoria replied, “but today we’re in the Hall of Remembering.”

Luckily they didn’t have to do homework all afternoon. Instead, the first years took part in a series of Halloween-themed activities. McGonagall showed them how to transfigure a face onto a pumpkin, and Professor Flitwick taught them the Candle-Lighting Charm, so they could make the pumpkins glow from within.

They were then introduced to Professor Trelawney, a tall, spindly women with incredibly thick glasses. She taught Divination, a subject reserved for third years and above, like Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. Victoria had heard bad things about Trelawney’s classes—supposedly the old woman was a fraud—but they had plenty of fun that afternoon, apple bobbing and interpreting each other’s dreams.

“Last night I had a dream that Professor Quirrell’s turban unravelled and strangled me,” Victoria said, “what do you think that means?”

“Oh, how horrible!” Susan gasped, “maybe you’re going to fail a test in Defence? No, that doesn’t sound very likely…”

But as much as they enjoyed dream interpretation, there was really only one thing on the students’ minds: the feast. The afternoon seemed to stretch on cruelly, the smells of cooking intensifying as Victoria began to wish she had eaten more for lunch. At last, the school mediwitch Madam Pomfrey finished her talk on “young wizards and witches” (Victoria didn’t think she’d be able to look Draco in the eyes for a week) and released them from their suffering.

Everyone dashed for the exit, heading straight for the Great Hall. Susan, however, was taking forever to pack up her things.

“Let’s go!” Victoria said, “I could eat a hippogriff!”

“Wait!” Susan whispered, and when she was done packing up she grabbed Victoria’s arm, pulling her in the opposite direction—away from the Great Hall.

“This isn’t the way to the feast,” Victoria said, “come on, stop fooling around.”

Susan just tugged again on her arm again. “Don’t you see, this is your chance!” she said. “Literally everyone will be at the feast. Hufflepuff will be empty!”

Suddenly the feast didn’t seem so important.

“Yes!” Victoria cried, “you’re a genius!”
They made their way down into the depths of the castle, closer and closer to the smell of cooking. Victoria’s stomach rumbled. “The kitchens must be around here somewhere,” she said as they passed deeper into the cellars, “the smell is amazing.”

“You think this is bad? We wake up to smells like this every day,” Susan said, “but none of us know where the kitchens are, so we have to wait for breakfast like everyone else.”

She led Victoria past a painting of a bowl of fruit towards an alcove stacked with large barrels. “This is it,” she said, pulling out her wand and tapping it several times on one of the barrels. The lid of the barrel swung open. “In we go!”

Susan gripped the top edge of the barrel and swung herself inside, going feet first. She disappeared into the dark passage within.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Victoria muttered, before jumping in behind her. It was a slide. Magically smooth, she slid down rapidly through several twists and turns before being ejected into a cozy, low-ceilinged room lit by many hearths. Circular windows sat high up on the walls, and through them you could see Hogwarts’ front lawn, the windows just above grass level. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow into the common room.

“Nice,” Victoria said, “it’s a lot more homey than Slytherin.”

“Yeah?”

Victoria nodded. “Slytherin’s great and all… very elegant, I guess, but this is just… comfy.”

“You should try the armchairs,” Susan said with a grin. “You sink so far into them that you might never get out.”

But Victoria’s mind was already focusing on their task. “We just have to find whatever Snape’s mystery object is. But he didn’t say what it is, so it could be anything!”

They rummaged through the room, searching every drawer, shelf, nook and cranny, hoping that the object—whatever it was—would be obvious when they saw it. To their dismay, however, nothing jumped out as obviously Slytherin in character.

“Are you sure it’s a specific object?” Susan asked. “Maybe he just meant for you to take any object, to prove you were here.”

“No, it’s definitely something specific, something he put here himself,” Victoria replied. She slumped into an armchair in frustration. “Oh! I see what you mean about these.” The chair really was very comfortable.

A look of dawning realisation crossed Susan’s face. “He put it here himself? But that must mean it’s something that wasn’t here before! When did he tell you about this challenge?”

Victoria saw where she was going. “At the end of September. Why? Did something mysteriously appear around then?”

Susan turned towards a large portrait of an elderly witch wearing a golden broach. She had a kindly face and was watching them with a smile.

“Uh, hello,” Victoria said, still not used to speaking to portraits, “I’m Victoria.”

“Isolt Sayre, pleased to make your acquaintance,” the woman replied. She had an Irish accent.
“Isolt Sayre!” Susan said with a gasp, “the founder of Ilvermorny?”

“The very same,” the portrait replied.

“Not to mention a descendant of Salazar Slytherin!” Susan exclaimed, clearly impressed.

“Well, that certainly sounds promising,” Victoria said. She turned to the portrait. “May we ask you a question?”

“Of course, my dear,” the portrait replied, “and since you’re so polite about it, I shall even allow you three.” She raised three fingers.

Victoria paused. With just three questions, the direct approach was surely best. “Did Professor Snape put you here?”

“That he did,” the portrait said, and she dropped a finger.

The second question was obvious. “Do you know what object he left for us?”

Isolt dropped a second finger. “That I do.”

Victoria shared an excited look with Susan. But she had just one question left… she had to make it count. If she just asked for the identity of the object, would that be enough? They’d already searched the common room and found nothing—what if the object was difficult to retrieve? They might need the portrait’s help with that too.

A suspicion grew in Victoria’s mind. They’d already searched the common room. That wasn’t quite true. They had looked everywhere except for one place… the portrait itself.

The third question dropped into place.

“Isolt, can you please give me the object?”

Isolt laughed and clapped. “Of course I can! Come closer, child. You’ll have to reach in for yourself.” She stepped aside to reveal a hidden shelf, on which were displayed a number of small flower pots. “Just one of them, mind.”

Victoria approached and pushed her hand into the portrait. It was like the barrier to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters: her arm went straight into the wall, and beyond she could feel the flower pots. She grasped one and took it out, a pot disappearing from the shelf in the painting at the same time.

“Well done!” Isolt said, “I must say, the other girls didn’t get it nearly so quickly as you did!”

Victoria’s heart sank. “Other girls?”

“Oh, yes,” the portrait said, oblivious to her distress, “the tall, blonde one, ever so pretty, and the black-haired girl with the, ah, distinctive nose. They were here for almost an hour before they figured it out. Bickered like old wives too, I’m surprised they didn’t wake up half the house.”

Pansy and Daphne had beaten her to it, and from the sounds of it, they had dared to defy curfew to do so.

“You’ll just have to beat them to Gryffindor and Ravenclaw,” Susan said, reading Victoria’s expression. “Now come on, we have a feast to get to. I’ll stick the pot in my dorm for now, so you don’t have to carry it around all evening.”
The way out of the Hufflepuff dorm was rather more mundane than the entrance: a spiral staircase which led back up to the alcove, where they crawled out of a different barrel to the entrance.

“It’s not very practical, is it?” Victoria said, brushing her knees, “it’s a good thing they keep these corridors clean!”

“Try doing it with an armful of books!” Susan said with a laugh, “if you’re not careful they fall on your head when you get out the slide.”

As they made their way to the Great Hall, Victoria began to imagine the food that awaited her. “I hope they’re still serving mains,” she said, “I love pudding but I don’t think I can get by on treacle tart alone, you know? I want something with gravy.”

“Speak for yourself!” Susan replied, “besides, I’m sure they’ll be loads left. They’ve been cooking all day, from the smell of it, and we can’t have been gone long.”

They had in fact been gone rather longer than Susan thought. The sun had set while they were in Hufflepuff, and now the castle’s halls were dark and gloomy, lit only by fairy lamps.

Victoria sniffed. “Speaking of smells, what’s that? It’s almost enough to make me lose my appetite.”

“Maybe a bathroom flooded again,” Susan suggested, “you know how Moaning Myrtle can be.” But as they turned a corner, it became very clear that the smell was not coming from a bathroom. The two girls froze.

A huge troll was lumbering down the corridor towards them, its head brushing the high ceiling, its greenish-brown skin covered in grime and lichen. An equally large club was resting on its shoulder. Victoria’s mind went blank. She just stood there, her legs suddenly weak, her stomach tight and heart pounding, as the troll stopped and looked at them in surprise.

The troll recovered first. With a roar, it raised its club and started moving towards them, far faster than such a large creature should have been able to, the floor shaking with its every step.

“Run!” Susan cried, and they turned and fled back the way they had come.

“To Hufflepuff!” Victoria said, “the barrels! It can’t—”

An enormous crashing sound came from behind them: the troll had rounded the corner without slowing down, taking a chunk of the wall along with it.

“Faster!” Victoria shouted, but Susan was running as fast as she could, and suddenly Madam Hooch’s runs around the lake seemed wholly inadequate training.

Victoria risked a look behind.

“Duck!” she shouted, pushing Susan to the floor as the troll’s club went flying through the air, crushing a fairy lamp where it landed. The hall darkened.

Victoria tried to stand back up, but she tripped on her robe. A heavy footstep sounded from behind her and she let out a sob.

“Help!” she shouted, “someone, help!”

The troll loomed over the two girls, who were trembling on the floor in terror. There was nowhere
left to run.

“Depulso!”

The troll was launched through the air, bellowing as it flew down the corridor as if pulled by a giant hook; it hit the ceiling before crashing to the floor in a mess of stonework and dust. Victoria looked up to see Professor Snape striding down the corridor towards them, his robes billowing behind him, his wand outstretched. Relief flooded her.

But it wasn’t over yet. The troll was getting up. It roared its defiance and began to stomp back towards them.

Professor Snape’s face was inscrutable.

“It’s getting closer!” Susan said, and the panic returned—what if Snape couldn’t beat it? How strong was a troll, anyway?


Victoria screwed her eyes shut and sobbed once more, wishing she could just wake up.

Thump, thump, thump came the sound of the troll’s advance, and then there was a flash of green light, bright enough that it pierced her eyelids. A crashing sound followed, and then silence.

“You may look,” Snape said.

Victoria opened her eyes and looked down the corridor. The troll was there, slumped in a heap, so close she could have almost reached out and touched it.

“Is it…?”

“Dead?” Snape curtly, “yes. Now, let’s get you to the hospital wing.”

“I… I don’t think I can stand,” said Susan, staring dumbly at the dead troll. “My legs have gone all wobbly.”

“No matter,” Snape said, and he raised his wand. Victoria opened her mouth to protest, but she was too slow.

A flash of red light, and then nothing.
Chapter Nine: Christmas

Professor Snape’s defeat of the troll quickly became the stuff of Hogwarts legend, providing the fuel for dinner table discussions for weeks. Where had the troll come from? What spell had Snape used to pierce its thick, magical hide? And how was Victoria Potter involved?

All at once, her classmates seemed to have remembered that Victoria was the Girl Who Lived. Whispers and pointed fingers followed her around the halls, speculating on everything from her powers to her hair.

“Can’t she beat a troll?”

“...waterfall braid...”

“Why wasn’t she at the feast?”

“...must take ages to do...”

“...probably just got lucky...”

It was even worse at night, for her dreams had become unsettled, full of dark, twisting corridors and heavy footsteps. Professor Quirrell featured too, his turban sometimes unravelling to wrap tightly around her. She always woke up at that point, tangled in her sheets and shivering with a cold sweat.

Of course, not everyone was so confused as to Victoria’s absence from the Halloween feast. It did not take long for Pansy and Daphne to figure out just where she had been that night, nor how she had got there.

“I do hope we’re all competing fairly for Snape’s prize,” Pansy said one evening in the common room. They were surrounded by glitter, Sticking Charms and ink pots of every colour imaginable, completing a poster for Professor Flamel on the International Confederation of Wizards. “It’d be such a shame, wouldn’t it, if some of us cheated.”

Victoria chose not to acknowledge the accusation, instead busying herself with drawing a bubble in green ink around her latest addition:

MUGWUMPS

The Council of Mugwumps has thirteen members, corresponding to the thirteen great schools: Brazil, China, Egypt, France, Great Britain, India, Japan, Norway, Persia, Peru, Russia, Uganda, and the United States of America.
“Oh, absolutely,” Daphne said, peeling a Sticking Charm before using it to fix a Chocolate Frog card of Pierre Bonaccord, the first Supreme Mugwump, onto the poster. “It wouldn’t be fair if someone, say, asked their friend for help instead of doing it themselves.”

Draco shrugged, completely oblivious. “Didn’t Snape say something about there not being any rules?”

“Oh, shush,” Pansy said with a scowl, “obviously there are some rules. We’re meant to be doing it on our own, or else what’s the point?”

Victoria was unable to resist. “Yes,” she said, looking pointedly between Pansy and Daphne, “isn’t it great that we’re all working alone?”

Pansy’s scowl deepened. “That’s different.”

“Whatever,” Daphne said, flicking her hair over her shoulder, “we’re going to win anyway. We’ve got Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw already… just Gryffindor to go.”

Victoria was in a bad mood for the rest of the night. How were Pansy and Daphne still ahead of her? Was there some special magic they were using, something they didn’t learn in class? She was determined to find out.

And so, as Christmas approached and her classmates began to chatter excitedly about their plans for the holidays, Victoria could be found shut inside the library, reading everything she could about using magic to uncover secrets. She barely noticed the days growing shorter, her every evening spent reading by fairylight. First came Unlocking Charms: From Open Sesame to Alohomora, but that was no help. Next was On Revealing, a tome so complex that Victoria had to keep her copy of Magical Theory next to her, just to look up the meaning of half the words.

She was no closer to a solution by the time the first snow fell in early December. Professor Dumbledore was met with cheers and applause when he declared, at breakfast, that classes would be cancelled for the day, and Victoria was put out to discover that the library was to be closed as well.

Her disappointment evaporated once she went outside with Susan. It was beautiful: a covering of pure white, as far as the eye could see, with the sky a clear blue above them. The snow itself was pristine, just waiting for the crunch of first being stepped on.

Protected by dragonhide gloves and their a thick cloaks, she and Susan laughed as they ran around, making snow angels and throwing snowballs at each other. It wasn’t long before a school-wide snowball fight developed. The Slytherin girls quickly found each other, with Daphne, Millicent and Tracey enthusiastically launching as much snow as possible at the Gryffindors. Meanwhile, Pansy was standing nervously to one side, frantically brushing snowflakes off her pristine robes whenever a snowball came near her.

“I’m not playing!” she was shouting to anyone who would listen.

Daphne and Victoria shared a look.

“Now!” Daphne called, and she and Victoria tackled Pansy to the ground while Susan, Tracey and Millicent stuffed snow down the back of her cloak.

“No fair!” Pansy squealed, her voice full of laughter, “I’m not playing!”

The battle between the houses escalated. Just as matters were reaching their climax, with the
seventh year Slytherins under siege behind walls of transfigured snow, Professor Dumbledore stepped out of the castle wearing a pair of pink earmuffs. He was accompanied by Professors McGonagall and Flitwick.

Victoria looked at them curiously, noting that they were all holding their wands. “What do you think they’re doing?” she asked, pointing them out to Susan.

Susan squinted, her face rosy from the cold. “Maybe they’re joining in?”

They weren’t. As one, the three teachers raised their wands, pointing them in the direction of the lake. “Glacio!” they cried, their voices carrying powerfully on the wind, and to Victoria’s amazement the lake began to freeze over before their very eyes. It spread quickly, the water creaking and groaning as icy geometry spun itself out like a spider’s web, and soon the entire surface of the lake was frozen solid.

It was Victoria’s first experience of ice-skating. Professor McGonagall transfigured their boots into skates, Professor Flitwick gave them a quick class in how to stop, and then they were off, haltingly at first, but soon growing in confidence as they sped around the lake.

“Vicky! Susan! Come on, we’re having a race!”

That was Pansy, of course, who had taken it upon herself to organise a race across the inlet. All the first years were gathering, and even some second years too.

“Last one across is a damp Squib!”

Chaos ensued as over seventy children tried to skate across the same space at the same time. More than one collision took place, yet out of the scrum a clear victor emerged: Cho Chang, a pretty, second year Ravenclaw who seemed to take to skating as easily as she did quidditch.

The teachers forbade any further races after that, and the rest of the morning was spent at a more sedate pace. The whole school had come out to enjoy the ice. There was Hermione Granger, surprisingly graceful, trying to show Ron Weasley how to do it properly; and there too was Hagrid the enormous gamekeeper, leaving great gouges in the ice behind him as he gingerly stepped out onto the lake. Even Professor Trelawney had descended from her tower, though she hesitated at the shore, clutching a bottle of sherry.

At the back of Victoria’s mind, something clicked.

“They’re using Divination!”

* * *

After that it was back to the library. Fortunately for Victoria, it was one of the few parts of the castle able to resist the chill of winter, with the flagstone floor emitting a dry, comforting warmth, like it had been sitting in the sun for hours. Outside the library, students rushed through the drafty corridors, taking refuge by the roaring fires of the Great Hall and the Slytherin common room.

Not even the classrooms were safe. Any heat would quickly dissipate into the thick stone walls, or else escape through the thin glass of Hogwarts’ many windows. Professor Flitwick, at least, had enchanted some cushions with Warming Charms to keep their seats warm, but Professor
McGonagall maintained that the cold would help them focus, and it was no surprise that Madam Hooch considered running through the snow to be character-building.

It was therefore inevitable that the Warming Charm was quickly becoming the most popular spell in the school, though it was devilishly tricky to get right. More than once Victoria had seen a classmate sweating buckets after overdoing the spell. The crackling heat of a fire was a much safer option.

The library was so comfortable that Susan had taken to joining Victoria there voluntarily, reading books like *Villainous Vikings: Gruesome Tales of Olden Magic* while Victoria devoured the Divination section. It was unsurprisingly extensive, given that Divination was commonly taught at Hogwarts, and Victoria was already accumulating a scroll full of ideas. One possibility was reading tea leaves, though she didn’t much like tea; another was haruspicy, the casting of chicken livers, but that seemed rather too bloody.

The one she and Susan were most keen to try was castanology, which involved swinging a conker from a string. Supposedly, if you concentrated hard enough on a location, the conker would pull towards it. The problem was practising, as they could hardly wander around the corridors aimlessly, waving a conker around. That would surely draw attention and could easily result in Victoria’s disqualification. So, like everyone else, she found herself eagerly anticipating the holidays.

Needless to say, she would not be returning to the Dursleys for Christmas. Why would she, when there was so much magic to explore at Hogwarts? It didn’t even bother her that she was the sole student remaining out of all Slytherin house: even alone, this was likely to be the best Christmas of her life.

“You will write to me, won’t you?” Susan asked as she was leaving for the train. She was very concerned about Victoria being all alone over Christmas. “And let me know if you find Ravenclaw!”

Once the holidays had started, Victoria took great joy in having the common room all to herself. She got to sit in the most comfortable chair, right next to the fire, and she could stay up as late as she wanted. One night, when she felt particularly daring, she even had a midnight feast made up of food she had smuggled out of the Great Hall. Dumbledore joined in, though he seemed disappointed by the lack of raw meat. Victoria fed him some cake instead.

The first few days of holiday were mainly spent on homework, which she got out of the way with enthusiasm (she was particularly proud of the essay she wrote for Professor Flitwick on the Unlocking Charm), and ordering presents for her friends from the various catalogues which had appeared at the start of December.

When she wasn’t in the Slytherin common room, she was trying to find Ravenclaw’s. Having constructed her conker on a string, she paced around the castle, swinging it gently from side to side, chanting as she went:

“*Invenio Ravenclaw,* *invenio Ravenclaw,* *invenio Ravenclaw*…”

As she did this, she focused with all her might on the Ravenclaw crest. She kept at it for days, systematically mapping out the castle, constantly alert for the slightest twitch on her string.

It was while she was searching the fourth floor that she came across the mirror.

She was passing a suit of armour when the string twitched. She was so focused on her chanting that
she almost missed it, but her brain finally caught up with her body and she came to an abrupt halt. Had she found Ravenclaw at last? She swung the pendulum and—there!—it twitched again, right in the direction of a door left slightly ajar.

It wasn’t Ravenclaw’s common room, that was for sure. It looked like an old, abandoned classroom. The desks were all piled up against the wall, and heavy drapes covered the windows, leaving the room cloaked in shadow.

“Lumos,” Victoria whispered, flicking her wand. A glowing sphere floated upwards, bobbing off the ceiling like a ball in water, filling the room with a harsh white light.

It was immediately obvious why this classroom was abandoned: there, at the end of the room, right where the blackboard should have been, stood an enormous mirror. It stretched from the floor to the ceiling and had a golden frame like a painting in a museum. At the very top of the frame was an inscription in some unknown language:

_Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi_

But the most amazing thing was what the mirror showed. As Victoria got closer, her reflection changed, and suddenly she was older, not a girl but a woman, tall, beautiful, and powerful. Her wand glowed with green light and a troll lay dead at her feet. All her friends were there too, looking up at her with admiration, and as she got closer still, she noticed Dudley in the background, begging for her forgiveness.

Did the mirror show the future? She stared deep into the glass, her nose almost up against it, searching for more details. How could she make sure this future came to be? Could the mirror tell her that as well?

She lost all track of time, staring into the mirror’s depths. She might have sat there for much longer, had she not been interrupted.

“A marvelous artefact, is it not?”

Victoria jumped in shock, twisting around to face the voice. It was Professor Dumbledore, his tall form silhouetted in the doorway.

“Professor!” she said, her heart skipping a beat, though she wasn’t sure why she was so nervous. She wasn’t breaking any rules, was she? “I, uh, didn’t hear you come in.”

Dumbledore smiled at her indulgently. “Yes, the Mirror of Erised does tend to have that effect. You would not be the first to fall under its spell, though you will, I hope, be the last.”

He stepped into the classroom, moving into Victoria’s wandlight and taking a perch on the edge of a desk. It was the first time she had been so close to the headmaster. He had a kindly face, framed with long, white hair, and was dressed in colourful purple robes.

“You hope?” she asked, “is there something wrong with it?”

“Not in the manner you are thinking, no,” Dumbledore said. He stroked his long beard as he spoke, his voice slow and deliberate. “The mirror is functioning as it should. But what is it, do you think, that the mirror shows us?”

“The future,” Victoria replied confidently. She shifted so that she was sitting cross-legged, her back now to the mirror. “I see myself as an adult, powerful enough to beat a troll.”
“And yet,” he said, “when I look into the glass, I see myself as a young man.”

That had her stumped. “It shows us… the age we want to be?” She supposed that would make sense—surely old people all wanted to be young again?

Dumbledore chuckled. “Not quite. I shall give you one more clue: the man I see in the mirror is not the man I was, but the man I might have been.”

Victoria frowned in thought. Clearly this was a test of some kind, one which she was determined to pass. “If the mirror shows you a different past, then it’s not showing something real,” she said, thinking out loud, “it is impossible to change the past, isn’t it?”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “Let us say that it is.”

“Okay. So the mirror is showing us something that’s impossible? But that would mean…” Victoria’s heart sank. It would mean the vision of herself would never come to pass. Suddenly it made sense why Dumbledore hoped nobody would look at it again. “It shows us something that we really want, but can’t have. Who’d make something like that?”

“You are almost there,” Dumbledore replied. “The Mirror shows us nothing more or less than our deepest desire. It is true that for many, this will be an impossibility... people do have an unfortunate habit of wanting what they cannot have.”

Victoria perked up. “But mine still could come true?”

“It may,” Dumbledore allowed, peering at her over the top of his half-moon spectacles, “or perhaps, in time, your vision will change. I confess that I too once dreamed of power… and yet now, when I look into the mirror, I see myself with the ability to change it all. I would advise you to be careful that, in the pursuit of power, you do not cast aside that which is most valuable.”

Silence met his declaration. It was all right for him, widely considered the greatest wizard of the age, to talk about the dangers of power. What did he know of being weak? Had Dumbledore ever cowered from a troll, waiting for its fists to fall?

Victoria doubted it.

“Well then,” Dumbledore said, standing up and looking at his pocket-watch, which had nine hands, “it can’t be long until dinner, and I have it on good authority that toad-in-the-hole is on tonight’s menu. Pip pip!”

Victoria knew a dismissal when she heard one. She stuffed her conker in a pocket and rushed to dinner, where indeed toad-in-the-hole was waiting for her. It wasn’t until later that evening, when she returned to the common room, that she realised that Dumbledore hadn’t really told her what he saw in the mirror. Not properly… what was it, in his past, that he wanted to change so much?

Should she have asked? She doubted he would have given her a straight answer. It was, she supposed, a rather personal question.

* * *

For the first time in her life, Victoria had trouble sleeping on Christmas Eve. Christmas with the
Dursleys had never been a pleasant affair: some second-hand clothes for her, all the most expensive toys for Dudley. The lunch was good, she supposed, but only when Aunt Marge didn’t come. She always got drunk, and when she got drunk she got mean.

But this year Victoria had presents from friends to look forward to, and a lunch cooked by Hogwarts’ house-elves. She was so excited that she didn’t get to sleep until past midnight, and woke up at six o’clock.

The moment she was awake, she knew she wouldn’t be getting back to sleep. She slipped out of bed to find a small pile of presents next to her trunk. Thanks to Draco talking about the matter at great length, she was aware that the Malfoy family opened one present at breakfast, and the rest after lunch, but Victoria had no intention of honouring their tradition.

She sat down in front of her presents and looked them over, feeling them, weighing them in her hands. This was a moment to be savoured. Dumbledore padded over to investigate, no doubt drawn by her own attention. He sniffed at a few of the boxes before dismissing them, turning instead to curl up in her lap. She picked a box at random and read the tag.

To Victoria

Happy Yule! Mother said you would like this.

Best wishes,

Draco

Her eyes widened when she removed the wrapping paper: the small box was marked with the logo of Smith’s of London, one of the most expensive jewellers in Britain. A charm bracelet lay within, just like the one Narcissa had been wearing at Halloween, though with fewer charms. A card beneath the velvet told her they would keep her dry, warm, and undisturbed by the wind. It was a generous gift indeed—Victoria was suddenly glad she’d not skimped on her present to Draco.

The next present was from Tracey, who had got her a collection of chocolate frogs, and then came a reassuringly squishy package from Daphne. That almost always meant clothes.

To Vicky,

Merry Christmas!

Love,

Daphne xxx

P.S. I hope it fits.

Sure enough, inside was a beautiful, silvery inner robe, the fabric incredibly soft and light. It was sorely needed, for Victoria had found herself rather lacking in casual robes. The ones she had bought at Diagon Alley were nowhere near enough, especially when Daphne seemed to have a
never-ending wardrobe.

After that was Pansy’s present. True to form, she had managed to come off as simultaneously generous and insulting by giving Victoria a truly impressive collection of makeup.

Dear Victoria,

Happy Yule! I noticed you don’t wear much makeup. After the holidays are over, let’s set aside an evening when we can try everything out. Daphne and I will be happy to show you the ropes!

Season’s greetings,

xx Pansy xx

Victoria had deliberately left Susan’s present for last. It was small, rectangular, and hard. A book, perhaps? But no, it was too thin to be a book… curious, she slipped the wrapping paper off, careful not to tear it, and smiled when she saw a framed photo of herself and Susan. Like all wizarding photos, it depicted them in motion: they were skating on the lake, cheeks flushed red, their hair messy and speckled with snowflakes. It was beautiful.

But how had Susan taken it? She didn’t remember seeing anyone with a camera on the lake. She turned to the tag for answers.

To Victoria,

Happy Christmas! I hope you’re not too bored! I’ve asked Daddy and he says next Christmas you can come stay with us. We always have a delicious nogtail for dinner with Aunt Amelia, have you ever had one? I think you’ll like it. Anyway, I hope you have a lovely day and eat lots of yummy food.

Lots of love,

Susan xxx

P.S. In case you’re wondering, I got this photo extracted at the Retinarium.

Victoria carefully placed the photograph on her bedside table, giving it a place of prominence. She’d got on okay with the girls in Little Whinging, but she’d never had a real best friend before. She rather liked the idea.

The rest of the morning was spent lazing around in the common room. She was taking a day off from searching for Ravenclaw—it was Christmas, after all. She tried on Daphne’s robe and experimented a bit with Pansy’s makeup. The results were disastrous and she quickly ran to the bathroom to wash it all off. Maybe she would take Pansy up on her offer of lessons after all…

Before she knew it, the grandfather clock chimed one o’clock and it was time for Christmas lunch. The Great Hall had been properly decorated for the occasion. A huge tree stood in the corner, so tall that its tip was brushing the ceiling, and the long house tables had been discarded in favour of
single round table in the centre of the hall. There were just a few students and teachers remaining over the holidays, with everyone else having returned home, so Victoria took a seat next to the ginger-haired Ron Weasley, the only other first year. He was there with his older brothers, each of which shared his ginger hair: Fred and George, who were in third year, and Percy, a fifth-year prefect.

Ron’s eyes widened when she sat down next to him.

“Hi,” Victoria said, smiling brightly, “pull a cracker with me?”

Wizarding crackers, it turned out, put their Muggle cousins rather to shame. Victoria shrieked as it went off like a cannon blast, causing the Weasleys to erupt into laughter. Her face turned red and she busied herself with putting the bright orange witch’s hat, which had emerged from the cracker, onto her head. Like the Muggle crowns, it was made of a thin, gauzy paper, but had clearly been enchanted to stay upright.

With a ding-ding of a spoon against glass, Professor Dumbledore called for attention. “Merry Christmas!” he announced, beaming at the small gathering, “as always, it gives me great joy to share this special day with all those who, for whatever reason, choose to call Hogwarts their home during the festive period. Soon our bellies will be full of turkey, but first we observe an ancient tradition, one which has been practised at this school for over a thousand years. Professor McGonagall, if you would be so kind?”

McGonagall stood and, with a flick of her wand, levitated a huge log of wood from behind the table. It looked like it had been freshly felled, with half-shorn branches sticking out in all directions, some of them still bearing leaves. It floated through the air towards the hearth, where, as always, a roaring fire was burning. Professor Dumbledore followed it, his own wand drawn, and out of the depths of the fire he summoned a tiny piece of wood, covered in ash and glowing from within with crimson heat.

“Last year’s log is almost extinguished, but its fire lives on,” Dumbledore stated, his intonation almost like a chant, “let the old ignite the new, as it has done since the days of the founders.”

Golden fire leapt from the small kindling, instantly consuming the floating log. McGonagall twitched her wand and it fell into the hearth, mingling with the rest of the fire.

“Splendid!” Dumbledore said, his voice back to normal. “Shall we eat?”

Mountains of food appeared in front of Victoria. There were enough roast turkeys to serve ten times their number, each one surrounded by glistening roast potatoes, and between them all the trimmings were arrayed: five different types of stuffing, chipolatas wrapped in bacon, buttered peas, fresh runner beans, and boats of thick gravy. Everyone dove in, and Victoria piled her plate almost as as high as Ron’s.

“What was all that about, do you reckon?” Victoria asked between mouthfuls of potato, waving her knife in the direction of the fire.

It was Percy who answered. “It’s known as the yule log,” he said, taking on a lecturing tone, “not all wizards follow the tradition, but it’s not uncommon. Many believe that the log has potent magical properties and offers protection for the year to follow.”

“The Muggles don’t have anything like that,” Victoria noted, “just the tree and presents. And church, I guess, for the people who believe that stuff.”
Ron frowned. “Muggles?”

“My aunt and uncle,” Victoria explained. “I grew up with them, after… well, you know.”

“Sorry,” Ron muttered, blushing at bringing up such a sensitive topic. For her part, Victoria found his reaction more uncomfortable than the question itself.

“Are your family all wizards?” she asked, trying to move to a safer discussion.

Ron speared a yorkshire pudding and poured gravy into it. “Yup. Mum and Dad are in Romania, visiting my brother Charlie. Then there’s Bill, my oldest brother—he’s a cursebreaker—and Ginny, who’s a year younger than me.”

“What’s a cursebreaker?”

It was the right question. Ron launched into an excited recounting of second-hand stories, telling her of his oldest brother’s adventures around the world. He had discovered lost tombs under the sands of Egypt, survived the labyrinths of Crete, and even spent a month exploring the hidden catacombs beneath Rome. From each location he returned to Britain with a small fortune in gold and gems—most of which, to Ron’s great displeasure, was retained by Bill’s employer, Gringotts Bank.

“Oh, but he must see so much interesting magic,” Victoria said, envious of Bill’s exotic travels. Ron blinked. “Who cares about that? Just think of all the gold!”

Just when she thought she couldn’t eat another bite, dessert came and she found herself able to eat just a little more. Flaming Christmas puddings, mince pies, and treacle tarts appeared, all accompanied with custard or cream. Victoria went straight for the Christmas pudding.

By the time she returned to her common room, she was far too full to do anything but lie down with a magazine, but even that seemed too strenuous. It wasn’t long before she dozed off, a copy of *Transfiguration Today* covering her face. It had truly been the best Christmas ever.

The holidays ended a week later, and the students returned to Slytherin common room in a maelstrom of trunks, pets, and excited reunions. Everybody wanted to share their holiday stories, and the loudest voice of all was Pansy’s.

“Daphne and I went to the Malfoys’ Yule Ball, of course. Anyone who’s anyone goes, and they all said that this year was particularly good… such a pity you couldn’t come, Victoria.”

Victoria, as Pansy well knew, had not been invited.

“Next year,” Draco promised. “This year’s invites were sent out before we met, but I’m sure mother will keep you in mind next time.”

It was not the last invitation Victoria was to receive that evening. Just as they were about to go to bed, Professor Snape swept into the common room and descended upon the first years.

“Potter! A word.”

She followed him to his office, which wasn’t far from the common room entrance. Its shelves were lined with gruesome ingredients, including one jar which looked like it contained a deformed baby. Victoria shuddered.
“The headmaster has requested I deliver you a message,” Snape said, taking a seat at his desk. “He intends to host a gathering next Saturday and would be pleased by your attendance. You are to present yourself to the gargoyle on the second floor, wearing dress robes, at three o’clock.”

Victoria blinked. “Alone?” She didn’t want to go to a party full of adults, even if the headmaster was interesting.

“Indeed. There is an—” Snape’s lip curled “—individual whom the headmaster wishes you to meet.”

“Who?”

“A friend of your esteemed father,” Snape said. “His name is Remus Lupin.”

Chapter End Notes

For the Americans among us, a “conker” is the hard seed of a horse-chestnut tree. In Britain it is a traditional game to put them on the end of a piece of string and swing them against each other until one of them breaks. The winner is the person whose conker survives the impact.
Chapter Ten: Making Connections

Stories were exchanged. Christmas gifts were compared. Holiday homework was handed in. And just like that, classes resumed as if they had never stopped. The teachers seemed determined to make up for the lost time of the holidays and, by the time Potions rolled around on Thursday morning, Victoria already had a pile of homework to complete.

As they waited outside the Potions classroom, Tracey was voicing her displeasure at the quantity of work.

“It’s inhumane, I tell you. Ten questions on counter-jinxes for Quirrell, an hour practising the Cutting Charm for Flitwick, and to top it all off, five inches for McGonagall on the solidification of liquids! Five!”

General sounds of discontent met her declaration, with even the Gryffindors joining in.

“You can look at my transfiguration, if you like,” Victoria replied, rooting through her bag for a scroll, “I did it last night so I could do Herbology today.”

“Don’t remind me,” Pansy grumbled. “I don’t see how it’s fair, having to draw twenty different mushrooms, and memorise their names, and their antidotes. I think I’d rather just be poisoned!”

Finally, Professor Snape arrived. All moaning abruptly ceased.

“In!”

They rushed inside the laboratory, positioning their cauldrons and eagerly starting fires beneath them. The dungeons were particularly cold, and many were keen to huddle around the warmth of a fire despite their thick winter robes. Victoria didn’t share their concerns: thanks to the Malfoys’ Christmas gift, it might as well have been a summer’s day.

With a jab of his wand, Professor Snape extinguished the fires. “I don’t recall telling you to commence brewing. You will not need your cauldrons today.”

No one dared point out that he usually punished them if they prepared their cauldrons too slowly. Not even the Gryffindors were that brave. So, with universal looks of dismay, the class set aside their cauldrons and took out their books.

Professor Snape selected a large tome from the shelf next to his desk. “Today we shall be focusing on the concept of key ingredients. If you have completed the reading I assigned before the holidays—and if you have not, I will quickly find out—you should already be familiar with the basics. I will now expand upon the topic in preparation for an upcoming project. Ready yourselves! I shall
dictate, and you shall write.”

Victoria dipped her quill into her ink pot and braced herself for an inevitable cramped hand. Professor Snape’s dictations were always long, and he took delight in speaking at a speed which made it extremely difficult, but not impossible, to keep up.

He began. “The key ingredient of a potion bears similarities to an incantation in a spell. An incantation does not reflect the complete structure of a spell, which exists only within the caster’s mind. However, it invokes the primary symbol at the root of the spell and so acts as the locus rei sitae around which the spell is constructed. A parallel situation holds for the key ingredient. It is not the only ingredient in a potion, yet it carries within it the seed of meaning which gives the finished product its direction. There are five principal categories of key ingredient…”

The scratching of quills on parchment became increasingly frantic as the dictation continued. Snape did not pause, continuing at an even but relentless pace, so that a single mistake was more than enough to leave you desperately trying to catch up. Muttered curses could be heard from around the room as, one by one, students fell behind, losing time while they blotted a patch of ink or corrected a misspelt Latin phrase.

Victoria was one of the few to keep up—it was easier if you had done the reading—but even her handwriting had devolved to a messy scrawl.

“Professor?” said Parvati Patil, a Gryffindor girl who had recently taken to copying Victoria’s hair, “could you repeat that last bit, please?”

The class stared at her in shock. No one interrupted the Professor while he was dictating. Snape descended upon her and snatched up her parchment with narrowed eyes.

“Are you deaf, girl, or merely simple? Ten points from Gryffindor for your inability to follow simple instructions. You’ve skipped the third paragraph entirely… no, this won’t do at all.” Looking pointedly around the class, he tore the parchment in two and let it fall to the floor. “Is there anyone else who wishes for me to repeat myself?”

Silence met his question. Parvati looked like she was about to cry.

“No?” Snape drawled, a small smile on his face, “then let us continue.”

Everyone rushed to put quill to parchment once more.

“Not all potions use a single key ingredient. Potions which contain two or more key ingredients are known as complex potions, the brewing of which requires a subtle understanding of how to balance the competing powers involved. The most lethal poisons are generally complex, as these poisons require equally complex antidotes. Such an antidote may be difficult to derive in the short time available before the poison takes effect…”

As she had predicted, Victoria’s hand soon cramped up. Snape granted them no reprieve, continuing to speak for another twenty minutes, by which time much of the class had given up entirely. Only Hermione Granger, who took great pride in her quillwork, seemed to have produced notes without error.

Of course, the dictation was just the beginning. Snape proceeded to write a long list of questions on the board for them to complete, a task made significantly more difficult by the fact that each student only had partial notes. They might have asked their neighbour, and so between them pieced together an answer, had Snape not demanded absolute silence. The rest of the lesson was therefore
dominated by the *swish-swish* of pages turning as everyone searched their textbooks for the answers they lacked. Only the Slytherins dared to ask each other for help, limiting themselves to hushed whispers in the hope that Snape would be more lenient on his own house.

Lunch approached and Snape remained silent. Victoria noticed Tracey, apparently taken by a fit of optimism, beginning to surreptitiously pack away her things. Would they really escape without homework?

Tracey was to be disappointed. Just as class was about to end, Snape stood to address them once more. “Next week, we will commence a project which will keep us occupied until the end of February. In pairs, you will attempt to create the ancient solution known as the *Arrival of Hapi*, a fertility potion so potent that a single drop should guarantee an abundant harvest for an entire farm.”

Tracey and Victoria’s eyes met and they nodded to each other. The two of them commonly worked together, since Pansy always paired with Daphne.

“This shall mark the next level in your study of potions, unlike anything you have brewed to date,” Snape continued. “I expect many of you will fail. Nonetheless, perhaps one or two of you will prove yourselves worthy.” His eyes landed on Draco Malfoy, who puffed up under his gaze. “Your pairs shall be as follows: Brown and Parkinson, Bulstrode and Weasley, Crabbe and Thomas…”

The class listened in horror as Snape proceeded to pair them up with little regard for friendship or even house. Indeed, it seemed almost as if Snape had deliberately placed them with someone they disliked.

“… Granger and Potter…”

Victoria scowled. Granger! Just her luck. Was there any girl more insufferable in the entire school? Her eyes landed on the bushy-haired girl across the room, who was scowling right back at her.

*Great.*

They left the class with yet another homework assignment: in their pairs, they were to research the key ingredient of the *Arrival of Hapi*. Needless to say, Tracey was not happy. Victoria wasn’t too pleased either. Her weekend was rapidly diminishing before her very eyes, a long Sunday afternoon in the library with Hermione Granger now looming on the horizon. She wouldn’t even have the time to resume her search for Ravenclaw with Susan.

First, however, she had to attend Dumbledore’s party. As instructed, she arrived at the second floor corridor at three o’clock on Saturday afternoon, where she waited nervously in front of a tall, stone gargoyle. She was wearing a long-sleeved dress robe of dark green velvet, owl-ordered from Madam Malkin for the occasion, and had put her hair up in a braided bun copied from a picture in Daphne’s latest *Witch Weekly* magazine.

“Er… hello?” Victoria said to the empty corridor, feeling rather silly. Where was the party? Was Snape just playing a trick on her?

Footsteps echoed down the hallway, heralding the arrival of Professor Flamel. He was dressed in an elaborate five-piece robe and had waxed his impressive moustache.

“Ah, Miss Potter! Albus mentioned you might be coming,” Flamel said cheerfully, “shall we be fashionably late together?”

“Late?” Victoria said. She had never been late for anything, never mind an appointment with Albus
Dumbledore. “I thought it started at three!”

“Mars bars,” Flamel replied.

“Pardon?”

The gargoyle sprang to life, stepping to one side with the sound of grinding stone, and behind it the wall parted, just like the entrance to the Slytherin common room. A spiral staircase was revealed, rotating upwards in a corkscrew motion.

“Come, my dear!” Flamel called as he stepped forward, much more energetic than he was in their classes, “quickly now, afore Elphias guzzles all the time-turned wine!”

They made their way up the staircase, which terminated in front of a sturdy oak door. Flamel didn’t bother knocking. They entered to the sound of jazz, clinking glasses and the pleasant hubbub of overlapping conversations. As faces turned to inspect the new arrivals, Victoria couldn’t help but look around in fascination.

Professor Dumbledore’s office was large and circular, with a high, domed ceiling crowded with portraits. A layer of bookcases lined the walls, interrupted here and there by glass cabinets full of mysterious contraptions, and to the left a fire was burning merrily within a large hearth.

A party was in full swing. Small groups of adults were dotted around the room, each one of them smartly dressed and clutching a glass. The portraits above them had joined the festivities, many of them having left their own frames to join their companions around tables heaped with food and drink.

“Welcome!” Dumbledore called, approaching them with open arms. He was wearing robes of deep crimson with a golden stole, as colourful as always, yet of a more formal cut. “Please, come in! You’re a touch late for lunch, I’m afraid, but no doubt we can find some wine for you, Nicholas. And perhaps a butterbeer for Miss Potter?”

Victoria had never had beer, butter or otherwise. “Yes, please,” she said, trying to hide her eagerness. The girls were going to be so jealous when she told them she’d been allowed alcohol.

Dumbledore clapped twice; a glass of wine and a bottle of golden liquid floated towards them.

Flamel took the glass. “Many happy returns, Albus,” he said, raising his drink, and Victoria hurriedly took her bottle to join the toast. “One hundred and eleven is no small milestone, my boy!”

Even though she was familiar with wizards’ extended lifespan, and obviously Dumbledore wasn’t young, it had never really occurred to Victoria that Dumbledore might be just that old. Why, that meant he was born in the nineteenth century! What would it be like, she wondered, to live for so long?

Dumbledore sighed. “Alas, I now pass from the comforting years of middle age into that most dreaded of conditions, old age. I shall try to make the most of it… the elderly must be allowed their eccentricities, after all.”

“By that measure, I should be as mad as a hatter,” Flamel replied, causing Dumbledore to chuckle.

“As in most matters, Nicholas, you prove to be the exception…” His eyes landed on Victoria. “But look at us, two elderly men boring a young lady with tales of their great years. Drink up, Miss Potter, and let us find you some more appropriate company!”
He led her across the room towards a young man hovering by a cheese board. She took a sip of the butterbeer as they went: it was sweet and warming, with a frothy, almost creamy texture, and just the slightest hint of bitterness at the end. *Delicious.*

“May I present Mister Justin Laghail,” Dumbledore said. “Justin, you will, of course, be familiar with Victoria Potter.”

Justin couldn’t have been too many years out of Hogwarts. He was tall, too skinny for his robes, and his chin bore the wisps of a sad attempt at a beard.

“A pleasure!” he squeaked, abruptly thrusting his hand forwards, and Victoria endured a particularly sweaty handshake. She resisted the urge to wipe her own hand on her robe once it was released. “Please, call me Justin!”

“Splendid!” Dumbledore said, beaming at them, “well, I shall let the two of you get acquainted. Oh, and I do recommend the baked camembert. It is particularly fine when combined with the chutney.”

He departed, leaving them in a rather awkward silence. Victoria took another sip of her butterbeer while Justin’s attention turned to the cheese.

“I never quite know what to do with myself at these things,” he confessed, loading some crumbly wensleydale onto a cracker. “I expect you’re used to it, being a Potter and all.”

She thought back to the Dursleys’ many dinner parties, held for Vernon’s business partners. “More or less,” she said, stretching the truth to breaking point. “So, uh, how do you know Professor Dumbledore?”

Justin bit into the cracker before replying, cheese scattering everywhere as it collapsed. “Oops!” He tried to brush off his robes, inadvertently rubbing the cheese into the black fabric. Victoria eyed the greasy streaks with mild disgust. “Never mind… it’ll wash out, I’m sure! Anyway, I went to Hogwarts of course, but I don’t recall speaking to Dumbledore once during that time… not many people do, you know? But then one day he sent me a letter, letting me know about a job going in Law Enforcement—fascinating stuff, I was actually helping them amend the definition of a dark creature—and since then we’ve kept in touch.”

“So you work for the Ministry?” Victoria asked, suddenly more interested. The idea of a magical government fascinated her. What did they actually *do*? Why did wizards need a government at all?

But to her disappointment, Justin no longer worked for the Ministry. “I’ve recently moved on elsewhere… it was excellent experience though, I’d never have got it without the headmaster’s help. He’s a great man, Dumbledore… just look at me, here, surrounded by so many important people!”

Victoria looked around. She didn’t recognise anyone, but then, the only famous wizards she knew were from chocolate frog cards and the wireless.

“That’s Elphias Doge,” Justin continued, nodding at an elderly man across the room. He was a short, stout wizard with little remaining hair. “The Special Advisor to the Wizengamot, I’ve wanted to meet him for ages… I don’t suppose you could introduce me?”

She had of course never met the man, nor even heard of him. But a feeling of recklessness took her, and she found herself loath to dissuade Justin of his high opinion of her level of sophistication. “Why not? Let’s go.”
Justin blinked. “Wait, I didn’t mean—”

She ignored him, grabbing his arm and dragging him over to the huddle containing Elphias Doge. A young woman (who, being a witch, could have been anywhere from thirty to fifty) was talking animatedly.

“... well, with an election in three years, the Minister can hardly afford to—oh, hello there.”

“Hi! I’m Victoria.” She had long since learnt that an introduction was quite unnecessary, but she figured it was polite to observe the formalities.

“An honour,” the woman said. Her voice was refined, reminding Victoria of Lucius Malfoy, and there was a certain dignity about her which belied her youth. “I’m Emmeline, dear, but do call me Emmy.”

“Emmeline?” Justin said, “not Emmeline Vance, head of the Obliviators?”

Victoria rolled her eyes—he really was useless at this. “This is Justin.”

“And, ah, what do you do, young man?” asked Elphias Doge. He was eying Justin’s robes, which still bore the evidence of the dropped cheese.

“I recently took up chambers at Lower Temple,” Justin said. “Just started this January, actually.”

Doge’s eyebrows shot up. “Indeed? My old stomping grounds! But I’m sure you knew that, eh? They haven’t taken a new junior in quite some years, I understand… what did you say your name was?”

“Justin Laghail.”

The adults shared a look, the meaning of it lost on Victoria.

“You had a sponsor, perhaps?” Emmeline asked, her voice neutral. “Someone with connections to the Inn?”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” Justin said, “I just applied. Master Fawley examined me by *viva voce* and offered me a scholarship.”

Now they were looking at Justin with real interest.

“Remarkable,” Emmeline said.

“Didn’t know Fawley had it in him!” Elphias added.

It was then that Professor Dumbledore, who had been circulating the room, joined their group.

“Albus!” Elphias ejaculated, “have you heard? This young gentleman has secured chambers at Lower Temple—without a sponsor!”

“Indeed? How fortuitous that the two of you should meet here, at a party which I organised,” Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. “One might almost suspect that it had been planned.”

Emmeline laughed. “We should have known.”

“I couldn’t possibly comment,” Dumbledore said, “now, if I may steal Miss Potter once more, a reunion of sorts awaits her.”
He took her over to the fireplace and pulled out his pocket-watch. “Any moment now… ah, yes, here he comes.”

The fire leapt up with a whoosh, taller than Victoria, and turned the vivid green of Floo travel. Suddenly, a man stepped out of the flames, as casually as if he were stepping out of a door. He was quite the contrast to the other party goers: he was wearing old, tattered robes, and, though his face was youthful, his brown hair was already turning grey.

Dumbledore stepped forward and embraced the new arrival. “Welcome back to Hogwarts, Remus. It’s been too long.”

They separated and turned to Victoria.

“Victoria, this is Remus Lupin, a friend of your late father,” Dumbledore explained, “I have asked him here to answer any questions you may have regarding your parents. Or perhaps you will discuss the price of fish in Venezuela… the choice is yours! Now, if you will excuse me, I believe Alastor is attempting to probe Fawkes with a dark detector.”

He left abruptly, hurrying across the room towards a grisled man with a wooden leg, who was using what looked like a radio aerial to poke at a magnificent golden bird.

Remus caught her eye and gave her a wry smile. “Shall we?” He led her towards a quiet corner, where a pair of chintzy chairs had been set up. “I expect you’ve got a fair few questions for me.”

Victoria took a seat, swinging her legs as she searched for questions. In truth, it had been a long time since she had thought about her parents. They were something abstract to her… everyone expected her to miss them greatly, but how could you miss people you never knew? Her first instinct was actually to ask Remus why he had never visited her, but that seemed like a rather rude question.

She settled on a more immediate concern. “I was just speaking to Justin,” she said, nodding her head in the young lawyer’s direction, “he mentioned something about the Potter family, about how I should be used to parties or something… what did he mean by that?”

Remus didn’t answer immediately, taking a moment to rub at his stubble. “A question befitting your house,” he said at last. “Understand that I’m by no means an expert in the history of the Potter family, but I suppose it falls to me to teach you what I know. Well… as I’m sure you’ve realised, the Potters go back a long time, almost as long as Hogwarts itself. The family is originally from Stinchcombe in the Cotswolds—I visited James there once or twice, back during our school days, and it’s quite charming… I wonder what happened to it…”

He trailed off, eyes distant, apparently in no hurry to continue.

“I think McGonagall mentioned something about that,” Victoria said, “back when we went to Gringotts.”

“Indeed? Well, I couldn’t say what state it’s in after a decade of sitting empty. Magical homes have a habit of turning rather wild, when left to their own devices. But to answer your original question… while the Potters are not among the most prominent families, they’ve been around for long enough that the name carries a certain cachet. There are some families, you see, who can be quite… particular about who they associate with. Families like the Malfoys, the Swanns, or the Smiths don’t just invite anyone around for dinner. So I imagine Justin assumed that you, coming from a respected family, were used to rubbing shoulders with a certain class of wizard.”
“So he was calling me a snob?” Victoria asked, not sure if she should be offended.

Remus laughed. “That’s one way of putting it. Lily would have no doubt approved.”

The mention of her mother reminded Victoria that she was supposed to be asking about her parents, not the Potter family history. “I don’t really have any specific questions about Mum and Dad,” she confessed, “but maybe you could just tell me about them?”

And so he did.

Her mother sounded a lot like herself: she loved to read and study, and was generally obsessed with magic, so much so that she had been offered a job in the Department of Mysteries upon finishing Hogwarts.

“Lily surprised us all, though,” said Remus. “She turned them down and went to work for Slug and Jigger’s instead.”

“What, the shop? Why?” Victoria asked. It sounded like insanity.

“She hid it well, but I think she had something of a taste for adventure,” Remus said, ”she wouldn’t have ended up with James if she didn’t! But really, I don’t think she liked the idea of working for the Ministry at all. She always had this rather romantic idea of the lone witch, living off her skills in magic, exploring some remote corner of the world. Hunting down rare ingredients from deepest Africa fit nicely with that. Of course, it fit less well with marriage and a child, and it wasn’t long before she settled down to have you.”

Her father, on the other hand, was rather more... well, more of a boy. From all accounts he had plenty of magical talent, but he hated studying, much preferring to run around the castle, getting into fights and breaking rules.

“You mustn’t judge him too harshly,” Remus said, seeing the expression on her face, “he grew out of it eventually.”

An idea formed in Victoria’s mind. “So since you were friends, I guess that means you broke loads of rules too.”

Remus raised an eyebrow. “I like to think that I was the voice of reason in our little gang… but yes, I suppose I may have broken one or two rules, here and there. I doubt anyone has ever explored the castle as fully as we did.”

Victoria sat forward, hardly able to believe her luck. “Could you tell me where Gryffindor’s common room is? Or Ravenclaw’s?”

He laughed. “Keen to follow in your father’s footsteps, are you? Well, I don’t blame you for wanting to connect to your parents… but perhaps this isn’t the best way. Besides, as a loyal Gryffindor myself, I could never betray my old house.”

Victoria pouted.

As they continued to speak of the Potter family, she barely noticed the room growing quieter as, one by one, Dumbledore’s guests left. It wasn’t long before only the two of them remained.

“... I hope you know, Victoria, that your parents would be proud of you, no matter what house you were sorted into,” Remus was saying, “don’t listen to those people who say that all dark wizards come from Slytherin… believe me, some of the worst dark wizards have in fact come from
Gryffindor.”

His words caused Victoria to frown. It had never occurred to her, before now, that her parents might not have approved of her house. As far as she was concerned, Slytherin was her home. She was about to say as much when the clack-clack of footsteps descending a wooden staircase broke the silence, and a moment later Dumbledore appeared before them.

He looked down at them with a warm smile. “Well now, the time for afternoon tea approaches, and I am sure that Victoria’s friends eagerly await her in her common room. Remus, shall I walk you to the gates? No doubt you would like to look upon the grounds once more. The Whomping Willow, you will be pleased to hear, continues to thrive.”

“That’s very kind of you, Headmaster,” Remus said, “if I might say farewell to Victoria first?”

“Of course,” Dumbledore said, “you will find me in the Entrance Hall.”

He swept from the room, pausing by the door to whistle. His pet bird trilled before flapping over to him, taking up a perch on his shoulder, its red-gold wings draped around him like a cloak.

“Marvelous creatures, phoenixes,” Remus said as he left, “I’ve no idea how he caught one, never mind tamed it. But that’s Dumbledore, isn’t it? Anyway…” He slapped his hands on his knees before standing up, Victoria following suit. “Shall we?”

They left the office in silence, Remus holding her hand down the narrow spiral staircase. “This is where we part ways, for now,” he said when they reached the bottom. “Do enjoy your afternoon tea.”

“It was lovely to meet you, Mister Lupin,” Victoria said, and it was true. Even though she had never before held much curiosity about her family, it was good to know more about them. She felt more… complete.

“Please, Remus is fine,” he said, and they shook hands awkwardly. “Mister Lupin makes me feel old indeed. Oh, and before you go, one last thing… I may be a loyal Gryffindor, but I hold no such loyalty to the House of Ravenclaw. You will find their common room on the fifth floor of the West Tower, behind a door with a bronze knocker shaped like an eagle.”

* * *

That night, Victoria made a big show of going to bed early. She changed into her nightie and laid out her robes for the next day. She brushed her hair one hundred times and cleaned off her glittery eye shadow. Then she shut herself behind the curtains of her four-poster bed and waited.

And waited.

It became increasingly difficult to stay awake as the minutes stretched on. She lay in the darkness, staring at the ceiling of her bed, struggling to keep her eyes open. The boredom was incredible—she couldn’t even read, for though some light pierced the drapes, it wasn’t nearly enough and Victoria didn’t dare risk wandlight. She needed everyone to think she was asleep.

After a torturously long time, the other Slytherin girls finally started getting ready for bed. The familiar sounds of their activity were a welcome break from the monotony. The clinking of glass
meeting glass, followed by the sloshing of water: that was Pansy, who always took multiple glasses of water to bed, filling them up from the basin in the corner. A muttered charm and an elastic snap: Daphne struggling to remove her bra. Muffled gargling from the direction of the bathroom: Tracey took dental hygiene very seriously.

The sounds slowly died down as each of the girls finished their routine and got into bed. And then, at last, Pansy’s voice:

“*Nox*.”

True darkness fell.

There was no talking that night. When the girls had first arrived at Hogwarts, their every evening had been full of whispers in the dark, but the novelty of living together had long since worn off. Sleepovers were less fun when you had one every night. Now came the true wait, the darkness and the silence conspiring to lull Victoria into sleep. More than once she had to pinch herself, or sit up, just to stop herself from nodding off. And then she heard it: the distant sound of twelve chimes, echoing up from the common room.

*Midnight. Not much longer.*

Footsteps trudged up the stairs, past the first year landing, as the sixth and seventh years headed off to bed. Five minutes later and she was once again in silence, only now it was broken by the rapid beating of her own heart. This was it. For the first time in her life, she was about to break the rules.

She crept out of bed, unconcerned by the swish of her sheets or the scraping of the curtain hooks against the rail. It wasn’t unusual for the girls to get up in the night—not with the amount of water Pansy consumed—and none of them would think anything of the noise, even if they woke.

Victoria, however, was not going to the bathroom. She put on her slippers and grabbed her charm bracelet before padding out of the room, shutting the door behind her as quietly as possible. Now came the most dangerous part. What if someone was still in the common room, ignoring curfew? If she was seen, she would have to pretend to be fetching something and return to bed, all hope of sneaking out forgotten.

She needn’t have worried, for the common room was dark and empty, lit only by the glowing embers of the smouldering fire. Victoria made her way towards the entrance on tip-toes, so tense that she almost shrieked when she felt something soft move against her shin.

Dumbledore meowed as he snaked between her feet, arching his back to rub against her legs. She breathed a sigh of relief. Of course *he* was awake, able to go anywhere he pleased. It was all right for some! She patted him on the head before continuing on her way, but was surprised to see that he followed her, circling her protectively.

“Are you coming with me, then?” Victoria whispered. He meowed. She wasn’t certain if he had understood—how smart were magical cats?—but she figured it couldn’t hurt.

Everything felt rather more real, the moment she was out of the common room. There were no excuses now: if she was caught wandering the corridors, it would mean house points and detention for a month. But she was in luck: the dungeons were deserted and she made good time upwards to the basement floor, where she quickly found a familiar set of barrels.

She didn’t have to wait long. A barrel lid flipped open and a head of long, red hair crawled out of it.
“I can’t believe we’re doing this!” Susan hissed as she exited the barrel. She was wearing flannel pyjamas and her hair was loose. “We’ll get caught for sure!”

Victoria just grinned. “I’ve got this far, haven’t I?” she whispered. “Now come on! Best not stick around, the house entrances are probably checked every now and then.”

They made their way west, intending to bypass the entrance hall (which felt far too open to sneak through) by entering the tower at basement level. Dumbledore prowled the corridors in front of them as they walked, frequently scampering on ahead before doubling back, his green eyes glowing in the dark every time he turned to face them.

“Why’d you bring Dumbledore?” Susan asked softly.

Victoria shrugged. “He kinda just brought himself.”

They were approaching the well-travelled parts of the castle now, with portraits appearing more frequently. Fortunately all of them were asleep, or otherwise vacant, their inhabitants no doubt visiting a frame elsewhere in the castle. Even so, Victoria found herself holding her breath every time they turned a corner.

“You know,” she whispered, trying to ease the tension, “you should wear your hair loose more often. It looks really—”

Dumbledore meowed from around a corner.

The girls froze. He meowed again.

Victoria’s heart leapt into her mouth; she pointed frantically at a nearby door and they rushed towards it, barging into the room beyond and almost slamming the door behind them before they remembered, just in time, that they had to be quiet. Susan took the handle and slid the door shut with the softest click.

They were just in time. Footsteps approached.

“How many t-t-times do I have to t-tell you, Severus?” said Professor Quirrell in his familiar stutter. “I’m prot-t-tecting the stone, same as you. There’s no need t-t-to follow me around like this.”

“Perhaps I am concerned for your safety, Quirinus,” drawled Snape, “after all, who knows what creatures might lurk in these halls, if a troll can get in so easily. You fainted the last time you encountered one, if I recall correctly.”

The voices disappeared down the corridor. For a long time, Susan and Victoria simply waited, slumped against the door, too scared to move.

“That was close,” Susan whispered.

Victoria bit her lip. “You want to go back?”

But Susan shook her head. “We’ve come so far, we might as well finish.”

The rest of the way was blessedly uneventful. They found the Ravenclaw common room door easily, exactly as Remus had described it.

“What now?” Susan said, looking around for clues.
Victoria began to get a bad feeling. “You don’t think Ravenclaw uses a password, do you?” After Hufflepuff, she had assumed that each House protected their entrance differently, with only Slytherin using a password.

At that moment, the eagle-shaped knocker woke up with a ruffle of its feathers. It blinked sleepily at them, before speaking: “The House of Ravenclaw is open to all those with the wits to enter, noble Slytherin. Merely answer the riddle, and entrance shall be yours. What has one head, one foot, and four legs?”

The two girls shared a long, dismayed look.

“That doesn’t sound like any creature I’ve heard of,” Susan said. That wasn’t good. Having grown up in the magical world, her knowledge of magical creatures was likely much better than Victoria’s.

“How can something even have four legs but only one foot?” Victoria wondered. “It doesn’t make sense. I assume the answer isn’t ‘a cow with three feet cut off’, or something stupid like that.”

The eagle said nothing—it seemed that they would receive no hints. A silence stretched out as the two of them racked their brains for an answer.

Susan groaned. “I can’t believe I got out of bed for this. I was very comfortable, thank you very much… you know Professor Sprout brings us bed warmers on cold nights, they keep your feet lovely and warm, right at the foot of the…” Her eyes widened and she turned to the eagle. “A bed! The answer is a bed!”

“Correct,” the eagle said, and the door swung open. It revealed a circular room, much smaller than Victoria had expected, and surrounded by bookcases. There were no chairs, nor any fireplace—just a statue of a tall, pretty woman.

“Well, I’m glad I’m not a Ravenclaw,” Victoria said as she walked in, wondering where Snape’s item could be hidden in such a spartan room. “Do you think it’s behind a book?”

“Victoria!” Susan hissed, “look up!”

She did so and gasped. The common room went up and up, filling the rest of the apparently hollow tower. The bookcases went all the way up too, with ladders and wooden walkways criss-crossing the space between them, and dotted all around were large reading platforms sticking out from the walls.

It was beautiful, but Victoria’s heart sank. How were they going to search all this? It would take them the rest of the night, and probably several nights after that.

“Well, we better get to it,” Susan said cheerfully, and she started climbing up a ladder. Victoria smiled. Trust Susan to just get on with the job.

They worked their way up, skimming their eyes over the titles of the books, looking under chair cushions and behind portrait frames. Occasionally, when she saw a book which seemed particularly Slytherin in nature, Victoria would pull at the book, half expecting a secret doorway to open. No such luck. As they ascended the common room, they occasionally passed tall, arched windows which looked down upon the castle grounds. It was a stunning view, and more than once Victoria had to tear herself from a window to get back to searching.

An extra large platform awaited them at the halfway point, and it was there that they discovered the doorways leading off the main tower into side turrets.
“The dorms, I reckon,” Susan said, keeping her voice low now that they were so close to the sleeping Ravenclaws.

“Look, that one’s open,” Victoria said, pointing to an archway one level up. It was set into the stone wall of the tower and was shrouded in shadow. “Let’s check it out.”

They ended up having to climb up two ladders, cross a walkway, then descend another ladder to get to the platform next to the arch. But even as they approached, the darkness beyond remained impenetrable.

“Lumos,” Victoria whispered, risking a very faint light. She crept forwards, ready to run for it if there were people on the other side. As she passed through the archway, it took her eyes a moment to understand what she was seeing: it was a huge, dark room, much bigger than the tower they had left, and she was standing about half-way up its height on a stone platform.

She looked down.

“Oh my god!” She knew exactly where she was. “Susan, it’s the library! Remember those alcoves we were wondering about? The ones no one can get to? Well, this is one of them!”

Susan followed her in and looked around in confusion. “But the library’s nowhere near the West Tower.”

“Well, the castle’s layout changes all the time, doesn’t it? I guess this isn’t so unusual, for Hogwarts,” Victoria replied. She stifled a yawn, fatigue suddenly catching up with her. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever stayed up this late.”

“And we’re only halfway up,” Susan said glumly. “I don’t think we’re doing this right.”

“I don’t understand why it’s so hard,” Victoria said with a sigh. “Hufflepuff was easy compared to this. We just had to ask the portrait and it gave us the pot.”

Susan’s eyes lit up. “That’s it!”

Victoria gave her a blank look, too tired to see the connection.

“Don’t you see? Help will always be given to those who ask for it in Hufflepuff,” Susan continued, sounding as if she were quoting something. “Of course you just ask for it in Hufflepuff, that’s how Hufflepuff works. But it’s not how Ravenclaw works.”

“Ohh, the challenges are like the houses,” Victoria said, nodding her head as she thought it through. “In Hufflepuff you ask for help, because Hufflepuff’s all about loyalty and friendship. So in Ravenclaw…”

“You have to do something clever,” Susan completed, looking quite pleased with herself. But then her face fell. “But I don’t know how we do that. How do you do something clever with an empty room? Do you think we have to read a book?”

Victoria doubted it. Snape wouldn’t have set a challenge that could be solved simply by reading. They would have to prove themselves somehow, like answering a difficult question…

An idea came to her. “Do you think… the riddle? Could that have been the test?”

Susan gaped. “That’s got to be it! It’s so… well, Snape-ish. You come in, you search the place for hours, and all along the thing you’re looking for is back the way you came.”
They rushed back down the ladders, so excited that they barely cared that they were out of breath and sweaty. When they reached the bottom, Victoria swung the entrance open so that she faced the knocker.

“You have it, don’t you?” she said, “the item Snape left for me? May I have it, please?”

“A riddle you answered, and entry was given,” the eagle said. “One riddle, one reward. Should you desire a further prize, another question must be answered.”

Victoria wanted to pull her hair out. She was so close! “Fine.”

The eagle cleared its throat. “One night, a king and a queen went into an empty castle. The next morning, three people came out. Who were they?”

Once again they were stumped. But Victoria was beginning to understand the word games the knocker liked to play, and her excitement had properly woken her up. She could feel the wheels turning in the back of her mind, the answer coming to the tip of her tongue:

“The king, the queen, and the knight.”

Susan groaned the moment she heard the answer.

“Bravo,” the eagle said. “You may take your prize.” It opened its beak wide, and hidden within was a single acorn. Victoria snatched it up with glee.

“Now I’m level with the others,” she said, hugging Susan with joy, “oh, thank you! I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Just one left now,” Susan said. “If you can find Gryffindor first, you win!”

Victoria grinned. Soon the Restricted Section would be hers.

Chapter End Notes

For those who are not familiar with Inns of Court, in England all barristers (a type of lawyer) are members of one of four Inns of Court: Lincoln’s Inn, Inner Temple, Middle Temple, and Gray’s Inn. The idea here is that there is a fifth, wizarding Inn which is where learning and practice of magical law occurs: Lower Temple.
Following the successful retrieval of the seed from Ravenclaw, Victoria was in such high spirits that not even an afternoon with Hermione Granger could get her down. She made her way to the library with a spring in her step and quickly found Hermione surrounded by books in a reading alcove. The bushy-haired Gryffindor had clearly been working for some time, even though they had agreed to meet in the afternoon, because she had already filled endless inches of scroll with her elegant script.

“Finally here, are you?” Hermione said, moving some books to make room for Victoria. “Well, I’ve already done most of it. I suppose you’ll want to copy me.”

Victoria rolled her eyes. This was exactly why she’d been dreading working with Hermione: she had this irritating habit of assuming she was the only person who was interested in studying. Nonetheless, she took the offered seat and had a look at what Hermione had written while she unpacked her own stationery. At first she’d considered taking Hermione up on the offer—there wasn’t much point in repeating work, and it was a group project after all—but she frowned as she read down the scroll. It all sounded rather familiar. Curious, she opened her copy of Magical Drafts and Potions to page eighty-two.

“Granger, you’ve basically copied the textbook out line by line,” Victoria said, comparing the two side by side. Oh, Hermione’s words were different, but the information was all the same, exactly as it was in the textbook. “And this is far too long… Snape clearly said ten inches maximum, and you haven’t even finished yet!”

Hermione snatched her essay back. “It’s called paraphrasing,” she said, “and it’s exactly as long as it needs to be—all that information is vital.”

“Well, I’m not copying that,” Victoria replied, unfurling her own scroll. “I might as well just hand in the textbook if I did. We’re supposed to be focusing on the key ingredient, not writing a novel about everything that touches the cauldron.”

“Excuse me for wanting to be comprehensive,” Hermione huffed, “some of us do more than the bare minimum, you know.”

Victoria shook her head in exasperation, but didn’t respond any further. It wasn’t her responsibility to help Granger get better marks, even if they were supposed to be collaborating.

After that, work continued in silence.

The Arrival of Hapi was an ancient Egyptian potion, Victoria read, which had been used for thousands of years to fertilise the soil after the flooding of the Nile. The magical government of
Egypt had even managed to secure a special exemption to the International Statute of Secrecy to allow them to continue the practice with a weakened form of the potion. Apparently, the International Confederation of Wizards had been persuaded by their argument that, should the tradition stop, the Muggles would grow suspicious when they discovered that the land was not as fertile as it used to be.

Unlike Hermione, Victoria decided against including all the history in her essay, limiting it to a short introduction. This wasn’t History of Magic, after all. Yet Hermione seemed to be particularly vindicated by how little Victoria was writing, smirking frequently at her almost-blank page.

“Sure you don’t need to copy mine?” Hermione asked.

It was true that Victoria took much longer to write than Hermione did, pausing between lines to leaf through different parts of her textbook and think. But she was happy with what she was putting together.

“I’m fine.”

The key ingredient to the *Arrival of Hapi* was the sap of a fig tree, which had to be “milked by two under the light of Mars”. The bulk of Victoria’s essay detailed the qualities of the fig: how its ability to grow in arid climates made it the perfect basis for a fertility potion; that the sap, which had to be extracted by doing violence to the plant, emphasised the cycle of life and death; and why, as a non-magical plant, it was not capable of being a key ingredient in its natural state, but had to be imbued with magical significance through the ritualistic acts of a witch or wizard. She even dipped into her charms book to write a section on how fertility magic called upon the elements of fire and earth.

“What’s this?” Hermione demanded, the next time she glanced at Victoria’s scroll, “that’s not in the book!”

“I felt it added something,” Victoria said, and then, because she couldn’t resist the chance to needle Hermione, she added, “you can copy it, if you like.”

Hermione looked scandalised at the very suggestion. “You can’t just make stuff up that’s not in the book! For all you know it could be completely wrong, and then what’d happen? Probably the potion would blow up in your face. So no, thank you, I won’t be copying it.”

Victoria shrugged. The section felt right to her. “Suit yourself.”

They handed their essays in during the next Potions class. Snape circulated the room, collecting them by hand, but he paused when he reached Hermione.

“What is this?” he asked, looking down at her scroll. It was clearly fatter than all the others.

To Hermione’s credit, she looked up at Snape without a hint of fear. “My homework, Professor. I know you said ten inches, but I added a bit extra to make sure I covered all the ingredients.”

Snape unfurled the scroll and held it in front of himself, his eyes skimming rapidly over the text. “I am not accustomed to having my instructions ignored, Miss Granger, and yet this is the third time you have exceeded the specified length. From now on, I shall be enforcing these requirements strictly.”

He then raised his wand and slid it across the parchment at a length of ten inches. Hermione gasped as the bottom half of the essay floated to the floor.
“Told you so,” Victoria whispered as Snape moved away.

Hermione looked distraught. She remained distracted throughout the class, and Victoria was forced to correct her errors multiple times as they brewed the first stage of the potion.

“... sprinkle, Granger! You have to sprinkle the rain water in...”

“... clockwise is the other way...”

“... that’s dung beetle, not scarab.”

It was a relief when the bell finally rang, but that relief was short-lived: once again, Victoria was stuck with Hermione for the next round of homework. It looked like they would be in the same pairs for the entire project. Snape distributed a fig pod to each pair and explained that they were to figure out how to extract the sap.

“Shall we meet outside the Gryffindor common room?” Victoria suggested as they left the laboratory, hoping to get at least something out of this relationship, but Hermione was on her guard.

“The library’s fine,” she said, her eyes narrow with suspicion, “same time on Sunday?”

Sunday arrived with high drama, as word quickly spread around the school that the Gamekeeper’s hut had exploded during the night. Luckily, Hagrid (who, despite his size, was as gentle a man as Victoria had ever met) had escaped with little more than a singed beard, but apparently there was now a small crater where his hut had been.

Victoria didn’t get to see it. She watched moodily as the Slytherin girls prepared to go out and investigate, wishing that she could go with them instead of doing Potions homework.

“Sure you can’t come?” Daphne asked while she wrapped herself in a scarf, “everyone’s going to see it; won’t Granger understand if you skip your little library session? Didn’t you say you’d already figured it out, anyway?”

“I’d better get it done while I can,” Victoria said with a sigh, “it shouldn’t take too long, if Granger’s as infuriating as ever... maybe I’ll be able to join you later.”

And so while the rest of the school was conducting an expedition across the grounds to see the remnants of Hagrid’s hut, Victoria was stuck in the library with Hermione. She watched with amusement as her partner raided the astronomy section, the stack of books wobbling precariously in her arms as she made her way back to their alcove.

“What are those all for?” Victoria asked, though she had a suspicion.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Hermione said, “the instructions say we have to extract the sap under the light of Mars. So we’d better figure out when Mars is brightest, don’t you think?”

Victoria, who had rather different ideas about how they should proceed, held back a cutting remark regarding Hermione’s reading comprehension. She would play along for now—it might even help. After all, the more frustrated Hermione got, the easier this would be. “If you say so.”

They unrolled a star chart and got to work, performing the complex geometry to predict the positions of the planets. It was thankless, repetitive work, and it soon became clear to Victoria, as their answers showed Mars drifting further from the Earth, that Hermione’s proposed solution was hopeless.
“It doesn’t make any sense!” Hermione said, coming to the same conclusion not long after, “Mars was in opposition months ago, and Professor Snape said we’re brewing the next stage on Thursday. I don’t understand… we can’t just wait another year!”

Victoria snorted. “So much for it being obvious,” she said, throwing Hermione’s words back at her, “now that you’ve finished wasting our time, can we get on with it?”

“Get on with what?” Hermione asked, “we’ve run out of ideas, haven’t we?”

“You’ve run out of ideas, I think you mean,” Victoria replied, “but for people who did the essay properly, it is obvious.”

Hermione’s cheeks reddened. “There wasn’t anything wrong with my essay!”

“Volume, Granger,” Victoria muttered, “I don’t think Madam Pince quite heard you.”

Hermione’s face just got redder. She lowered her voice to a stage whisper. “You started it! And Professor Snape is just very particular about what he wants. But you know, Professor McGonagall very much appreciates my essays. She always gives me extra marks.”

“Bully for you, but if there was nothing wrong with your essay, then how come we just wasted an hour with this?” Victoria gestured at the charts. “Admit it, Granger, you’re stumped and you need my help.”

“I need no such thing,” Hermione hissed, “and you’ve given me no reason to believe you even could help! Oh, it’s easy to sit back and criticise, but if you actually knew what to do, you’d be doing it already! Who would have thought the Girl Who Lived would be so stuck up? I suppose it’s inevitable, really. You’re just like all the other Slytherin girls, nasty and—”

Hermione watched with incredulity as Victoria picked up the fig pod, held it over a conical beaker, and crushed it within her hand. The white sap came pouring out, far more than the fruit should have been able to hold, and ran between her fingers into the beaker.

“Thanks for your help,” Victoria said with satisfaction, before pulling out a handkerchief to wipe off her fingers. “You played your part rather well, I think.”

Her hands now clean, Victoria put a stopper in the beaker before transferring it to her bag. “I just kinda figured it out, I guess.”

She half-expected Hermione to once again react with derision, accusing her of “making stuff up”. But this time, faced with a beaker indisputably full of sap, she just looked forlorn. “I don’t understand,” she repeated, her voice soft.

Victoria continued packing away her things. “Cheer up, Granger! We’re on to an easy Outstanding
here. Now, I don’t know about you, but I’m gonna go check out Hagrid’s hut.”

As the week wore on, Victoria began to spot the signs that her classmates were figuring out the sap. Dean Thomas and Vincent Crabbe had bruises on their faces, apparently having resorted to Muggle duelling to invoke Mars, and on Wednesday evening Daphne had to coax Pansy out of the bathroom, where she had been crying for hours after Lavender Brown told her she was too ugly to ever model for *Twilfitt and Tatting*. It was, she reflected, a rather cruel potion to have them create, and though its effects were undeniably useful, Victoria couldn’t help but think that Snape had selected it mostly for the effect it would have on the class. She was therefore quite grateful when the final day of brewing arrived, after which they could all go back to working with their friends and ignoring their enemies.

With the finish line in sight, and spurred on by the thought of never having to work together again, for once Victoria and Hermione operated like a well-polished broom. They were perfectly in sync as they sliced and diced, stirred and poured, and soon enough their potion began to take shape.

Snape passed by their table, taking a moment to peer inside their cauldron to see a pearly white liquid bubbling away, just as the instructions said. Soon it would reduce in volume to the size of a teaspoon.

“An adequate attempt. Five points to Slytherin.”

Victoria glanced at Hermione: her eyes were alight with indignation at the one-sided allocation of points, but she was clearly smart enough to keep her mouth shut.

In order to test their potions, that afternoon Professor Snape took the class on a short field trip to the nearby Hogsmeade Farm. A small fleet of horseless carriages awaited them outside the entrance hall; they scrambled into them with raucous squabbling, everyone trying to get a seat with their best friends.

Victoria sat with Pansy, Daphne and Tracey. The four girls had even managed to smuggle some lemon drizzle cake out of the Great Hall, the sharing of which was made considerably more difficult by their lack of a knife. Crumbs flew everywhere as the carriage wobbled down the cobbled path, past the school gates and towards Hogsmeade. They swung off the main road just as they were approaching the train station, heading down a narrow track that took them south, clear of the village and into the wilderness. The view on both sides of the lane was obscured by a wall of gnarled Scots pine, their evergreen canopies forming a tunnel through which the carriages traveled. The cold winter sun glinted through the leaves, and here and there a break in the trees afforded them a view into the fields beyond, full of unnaturally huge cabbages and leeks.

“Look!” Daphne said, pointing out the window to a field of grazing animals. They looked like shaggy-haired cows, only twice as large and with a pair of long, dangerous-looking horns. “Bicorn! Oh, they’re so cute!”

Victoria laughed. “Sure, from here they’re cute. Bet you wouldn’t want to get near them, though. Those horns look vicious.”

“They’re quite harmless, really,” Pansy said, causing the girls to all look at her in surprise. She had never before shown any interest in animals. “What? One of father’s tenants has a herd. Back when I was little, we used to help them collect the horns after shedding season... they’re perfectly friendly, so long as you don’t let them see you taking the horns away.”

Eventually they pulled up outside an old stone farmhouse. It was set back from the lane in a
clearing surrounded by weeping willows, their drooping branches bare for the winter, and chickens roamed the yard freely.

Snape walked along the line of carriages, banging his hand against the sides. “Out!”

As they were clambering down, the barking of dogs announced the arrival of the farmer, who emerged from the house accompanied by six crups. Crups were magical dogs which resembled overgrown Jack Russell terriers—or at least they did once their wizard-owner had cut off one of their two tails. It made Victoria sad to think of the happy little puppies with two wagging tails, unsuspecting that one of them was soon to be removed, but dogs with two tails were considered a risk to the Statute of Secrecy. Crups were also renowned for their loyalty towards wizards; the six of them circled the farmer protectively as he approached Professor Snape.

“Severus!” the farmer said, and the two embraced in greeting. He was a young, burly man who dwarfed Snape in both height and width, with a shaggy beard and messy hair. Pansy and Daphne shared a look and giggled.

Snape turned to address the class.

“This is Mister Selwyn, whose family has owned Hogsmeade farm for generations. He has kindly allowed us to use one of his fields for our little demonstration and I expect you to return his generosity with respect. You are not to disturb the animals or wander off into other fields. Step one toe out of line and it’ll be detention for a month, am I understood?”

The class murmured its assent. They then proceeded to follow Selwyn and Snape down another lane, this one even narrower and muddier, making sure to maintain a good distance between themselves and the Professor.

“Oh no!” Pansy moaned, looking with despair at her feet. She had worn her normal school shoes for the trip, and they were already caked in mud. “They could’ve warned us!”

“What did you expect on a farm?” Daphne said with a laugh. She tugged Pansy forward, dragging her through a deep puddle. Daphne herself was wearing a pair of knee-high boots.

“Thanks for that,” Pansy said sarcastically, “now my feet are wet and dirty instead of just dirty.”

There were no crops growing in the field Selwyn led them to, which was little more than a vast rectangle of mud with intermittent tufts of long grass. Victoria supposed he wouldn’t want them testing out their amateurish potions on prime fertile ground.

“I’ll leave you here, shall I?” Selwyn said, and he winked at them as he departed, “don’t mind old Severus here, his bark’s worse than his bite!”

Snape glowered at Selwyn’s retreating back.

“Now for the moment of truth,” he said once they were alone. “Let’s see if any of you have managed to successfully brew the *Arrival of Hapi* … Weasley, Bulstrode, we’ll start with that travesty you call a potion…”

Snape used a pipette to cast the smallest drop of the virulent green mixture onto the soil, which immediately sizzled like a frying pan. Smoke rose in faint whisps as the ground blackened and produced a tar-like smell.

“Poor,” Snape announced, producing a scroll of parchment to note their failing grade. Ron didn’t look surprised, but Millicent’s face fell in dismay. “Inadequate potency, and the effect was
reversed. I suspect you failed to properly counteract the toxic nature of the fig sap. Malfoy, tell the class how this is achieved.”

Draco stood up straighter beneath Snape’s gaze. “The daisy flower, sir, which should be dropped whole into the potion as soon as the sap is added.”

Snape nodded. “Good—five points to Slytherin. Now... who would like to go next?”

One by one the potions were tested. Most were awful, blackening the ground like Millicent’s, and Neville’s even caused an evil-looking plant to sprout, its thorns dripping with blood. Snape rapidly dispatched it with a blast of purple fire, leaving an ugly scar on the ground and earning Neville a Troll, a grade so poor that Victoria had thought it a student legend.

Some potions fared better. Daphne and Parvati’s released a sweet, summery smell when it was tested, with a single blade of grass poking its head up out of the mud. That won them an Acceptable. It was Draco and Seamus’ potion which was awarded the first Exceeds Expectations after it grew an entire patch of grass, though they had points taken off for the fact that the grass was full of weeds. Finally it was Victoria and Hermione’s turn, their potion practically glowing in its tiny glass vial.

Victoria watched nervously as Snape extracted a single drop. Was the glowing good? The book hadn’t said anything about it. Had they added a large enough daisy? Would it matter that Hermione hadn’t sprinkled all the rainwater?

The drop fell; the class gasped. Suddenly, the plants around them were growing at an unbelievable pace, like someone had set the world to fast-forward. An entire lawn of grass was shooting up through the thick mud across the field; then the hedges marking the boundary burst into bloom, with succulent, fat blackberries developing in seconds. Even the dark, cracked soil left by the other potions healed—all but the scar left by Neville’s monstrous creation, which endured without change, a spider’s web of blood-red veins caked into the earth.

The change stopped after a matter of seconds, but they now found themselves transported from winter to spring, the field full of grass and flowers and, yes, weeds. The class erupted into applause; Victoria was grinning so hard that her cheeks hurt. Hermione was actually crying.

“Outstanding,” Snape muttered, writing the grade onto the parchment as if this were no more impressive than any of the other potions. “As with Malfoy and Finnegan, the potion lacks specificity. Notice the weeds, the overly long grass. Yet it must be admitted that its potency is... unusual.”

His dark eyes met Victoria’s own. There was a contemplative look in his gaze which made her distinctly uncomfortable—she broke the eye contact, unable to meet the intensity of Snape’s sudden attention.

Selwyn’s return rescued her from further examination.

“By Jove! What a sight that is!” he cried, hopping over the stile with a three-legged goat draped across his broad shoulders. He looked around with a wide smile, before stooping down to rub some of the soil between his fingers. “Beautiful! Ten years you’ve been bringing the kids down here, Severus, but not once have I seen this. Who’s the budding potioneer?”

All eyes turned to Victoria. Hermione stepped forward to stand next to her, but no one seemed to notice.
“Ah.” Selwyn’s smile no longer made it to his eyes. “Yes, of course. We should expect no less from the girl who bested the Dark Lord. You have my… gratitude.”

Whispers followed Victoria back to the castle. Word of her potion quickly spread, and suddenly it was like she had arrived at Hogwarts all over again, with curious stares and pointed fingers down every hallway. The difference this time was that Victoria actually found herself enjoying the attention. It wasn’t like Voldemort’s fall, or the troll, which both happened to her. No, this time Victoria had done something worthy of notice all on her own. She pretended to be above it all, of course—no one liked a show-off—but her ears pricked every time she heard her name, and she regularly had Susan report on any interesting comments she may have overheard.

It didn’t last. A first year could only hold the older students’ interest for so long, even if she was the Girl Who Lived, and the rumour mill moved on after a couple of weeks. Normality was restored, and for a time Victoria busied herself with her usual routine of attending classes, doing her homework, and generally immersing herself in magic, making time here and there for Susan and the Slytherin girls.

She made a few attempts to find Gryffindor with Susan, even returning to a bit of castanology, but she was beginning to suspect that divination was not as useful as she had first believed. The Gryffindor common room remained elusive, not only to Victoria but clearly to Pansy and Daphne too, and as the Easter holidays approached she began to wonder if any of the Slytherins would be able to solve Snape’s challenge.

That all changed during Charms on the Tuesday before Easter.

“We begin today’s class with a story,” Professor Flitwick said, his voice unusually somber. “Long ago, before wizards and Muggles parted ways, it was common practice for Muggles to hunt wizards and burn them for the crime of witchcraft. You’ll know this from History of Magic. But what you may not know is that in the year 1590, a first-year Hogwarts student named Alanis Muir was burned at the stake. She was no older than you are now.”

The class was silent. Victoria reached out and took Susan’s hand, her mind conjuring up images of fire and smoke. If she’d lived in a different time, that could have been her.

“Back in those days, Hogwarts students were not taught the Flame-Freezing Charm until second year,” Flitwick continued, “and so poor Alanis Muir had no defence against the fire. You see, the vast majority of these so-called witch burnings actually targeted Muggles, and on the rare occasion that a wizard or witch was accused, they could simply escape, or otherwise fake their death. The execution of a real witch, and a young one at that, deeply shocked the wizarding world. It was resolved that never again would a wizarding child be allowed to suffer such a fate. And so today, as has been the tradition for hundreds of years, we shall learn the Flame-Freezing Charm.”

Professor Flitwick proceeded to show them the wand movements and incantation. “We studied the Fire-Starting Charm in detail last month, so you should know more than enough about fire to pick this up quickly,” he explained, “just remember that your wand position will change, depending on whether you are casting the charm on yourself or an object. Can anyone remember what we call a charm which we cast on ourselves?”

Victoria kept quiet, waiting to see if someone else wanted to try to answer. She knew Professor Flitwick would call upon her should the class remain silent.

Susan tentatively raised her hand. “Reflexive?”

Flitwick clapped. “Correct! Five points to Hufflepuff.”
They split up into pairs to practice the spell. Professor Flitwick distributed Ashwinder burners—a kind of metal candle fuelled by Ashwinder eggs, which went into a small opening at the base—and a collection of random objects to each pair. The idea was for the class to cast the charm on the objects and then test their spellwork by placing them over the fire.

Cries of "*incendio!*" went around the room as everyone lit their burners. Victoria simply clapped her hands twice; the blue flame lit immediately.

"Show-off," Susan muttered, before placing a tripod over the flame. "Do you want to go first? Might as well get it out of the way."

Victoria shrugged. "Sure." She picked out a ball of screwed-up parchment and tapped it with her wand. "*Immunignis!*"

There was no visual sign that the spell had been successful, but many charms worked that way. Susan placed the parchment onto the tripod. "Proof of the pudding is in the eating!"

They waited for a moment, watching for the tell-tale curling up of the parchment at the edges. None appeared.

"Okay, my turn!" Susan said cheerfully, taking the parchment off the tripod. "Ohh, it’s hot to the touch! Weird…"

"It makes sense," Victoria said, touching the parchment gingerly to feel the rapidly dissipating heat. "The charm doesn’t change the fire, does it? It’s still fire, so the object is still hot. It’s just that being hot isn’t harmful anymore. So if you touch it and you’re not protected, you can still feel the heat."

Susan got the spell on her first try too, sticking her tongue out at Victoria when her wooden figurine resisted all damage. They then set themselves to the task of trying the spell on objects of increasing size.

Across the classroom, Justin Finch-Fletchley raised his hand. He was a Hufflepuff who had been due to attend Eton, before he’d discovered that he was a wizard. "Professor?" he called, "how hot can you go before the charm fails? Like, would it protect you from, say, molten steel?"

"An excellent question!" Flitwick said, though Victoria thought it very Hermione-ish. "You’ll read the theory in detail for today’s homework, but the short answer is that the charm protects you from all heat. As with many protective charms, it works on an immunity basis… temperature is simply not relevant."

That got Victoria wondering if the charm could be modified to protect you from the cold. A lack of heat was not so different from heat itself, after all... absorbed in those thoughts, she barely listened as Professor Flitwick continued: "I must warn you, however, that it will not keep you safe from aggressive forms of magical fire. If you used this against a dragon, you’d quickly find yourself burnt to a crisp! For that you’d need an advanced form of protection like the Shield Charm."

Once the class was comfortable with casting the charm on objects, they progressed to a rather more nerve-wracking affair: casting the charm on themselves. Professor Flitwick insisted upon supervising them closely for this exercise, so only one pair was allowed to practice at a time. They went to the Professor’s desk in turns, where they would cast the charm under his keen eye before putting their hand into the fire.

While this was going on, the rest of the class was left to their own devices. Technically they were
supposed to be practising, but so long as they didn’t get too raucous, Professor Flitwick was happy for them to move around the class, visiting their friends to chat. It was one of the reasons that everyone loved Charms.

Pansy and Daphne dragged their chairs over to Susan and Victoria’s table.

“May we join you?” Pansy asked, proper as always. Daphne was already sitting down, not waiting for permission.

“Sure,” Susan said with a shrug. She cast the charm on a block of chocolate and put it over the fire. “I wonder what’d happen if you ate it. Would it just get stuck inside you, unable to melt?”

“Ew,” Daphne said, scrunching up her face, “no thanks.”

They were interrupted by shrieking laughter—Hannah Abbott, taking her turn with Flitwick, had put her hand into the fire. Apparently it tickled.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Pansy leaned forwards as if to share a secret. It was a familiar code; the others quickly ducked their heads to join the huddle. “So Vicky,” she whispered, “how’s Gryffindor going?”

“Well, I haven’t won yet, have I?” Victoria responded, not willing to divulge just how little progress she was making. Who knew what information might inadvertently help them?

“Exactly,” Daphne said, “obviously you don’t know where Gryffindor is. We do. So let’s make a deal.”

Victoria’s heart fell: once again they had beaten her to the location. Just how were they doing it?

She was fairly certain now that they weren’t using divination.

“If you know where it is, why make a deal?” Susan asked, “why not just go get it yourselves?”

“And risk getting caught and disqualified?” Daphne said.

Pansy nodded. “We’re in the lead, we’re not going to just throw that away. But you need our help to find it. So here’s the deal: we’ll tell you where Gryffindor is, and how to get in, if you go in first. You tell us if the coast is clear, and if it is, we go get the object together.”

“And if it’s not?” Victoria said.

“If it’s not, you get disqualified and we try another day.”

It sounded like Victoria would be taking all the risk in this plan. Could she really trust them? “So what, we just persuade Snape to let us share the prize?”

Pansy laughed derisively. “Er, no. I get the prize, and I promise to share it with you next year, one week a month.”

“That’s not fair!” Susan interrupted, “there’s three of you, she should get it one third of the month!”

“So find Gryffindor all on your own,” Daphne said with a shrug, “good luck with that. But if you want our help, you take it or leave it.”

Victoria hesitated. Would Pansy really share access to the Restricted Section with her, once she had won the prize? The pass would be entirely within Pansy’s control, and there would be nothing
Victoria could do about it if she reneged on their deal. It wasn’t like Snape would be interested—if anything, he’d mock her for having made such a bad deal.

But she was forced to admit that she was unlikely to find Gryffindor without their help, and definitely not before they found some other way to retrieve the object. Having the pass for one week a month wasn’t *that* bad, really. Certainly it was enough to find some books on alchemy.

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?” Victoria said at last. “So how do we do this?”

They would execute the plan that afternoon, while most of the school was outside for Flying. Though the older students were permitted to skip Flying if they wished, in reality many of them chose to continue with it, and those few who did excuse themselves were likely to be in the library. It was, Pansy reasoned, the best time to break into Gryffindor.

The plan also allowed little time for Victoria to back out, if she were to have second thoughts. As she and Susan walked down the path to the Quidditch stadium, they agonised over the deal.

“I don’t know about this,” Susan said, “the whole thing depends on you trusting Pansy. I know you’re friends and all, but you must have noticed that she’s not… well, she’s not the *nicest* girl in the school, is she?”

Victoria sighed. “Maybe not, but she’s nice to me. Like you say, we’re friends… I don’t think she’d go back on the deal. Why would she, anyway? She barely reads, so it’s not like she needs to hold onto the pass. She’ll probably take one or two books out, just to show off that she can, then forget about the whole thing.”

“I’m not sure that’s how Pansy thinks,” Susan disagreed, “she’d keep the pass just for the sake of holding it over you. She likes to boss people around, doesn’t she? She’s not going to let you have the pass for free if she can make you do stuff for it.”

“I am doing stuff for it! This whole plan is me doing something for it!”

“But will she stop there?” Susan asked. She glanced around conspiratorially, checking that they couldn’t be overheard. “Have you considered… just taking the object? After they show you to Gryffindor and give you the password, that’s when they need you. But you could just go in, take the object and then run to Snape to get the prize. You’d have a head start.”

It was a thought which had already occurred to Victoria. She couldn’t deny that it was tempting… the best way to avoid being betrayed would be to betray them first. Once she had rushed to Snape with the three objects, the challenge would be over and she’d have the note, which then she could deign to share with Pansy when she felt like it. But the whole idea made Victoria extremely uncomfortable.

“They’re my friends,” she insisted, and there was a note of finality to her voice. She’d come to a decision without even realising it. “I can’t stab them in the back just because I’m afraid they might stab me in the back. What if they do mean to play fair and share the pass with me, like they say? Then I’m the bitch, not Pansy.”

They reunited with Pansy and Daphne in the changing room, where they quickly changed into their flying robes. Victoria had long since shed any embarrassment over the shared changing room—even Hermione no longer waited until everyone had left—and she quite casually walked past a group of changing boys towards the mirrors, where the girls gathered to fix their hair.

Daphne sighed as Victoria curled her plait up into a bun, surreptitiously using her powers to tighten
the knot. "How do you have such perfect hair every day?"

"That’s rich, coming from you,” Pansy said. Unlike the other girls, she didn’t change her hair for Flying. Her sole concession was the use of a headband, which she wore a couple inches behind her fringe, where it would likely fall off if she ever actually ran properly. “I swear on Friday you just rolled out of bed and your hair still looked great.”

"That’s different,” Daphne said, “it’s still messy, it’s just that it’s meant to be that way. But Vicky here never gets messy hair. It’s unnatural.”

“Well, I’d hate to do anything unnatural,” Victoria said with a laugh, “you know, being a witch at a magic school.”

Once they were ready, they made their way outside where Madam Hooch sent them on their customary warm-up run around the lake. This was their chance to escape: the run was long, unsupervised, and passed by the school. Even better, after the run was complete, everyone would be split into groups for activities led by the prefects. Each prefect would simply assume that they had been assigned to a different group.

It was a pretty good plan. Of course, running with Pansy meant that it took far longer than normal, as she refused to move at any speed faster than a light jog, but soon enough their feet were tapping against the wooden planks of the bridge to the Owlery. From there it was a rocky but downhill run towards the castle’s eastern wall, through the gate, past the greenhouses and—with a look around to make sure no one was watching—inside the school via a side-entrance.

“Good luck!” Susan called as they parted ways. “See you in the Restricted Section!”

Daphne took the lead once they were inside the castle. She marched them through the castle on a convoluted route, at some points even going in circles, but slowly they were making their way upwards to the seventh floor.

“You have to take this route,” she explained, “otherwise the entrance won’t appear.”

Finally they arrived, passing through the Room of Clocks to emerge onto a landing at the top of a stairwell.

“That’s it,” Daphne said, pointing at a tall portrait of a fat woman, "you just have to give the password and the portrait will open.”

Victoria steeled herself, mentally preparing for the disappointment of being discovered. It could be over very soon, if anyone was waiting on the other side. "What’s the password?"

“Pig snout,” Pansy said, and the portrait swung open like a door. “Go on, then. Have a look.”

Victoria poked her head around the door frame. The Gryffindor common room was a cosy affair, with a roaring fire and many clusters of armchairs around coffee tables. Tapestries hung from the walls, with tall windows between them looking down onto the grounds. Brooms were resting against the walls next to many of the windows, and Victoria realised that they were actually doors.

She stepped further into the room so as to see all the nooks and crannies. No one was around.

“It’s empty,” she called back to the girls, “and very… red.”

Pansy and Daphne followed her in, looking around in curiosity. “This is nice,” Daphne said, a note of surprise in her voice. “Who knew Gryffindors had such good taste?”
“And no wonder they’re beating us at Quidditch,” Pansy said, pointing out the brooms, “they must get so much extra practice. It’s basically cheating… I wonder if Marcus knows.”

“Never mind that,” Victoria said, “we have to find Snape’s object before someone comes back.”

Daphne sighed. “I always hate this part.”

She and Pansy got to work searching the common room, as Victoria had done in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. But she knew better now: the means of uncovering the object always reflected the House’s qualities. Hufflepuff had depended on openness and honesty, Ravenclaw on cleverness. Surely Gryffindor’s object would take an act of bravery to win—or, knowing Snape, stupidity.

Her eyes were drawn to the windows. “I wonder if we have to jump out.”

“Jump?” Pansy said incredulously, “are you insane?”

Victoria explained her reasoning, no longer caring about keeping her knowledge a secret. The longer they stayed in the common room, the more they all risked getting caught.

“I really wish we’d known that earlier,” Daphne moaned, “we spent hours in Hufflepuff.”

“But I doubt Snape would want us to jump off a tower,” Pansy added. She peered through one of the windows. “It’s a long way down and we don’t know how to fly.”

Even if jumping out the window was a bit extreme, Victoria was sure she was thinking along the right lines. She cast her gaze around the room, looking for anything that would involve obvious bravery. The sword on the wall, perhaps? Or maybe they had to risk discovery even further by entering one of the dorms?

Her eyes landed on the fire.

“That’s it!” she said, “what if the object’s inside the fire?”

Pansy groaned. “Of course it’d be that.”

Victoria knew how she felt: they’d all left Charms able to cast the Flame-Freezing Charm, but that had been with Professor Flitwick on hand to help them if anything went wrong. If their spell failed here it would mean serious burns.

“I’ll do it,” Victoria found herself saying. She walked over to the hearth and was suddenly, painfully conscious of just how hot it was. Even from several feet away, she could feel the dry heat radiating outwards.

“Thanks, Vicky,” Pansy said, “you’re a good sport—we’ll remember that.”

“Be careful,” Daphne added, a hint of worry in her voice.

Victoria drew her wand and made the movements. “Immunignis!” Immediately the sense of heat vanished, replaced with a slight, ticklish tingle on her skin. “Here goes nothing.”

She stuck her arm into the fire: the tingle intensified, but she felt no pain, nor did her skin blacken or her robes catch on fire. Victoria sagged in relief; she hadn’t realised how tense she was. Confidence growing, she stepped into the hearth, which was more than big enough to accommodate her height. She kept walking forwards, unable to see clearly due to the smoke and the bright flames, but it was obvious that the fire went back much further than it should have.
After a few more steps she emerged from the other side into a small, hidden chamber. Medieval weapons in wooden racks were arrayed all around her, but Victoria only had eyes for the table at the centre of the room. On it rested a collection of small glass spheres, each one of them glimmering with a fickle golden light. Though she’d never seen one, she immediately knew what they were: decanted sunlight, a rare potion ingredient.

She grabbed three of them and returned the way she’d come, remembering just in time to test that the charm was still in place before walking into the flames. Soot and smoke obscured her vision once again, and then she was stepping back into the common room.

Pansy was waiting on the other side, her wand raised.

“Petrificus totalus!”

Victoria’s whole body went rigid: her legs were forcefully pushed together, her arms snapped to her sides, her back stiffened. The glass spheres fell to the floor with her wand, and Victoria followed them soon afterwards, her body toppling over like a plank of wood.

Luckily she fell into a soft, fluffy rug, but it still hurt. She couldn’t even call out in pain, since her jaw was as rigid as the rest of her. All she could see was rug; Daphne gently rolled her over so that she was staring at the vaulted ceiling. The sound of glass on glass came from nearby: no doubt that was Pansy pocketing the decanted sunlight.

Victoria was furious with herself. Her vision blurred as tears came, but she blinked them back, her eyelids one of the few things she could move. Why had she trusted them? Susan had warned her of this, though even she hadn’t anticipated Pansy making a move while they were still in Gryffindor. They’d been so focused on whether Pansy would share the pass after the challenge was complete that they’d completely overlooked an earlier betrayal.

“No hard feelings,” Daphne said from above her. She didn’t look Victoria in the eyes. “We just couldn’t risk you getting to Snape first. You really were a good sport… we’ve left you your orb, since you’ve earned it.”

“No that it’ll do you any good, once we have the prize,” Pansy said, stepping into her field of vision. “Still, it might be a nice paper weight.”

If Victoria could have spoken, she would have asked them why. It was so unfair! She’d helped them, they’d had a deal! But she couldn’t speak. All she could do was moan angrily.

“Sorry for this last part, too,” Daphne said. She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted at the top of her voice: “Help! Help!”

They ran from the common room, leaving Victoria alone—or so they thought.

The sound of hurried steps came down one of the staircases which led off the common room. Someone was coming! She was going to be caught! Her heart skipped a beat, the panic almost overwhelming, but she had just enough presence of mind to push with her powers. It was just in time. The steps emerged into the common room, paused, and then there was a gasp.

“What on Earth…? Finite Incantatem!”

Victoria gasped as her body relaxed. Then came the pain, like blood returning to a dead leg, a rush of feeling and wobbly, barely-there strength.
“Here, let me help you up,” Percy said. He placed his hand behind her neck and helped her struggle into a sitting position, her back against an armchair. “Who did this to you, Hermione? I know the Petrification Hex when I see it. That’s not magic you mess around with. If I hadn’t found you… well, whoever did this will be suspended, mark my words.”

“Thanks,” Victoria croaked. She had to be careful: she might have copied Hermione’s face, but she couldn’t mimic her voice. She needed to get away from Percy before he realised she wasn’t really Hermione. Plus, she might still be able to beat Pansy and Daphne to Snape. What justice that would be, if she managed to get the pass first!

“I didn’t see who did it,” she said, trying to sound posher than normal. She picked up her decanted sunlight and wand while thinking of a Hermione-ish excuse to leave. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to go organise a Muggleborn revolution.”

She scrambled to her feet.

“What? But we need to report this to Professor McGonagall! Not to mention get you to the hospital wing, you’ve clearly hit your head…”

“Sorry, gotta go!” Victoria interrupted, quickly making her retreat. “Those pamphlets won’t write themselves!”

She practically ran from the common room, not even shutting the portrait behind her, and sped through the castle, hoping that Pansy and Daphne would take their time to find Snape. How long had it been since they’d left? A couple of minutes? Surely she could catch up with them.

Her route took her back towards the ground floor and then into the dungeons, jumping down staircases three steps at a time, taking every shortcut she knew. Snape’s office was just down the hall from the Slytherin common room, she was almost there—

She burst into his office with the barest hint of a knock, but Pansy and Daphne were already there.

“… as you can see, it’s completely useless,” Snape was saying. He was sitting at his desk with the girls opposite him. In his hands he held the flower pot, the seed, and the sunlight. Victoria blushed; not only had they beaten her to Snape, she’d also forgotten to bring the other items!

“I don’t recall inviting you into my office, Miss Potter,” Snape said. Daphne twisted in her chair to look at Victoria in shock, but Pansy didn’t turn. “But no matter… I was just finishing with Misses Parkinson and Greengrass here. As I was saying, you have failed to bring me the required object, and as such I have no choice but to disqualify you from the challenge.”

All three girls gasped. Hope filled Victoria once more, though it was laced with confusion. She had exactly the same objects as they did, and she knew for a fact that they had been correctly retrieved from the common rooms. What were they missing?

Snape passed the objects back to Pansy. “Let this be a lesson to you: in the future, it would be wise not to prematurely declare a task complete. Patience will often serve you better than haste. Now, Potter, what is it you want?”

Victoria gripped the glass sphere in her robe pocket. “Um, never mind. Just, uh, collecting Daphne and Pansy here. For… flying class.”

Snape raised an eyebrow.

“Very well. But you’d better figure it out soon, Potter. It’s between you and Mister Malfoy, now.”
Summer Arrives

Victoria Potter

By Taure

Chapter Twelve: Summer Arrives

The arrival of the Easter holiday brought with it a week of glorious sunshine. The Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, had apparently managed to persuade the Americans into trading a whole week of Californian sun for a measly bit of Scottish rain. It was quite the coup, and when the papers arrived at breakfast—as usual, in a flock of owls—they were uncharacteristically full of praise for Minister Fudge and Bartemius Crouch, the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

“FUDGE WINS A SCORCHER” announced the Daily Prophet, which also featured a pull-out primer on the use of fire charms for barbecuing; “CROUCH COMEBACK?” read the Hogsmeade Herald. But it was Daphne’s copy of Witch Weekly that caught Victoria’s eye: it was a special swimwear edition, full of designs produced by the siren communities of the Mediterranean.

Normally, Victoria would have joined the others in excitedly pouring over the magazine, but these were not normal times. Tensions were running high between the Slytherin girls. Without a word being spoken, a carefully coordinated dance had developed: Victoria was pretending that Pansy and Daphne did not exist, and everyone else was pretending that this was completely normal.

However, it did present some practical difficulties, and breakfast was no exception. The jam was resting in front of Pansy, several places down from Victoria and tantalisingly out of reach.

Unfortunately for Tracey, she had inherited the position of go-between.

“Tracey,” Victoria said, “could you pass the jam, please?”

Tracey rolled her eyes. “Pass the jam, Pansy.”

Without looking up from Daphne’s magazine, Pansy pushed the raspberry jam forward, which Tracey in turn delivered up the table. Victoria took it with a scowl. Pansy knew she hated raspberry jam. It had all those little seeds in it that got stuck in your teeth.

“Tracey, please pass the strawberry jam.”

Pansy responded before Tracey could even open her mouth. “Uh, do I look like a house-elf? Please tell Victoria to get her own jam.” She still hadn’t looked up from the magazine.

And so the dance continued. In the common room, Pansy would sit on the couch furthest from Victoria’s cushion. When they played games, they were never on the same team. And each morning they took turns to shower at six o’clock, before everyone else got up, just so they wouldn’t have to share the bathroom.

As the days passed and the new routine became established, Victoria’s anger began to cool, transforming into a simmering resentment. She just didn’t understand why Pansy and Daphne had
felt the need to ruin everything. They had all been so happy together.

The problem wasn’t that they had tricked her—she’d been expecting that—but rather the way they had done it. It was one thing to run off with the glass sphere, trying to get to Snape first (after all, Victoria herself had considered doing the same), but hexing her for good measure? That was deliberately trying to get her into trouble, just to make sure she had no chance of winning the contest.

She should have listened to Susan. Hadn’t she warned Victoria not to trust them? Hadn’t she pointed out that Pansy was cruel? It had been stupid to think that Pansy would honour their pact, and she hated feeling stupid. It reminded Victoria of her school reports back in the Muggle world: even now, she could hear Vernon’s chortle as he announced selected highlights of her teachers’ damning comments.

But life went on. Winter robes were packed away and summer robes came out of their trunks, a white dress robe with a gingham print in Slytherin green.

As a result of Victoria’s strained relationships with Pansy and Daphne, she was now spending even more time with Susan. The two of them had a picnic on Sunday afternoon, finding a large, flat rock overlooking the lake where they could spread out a blanket and sit down. It was a cosy spot, out of sight of the castle due to the slope behind them. When they arrived, they unpacked a hamper full of cucumber sandwiches, chipolatas on cocktail sticks, a thick slice of quiche, a flask of pumpkin juice and, to follow, a couple of fruit scones with clotted cream and strawberry jam. They hadn’t even needed to smuggle the food out of the Great Hall, as lunch during the holiday was a relaxed affair, more of a buffet than a meal, and students were allowed to take the food away with them.

While they ate, they puzzled over Snape’s challenge.

“Obviously the seed goes into the flower pot,” Victoria said, using one hand to stick the acorn into the potted soil while holding a sandwich in the other, “but what next? Do I break the sunlight open? That makes sense, right? Plants need sunlight.”

Susan carefully tapped the glass sphere with her fingernail. “It definitely feels like you could break it easily. But what if it doesn’t work? Then you’d have to go into Gryffindor all over again, just to replace this one.”

“And that went so well the first time,” Victoria said. “I just wish I’d taken more of the spheres… I wonder what Pansy and Daphne did with theirs, after they got disqualified.”

“Fat chance of them sharing, even if they kept them,” Susan said. She cheerfully snatched a chipolata and gobbled it in a single bite.

Victoria gasped. “Hey! You had three already!”

“You can have one of my sandwiches,” Susan said, pushing her paper plate towards Victoria.

“Betrayed for a sausage,” Victoria grumbled. She took a triangular sandwich from Susan’s plate and added it to her own. “At least you didn’t hex me for it.”

“Hazard of being a Slytherin,” Susan joked, and her hand darted forward for another chipolata. Victoria slapped it away with a laugh.

“Stop it! There’s only two left!”

“Fine, fine. But speaking of Slytherin…” Susan’s face turned serious, “how are things?”
“Awkward,” Victoria said. “I can’t see how things will ever go back to normal. Best if we all just avoid each other from now on, I reckon.”

Susan made a sound of vague agreement. “So... you just never speak to them again? For six years?”

Victoria frowned. “What else can I do? We can’t be friends, but we can’t fight for years either. Staying away from each other works.”

“You could just...”

“Could just what?”

Susan looked extremely reluctant to spit it out. “You could just let it go.”

Victoria put her sandwich down in shock. “But you were the one who told me not to trust them in the first place! Now you’re saying I should forgive them?”

“Not forgive,” Susan said, raising her hands in a calming motion, “but maybe... move on. You can’t ignore them for years, not really. Do you really want to get up at six in the morning until seventh year, just to avoid Pansy? Seems a bit much.”

“Maybe,” Victoria replied with a sigh. She took a chipolata and nibbled at it. “But they have to apologise first.”

An apology from Pansy was not forthcoming. She had clearly decided to respond to Victoria’s silent treatment in kind, acting as if she were the injured party. Daphne, on the other hand, had reacted quite differently: she was now going out of her way to be exceedingly nice to Victoria.

Several days after the start of the holiday, Victoria found the swimsuit copy of Witch Weekly resting on her pillow in the evening. A note was stuck to the cover, written in Daphne's distinctly beautiful handwriting:

*I thought you might like to borrow this. The one on page 24 is perfect for you!*

*D xxx*

Victoria scowled, but it didn’t stop her from devouring every page before going to sleep. Later that week, when she stepped out of the shower at an unthinkably early hour, she discovered that someone had switched her towel with a much fluffier one. It was light pink, smelled of fresh roses and had a Warming Charm sewn into it. Victoria almost groaned with happiness when she wrapped it around her dripping body. It was like slipping your foot into a just-ironed sock. Of course, after a year of sharing the same bathroom, she knew the towel by sight: it was one of Daphne’s.

It was rather annoying. After all, it was difficult to pretend that someone didn’t exist when they were being so nice to you. In the face of such relentless kindness, it was inevitable that Victoria would eventually break her silence.

It happened on Friday evening in the common room. As usual, Victoria was sitting on a cushion
with a book in her lap, half-listening to the conversation as she read. Even though she was reading, she sat right at the centre of the first years, her cushion positioned at the head of the coffee table. She liked it there, where she could chip in with the occasional comment without fully involving herself, and by now everyone recognised that it was her spot.

Another cushion dropped to the floor next to Victoria; a moment later it was followed by blonde hair, blue eyes and a cute, upturned nose.

“Good book?”

“No particularly,” Victoria said. It took her a moment to remember that she wasn’t supposed to be speaking to Daphne. She glanced to her right, through the curtain of her own dark hair, to see Daphne giving her a brilliant smile. Victoria sighed. Now that she’d spoken, she could hardly go back to silence. “Here,” she said, flicking the book closed so that Daphne could see the cover, keeping her finger inside to mark her page.

“Green Fingers by Hortensia Gardener,” Daphne read, her eyebrows rising. “Never knew you were that interested in Herbology.”

“I’m not. Well, I like the class, but that’s more ‘cause we get to do stuff,” Victoria said. “No, this is for Snape’s stupid acorn. No matter what I do, I can’t get it to germinate.”

Daphne looked down, no doubt uncomfortable around the subject of Snape’s challenge. “That’s bad luck. I’m afraid I’m no help on that front… Herbology’s not my strong suit. Which is weird when you think about it, ‘cause Potions is my best class.”

Victoria shrugged, putting her book down. “I’ll figure it out eventually. How did you do it, anyway? Find all the common rooms, I mean. I’ve been wondering for ages… you always got there before me.”

“Oh, that?” Daphne said, “it’s simple, really. We just asked the house-elves.”

“The house-elves? I thought you were using divination!”

“I know,” Daphne said with a giggle, “we saw you going around with that conker a few times.”

Victoria blushed. She still wasn’t sure if castanology counted as real magic, or if the common rooms were just protected from it. “But house-elves! It’s so simple… I can’t believe I didn’t think of it.”

“It was actually harder than you’d think,” Daphne replied. “The little buggers are a nightmare to catch, let me tell you. House-elves aren’t meant to be seen, so you’ll never just run into one. We ended up having to make an awful mess and hide nearby, waiting for one to show up… they can’t stand to leave a mess for long, you see.”

“And then when the house-elf appears…”

“You just ask. They’re ever so keen to please, once you start talking to them. I don’t think they realise that we’re not supposed to know where the common rooms are.”

With such a reliable source of information, it was no wonder that they had beaten Victoria to every common room.

“How about you?” Daphne continued, “obviously Susan gave you Hufflepuff, but what about Ravenclaw?”
Victoria didn’t much fancy going into detail about Remus Lupin. “A family friend told me.”

“Oh.”

Their conversation lapsed. Luckily, Draco could always be depended on to fill an awkward silence. He was currently holding court on the topic of brooms:

“...of course, Nimbus usually waits five years between new racing brooms, but they’ve not got much choice. If they don’t take advantage of Smethwyck’s Swivel Charm, they’ll be left behind…still, I wouldn’t be too happy if I’d just bought a Nimbus 2000...”

Daphne shifted on her cushion, moving closer. “Listen, Victoria, I just wanted to say… well, I’m sorry for how things turned out. We shouldn’t have hexed you.”

For a moment, Victoria was speechless. “No, you shouldn’t,” she said, her voice suddenly thick with emotion. There was a wobbly feeling in her throat, like she was about to cry.

“Can we go back to normal?” Daphne asked.

Until that moment, Victoria hadn’t realised just how badly she’d needed to hear those words. It turned out Susan was right: she couldn’t forget what happened, but she could move on.

“Yes,” she said, quickly rubbing her eyes with the sleeve of her robes. “Just you, though. Pansy has to say sorry for herself.”

Daphne bit her lip. “I’m sure she will.”

But as the days rolled by, it became increasingly clear that Pansy was not going to apologise. To do so would first require her to recognise her wrongdoing.

Matters came to a head one morning during the second week of the holiday. It was a Tuesday, which meant it was Pansy’s turn to shower early. Victoria relished her lie-in, cocooned in the warmth of her covers as the girls began to get up. Millicent was first, jumping out of bed with her usual energy, throwing on some clothes and running down to breakfast without showering. She’d recently been hanging out with Octavia O’Connor, a ginger-haired girl from the other first year dorm, and the two of them were often seen down by the quidditch pitch. Tracey came next, groaning and cursing as she rummaged through her bedside cabinet before stumbling into the bathroom.

Victoria followed. She took her time, stretching like a cat as she used a foot to push her sheets to the foot of her bed, resisting the moment of wakefulness for as long as possible. At last she was forced into action when she heard movements from Daphne’s bed —there were only three showers, and the one at the end had a faulty Warming Charm. Keen to avoid a cold shower, she quickly stripped, wrapped a towel around herself and grabbed her bag of toiletries.

Daphne emerged from her bed at exactly the same moment. “No!” she cried, and the two of them raced across the room, clutching their towels and giggling. Victoria got there first, throwing the bathroom door open with a shriek of victory.

It was like stepping into a sauna. Curtains of steam hung thick in the air, clinging to every surface except the Mist-Free Mirrors above the sinks. The showers were at the far end of the room, each one set into a stone alcove, from which came the sounds of running water and Tracey’s singing.

The sound of water lessened with the distinctive iron squeak of a faucet turning, but Tracey continued to sing. Victoria frowned. Had a ghost got into their bathroom again? But then a hand,
very much alive, plucked a hanging towel off the hook outside one of the alcoves. There was only one person it could be, and a moment later Pansy emerged, wrapped in the towel and wringing out her black hair.

“What are you doing here?” Victoria blurted out, too annoyed to keep her silence, “it’s your turn to shower early.”

“Says who?” Pansy replied, “I never agreed to anything.” She shook her hair out and stepped across to a sink, where she began to remove a vast array of tubes and jars from a bag. It was clear she had no intention of leaving.

“Oh, give me a break,” Victoria said, “you’re saying what, you just randomly decided to get up at six every other day for the last week? Do you really think anyone’s going to buy that?”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “I’m saying I generously gave you some space to sulk, but it’s got old fast. If you want to avoid me like a child, feel free to get up early every day, ‘cause I’m tired of it.”

Victoria couldn’t believe it. She was doing it again—breaking an agreement and acting like she was the victim!

“You hexed me,” Victoria said, slowly, like she was speaking to a toddler, “you don’t get to go around acting like I’m the one in the wrong here!”

“Are you still going on about that?” Pansy replied, turning towards the mirror. She unscrewed a jar and began dabbing a white cream over her face. “Really, Vicky, when are you going to get over it?”

“When you say sorry!”

Pansy slammed the jar down on the stone of the sink and spun around to face Victoria once more, her face splotched with white. “Sorry? Fine! I’m sorry that I tried to win a competition! I’m sorry that you can’t tell the difference between a game and real life! I’m sorry that you didn’t figure out that tricking people was part of the rules! I’d say you’re just a sore loser, but you didn’t even lose, did you? We got disqualified and you’re still in the running. So the way I see it, things turned out pretty well for you, didn’t they?”

The room fell into silence. Suddenly, Victoria felt ashamed. Was she overreacting? Was that what everyone thought of her—that she was a poor sport who took games too seriously? She glanced back at Daphne, who was still standing in the doorway. She was looking pointedly at her feet.

The sound of water stopped. With her usual lack of shame, Tracey stepped out from the shower, vigorously drying her hair with her towel. “Is everyone finished being silly now?”

Victoria sighed. She was outnumbered. “Yes.”

* * *

Things did not go back to how they had been before. How could they, after everything that had happened? Victoria and Pansy may have signed a peace treaty, but doing so did not erase the conflict from history. Nonetheless, a new normal developed, one where Victoria neither ignored Pansy nor sought her out. It was as if they were the barest of acquaintances, polite but distant, and
it suited everyone just fine.

Their meagre reconciliation was well-timed, because once summer term arrived they found themselves lacking the energy to indulge in the drama of the holiday. The reason for this was simple: exam season had descended upon Hogwarts.

It was worst for the fifth and seventh years, who were about to take the Ministry’s O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams. A frenzied studiousness had overtaken the common room as they went about their increasingly panicked revision, anyone who spoke above a whisper finding themselves the recipient of fifty glares. It felt like the room was being steadily converted into a second library, with couches and coffee tables disappearing, replaced by large desks covered with mountains of books.

The first years had end-of-year exams too, though they were only informal ones set by their teachers. Unlike the older students, whose future careers would be determined by their results, for the first years the exams had little impact beyond that of bragging rights.

Unfortunately no-one seemed to have told the teachers. The moment classes resumed, the students were greeted with a series of lectures on the importance of the upcoming exams as well as the necessity of thorough revision. To that end, the teachers had stopped introducing them to new magic and instead embarked upon a rigorous series of classes which were designed to consolidate everything they had learnt to date.

For many of Victoria’s classmates, this period represented the first time they were able to successfully cast the spells they had been learning. Only now did the concepts introduced at the start of the year make sense to them; ideas which had once been opaque suddenly seeming obvious in the light of everything they had subsequently studied. Of course animation charms invoked the aspect of Jupiter; all spells involving a dominant will required it. And how had they not understood the Hierarchy of Transubstantiation? Wasn’t it plain to see that dead substances needed a vital spark to become living?

Though intense, it was therefore also a time of joy as the students finally began to feel confident in their powers. Tracey was bouncing off the walls for days when she at last managed to cast the Fire-Starting Charm; Daphne annoyed them all by whistling incessantly after she got the hang of whistling a flower into bloom. In Transfiguration, the entire class gave an embarrassed Neville Longbottom a standing ovation when he succeeded in turning his matchstick pointy.

Victoria had initially considered all this revision rather pointless. After all, unlike most of her peers, she had been able to cast these spells the first time around. Hermione Granger was in a similar situation, but the two girls had each reacted rather differently.

Hermione had moved onto second year material, winning points across their classes as she displayed her advanced knowledge. She impressed McGonagall with some rudimentary transfiguration of steam, and Flitwick had practically squealed in delight when she had managed to magically repair a torn page.

Meanwhile, Victoria kept her focus on first year spells, something which caused Hermione to send many smug looks in her direction. She tried not to let it get to her, secure in the belief that Hermione was making a mistake by moving on so quickly. As Victoria looked back upon her earlier work, she was seeing entirely new connections which had previously eluded her, and she quickly came to realise that successfully casting a spell was only the first step on the path to true mastery. There was so much more to each of the apparently simple spells they had learnt: while Susan was confidently levitating objects of increasing size, Victoria was figuring out how to make ten float with a single spell; while the class solidified water into ice beneath Professor
McGonagall’s exacting eye, Victoria was learning how to solidify wine into grapes.

Though less flashy than Hermione’s shows of advanced magic, Victoria got a thrill every time she manipulated a spell to some slightly different purpose. It reminded her of the time before Hogwarts, back when she had been experimenting with magic all on her own, coaxing her powers to follow her will, a visceral connection to magic that learning spells by rote just couldn’t provide. It was as if she had been, until that moment, no more than a tourist with a phrase book, but now she was having a proper conversation.

When all was said and done, she found herself enjoying their revision classes so much that she was sorry to see them end.

The exams were upon them in short order, just a few weeks after the end of Easter. As well as written papers, they had a practical test in each subject except for History of Magic, their final grade being the average of the two. It was a gruelling couple of weeks, filled with cramped hands from writing, long sessions in the library between exams and, after their Astronomy practical, very little sleep.

Victoria excelled. When Professor Flitwick, sitting with a feather before him, asked her to levitate something, she swept the Professor, the table and the feather up into the air with a single “Wingardium Leviosa!”. In Potions, she knew she had brewed a perfect Anti-Hurling Tonic, and she was quite happy with her Herbology paper, where she had correctly identified all the differences between mundane and venomous nettles.

Friday afternoon saw the first years lined along the Transfiguration corridor, awaiting their final exam. There was an unmistakable buzz in the air, a sense that the release of summer was just around the corner. They just had to get through one short test.

A door opened. “Abbott, Hannah,” called Professor Winters, one of the Transfiguration teachers, and a plump blonde girl headed into her classroom. A moment later McGonagall followed suit, beckoning Susan to come forward.

Victoria gave Susan a hug before she left. “G’luck.”

The wait was intolerable, short though it was. Six minutes later Susan emerged from McGonagall’s classroom looking very relieved. She was assaulted with a storm of questions the moment she returned.

“Is it hard?”

“What did you do?”

“Please tell me there’s no shaping.”

Susan simply shook her head and pushed through the crowd. “I’m not allowed to talk about it,” she said repeatedly as she made her way down the corridor. “Sorry!” She caught Victoria’s eye and gave her a thumbs up before heading off.

McGonagall reappeared. “Boot, Terry!”

And so it went. Some people were quick, like Susan. Hermione took about ninety seconds. Others took a lot longer, though no one was gone for more than fifteen minutes. Victoria supposed there was some kind of time limit in place—if you couldn’t do it, they just took pity on you and let you go.
“Potter, Victoria,” McGonagall called.

The Transfiguration classroom had been stripped bare. The posters had been turned to face the walls, and all the tables and chairs were gone. In their place was a large wooden chest, a scroll of parchment resting on its top, and to its side a pool of water had been cut into the flagstone floor.

McGonagall made her way to a chair in the corner and conjured a clipboard. “Good afternoon, Miss Potter. This test consists of a single task, which is designed to assess the three skills you have studied this year. Using the items in front of you and the magic of transfiguration alone, you are to open the locked chest. Do you have any questions?”

Victoria shook her head, her mind whirring. Was she supposed to transfigure the chest? It was a mixture of wood and metal, but they hadn’t covered combined substances yet. Even worse, the chest was much bigger than anything she’d transfigured to date. But what alternatives were there?

“Then you may begin.”

Desperately hoping for some clue, Victoria reached for the scroll on top of the chest. It contained a detailed drawing of a key. Of course.

Of course.

It was simple: using the Solidification Spell, they were to turn some of the water into ice. Once in that form, they could use the Shaping Spell to form it into the shape of a key, using the drawing as a guide. Then it was a simple matter of using the Transubstantiation Spell to turn the ice key into something less brittle, so that it wouldn’t snap in the lock.

Victoria took her wand from the loop at her waist, relief flooding her body. It would be over in a matter of seconds. But just as she opened her mouth to utter the first incantation, something very strange happened. A new awareness came to her, like the rush of sound following a pop of the ears, when suddenly she would realise, days after having gone swimming, that the world had been on mute.

The world changed.

The moment she thought of the Solidification Spell, she saw how it would flow into the Shaping Spell, forming a single, unified process; and the same in turn for the Transubstantiation Spell. They weren’t separate spells, really—they were all different aspects of the same process. It was like running. You didn’t think about lifting one leg up, then pushing off with the other… once you knew how, you just did it.

Her wand jabbed forward, tight grip, slight twist. No words were spoken. The water shimmered, and at the centre of the pool a metal key coalesced. Dazed, Victoria knelt down and fished the key from the water. What had she just done?

The key fit perfectly; with a click, the chest swung open.

Victoria glanced at McGonagall, who was looking at her with something suspiciously like pride. “An impressive display,” she said, placing her clipboard on her lap. “Are you aware of what you just did?”

She shook her head.

McGonagall smiled. “In class, I have referred to transfiguration as an art. This is no slip of the tongue. You should understand that transfiguration is as much a technique as it is a set of spells...
for those who truly grasp the principles, who see the art as a whole, spells are quite unnecessary. Though I must confess, I have never seen a student perform transfiguration by technique before their fourth year.” She cocked her head. “Perhaps it relates to your particular abilities? But no, not even Miss Tonks…”

As McGonagall began to talk to herself, Victoria looked at her wand, wondering if she’d be able to duplicate the feat. “So… does this mean I can transfigure anything?”

Professor McGonagall’s focus snapped back to Victoria. “Why don’t you try?”

She imagined the chest forming into a lion, huge and ferocious, and, just as she did before, jabbed her wand. Nothing happened. If Victoria didn’t know better, she could have sworn she saw McGonagall’s lips twitching.

“Transfiguration by technique comes from your ability to see the connections between different processes,” McGonagall explained. “As with most magic, there is no shortcut to mastery. You must first learn the component parts before you can put them together.”

Victoria couldn’t help but feel disappointed. “I understand.”

“Good.” McGonagall took out a pocket watch. “Your exam is now complete; please proceed to the Great Hall for activities with Professor Trelawney. And remember, not a word to your fellow students.”

* * *

That night, a storm broke over Hogwarts. The deep rumble of thunder could be heard even in the dungeons, shaking the castle to its roots. Forked lightning lit up the sky, striking the peak of the Astronomy Tower again and again, and rain fell in solid sheets.

Victoria woke suddenly, a hand shaking her awake. She squinted at the figure silhouetted between the curtains of her four-poster bed.

“What…? Daphne?”

“Come quick!”

Daphne tossed Victoria her dressing gown. The others were getting up too, stumbling out of bed and lighting candles. Outside the dorm, footsteps could be heard rushing up and down the staircase. The whole of Slytherin was on the move.

“What’s going on?” Victoria asked. “What time is it?”

The door swung open, bright light from the landing assaulting Victoria’s eyes. A thatch of messy red hair appeared—Gemma Farley, the fifth year prefect.

“Everyone ready?” she said, her eyes landing on Victoria, who was still struggling sleepily into her dressing gown. “Hurry up, let’s go!”

She led them out of the common room and into the castle, the sound of thunder increasing in volume as they ascended towards the surface. Tracey’s hand found Victoria’s, clutching it tightly
every time another boom rattled the castle. Other groups of students were out and about, some of them running and shouting; the whole school was awake, curfew forgotten, and everyone seemed to be heading in the same direction.

The lightning made itself known the moment they reached the ground floor. It was immediately clear that this was no normal storm: regular flashes illuminated the corridors with a harsh white light, and rolling thunder followed on its heels, so deep and powerful that Victoria could feel it in her chest. Tracey would jump in shock with every lighting strike, a small whine escaping her mouth. The rest of the girls were in little better state. None of them had ever experienced a storm like this.

“Where are we going?” Pansy asked after a particularly long rumble of thunder, “shouldn’t we be staying away from the storm?”

Gemma pushed on. “Trust me, you’ll want to get a good look at this one.”

They approached the quadrangle outside the library, where a large number of students had gathered to watch the storm. The cloisters were packed with those huddling away from the heavy rain, but the crowd was now growing so large that it was spilling over into the soaked courtyard.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Gemma said, and she pointed her wand at a group of drenched first years. “Impervious!” Her spell redirected the rain around them, repulsed like one magnet from another. Under normal conditions the effect would have been invisible, but that night the rain was so thick that it formed a watery dome around the spell.

Lightning flashed, and this time Victoria saw it, a crackling, branching fork which crossed the sky rather than shooting downwards, casting an almost purplish light on the clouds around it. It seemed to go on forever, a new branch shooting off even as another faded. The crowd cried out, some of them in appreciation, others in fear.

Tracey was still gripping Victoria’s hand, but now a grin was on her face. “Awesome.”

“Out of the way!”

Professor McGonagall hurried past, students parting before her. She was in her nightclothes, fluffy slippers and all, and was escorted by two clanking suits of animated armour. “Back to bed, all of you!” she shouted, not breaking her stride, and she barely seemed to notice that her command was universally ignored. She made her way across the courtyard and ducked back inside the castle though a side door.

“What’s that about, do you reckon?” Pansy asked. It was the question on everyone’s lips, wild speculation making its way around the crowd.

Not long after McGonagall had disappeared back into the castle, the enormous gamekeeper Hagrid followed in her footsteps, accompanied by Professor Flitwick. Hagrid was carrying a crossbow the size of a small car, an equally oversized hound walking to heel.

“... you have shut the gates, I assume?” Flitwick was saying. He was almost running to keep up with Hagrid’s long strides. “He mustn’t be allowed to escape!”

“Locked ’er down completely,” Hagrid responded, “only way out now’s through the forest, an’ I don’t fancy ev’n his chances there.”

Flitwick went through the same door as McGonagall; Hagrid stayed behind, taking up a position outside the door, his crossbow pointed unwaveringly at it.
It was then that Victoria felt something strange: the back of her neck pricked, a shiver running
down her spine, and suddenly the wind picked up, blowing in every direction, whipping her hair
and dressing gown as it swirled around her. She wasn’t alone in feeling it; the entire crowd gasped.

“There!” a boy shouted, “on the third floor!”

All eyes followed his pointed finger to a line of windows looking down on the courtyard. Flashes
of light were coming from within, blue and red and silver, and then a mighty voice could be heard
through the whistling wind, echoing with power:

“... ima car...em! ”

The storm died. Rain became drizzle, and the castle fell into darkness as the lightning petered out.
The students waited. And waited.

Eventually, when nothing more seemed likely to happen, they returned to bed.

* * *

The end of term approached. While the upper years were still finishing off their exams, the first
years took it easy, the teachers perhaps recognising that their students’ minds were now closed for
business until next September.

Of course they still had to attend class, but no new magic was expected of them. Professor Flitwick
had them creating posters depicting wand positions to replace the fading ones on his walls, and he
even let them listen to the wireless while they played around with paint, glue and stencils.
Professor Flamel spent his classes regaling them with fascinating tales of medieval France, and in
Herbology, Professor Sprout showed them how to make daisy chains. Even Snape, in an unusual
concession to “end of term frivolity”, performed a series of demonstrations which largely involved
making things explode. He did spend most of that lesson making snide comments regarding
Neville’s ability to achieve the same results by merely looking at a cauldron, but for Snape that
was positively jolly.

But it was Defence Against the Dark Arts that had everyone talking. The class had been cancelled
and it was becoming clear that Professor Quirrell would not be returning from wherever he had
disappeared to. The school was alive with rumours: he’d been caught having an affair with
Professor Vector, the Arithmancy Mistress; he’d been eaten by his turban; he had stuttered so hard
that his head had exploded.

Nobody knew the truth of the matter, and the teachers weren’t telling.

The last day of term coincided with the conclusion of the quidditch season. Ravenclaw beat
Gryffindor handily, crushing the latter’s hopes of winning the House Cup, and that evening, after
the end-of-year feast, a party took place in Slytherin common room to celebrate their victory.

With swing playing on the gramophone and a plentiful quantity of butterbeer, the mood was
certainly upbeat. Several bottles of elf-made wine had been acquired and were making their way
around the older students, some of whom had perhaps drunk a bit too much. Next to the
gramophone, Rebecca Hale was clutching a glass and dancing in a manner that would have
horrified Professor McGonagall, but which was greeted with enthusiastic cheers from the boys.
Victoria was not participating. She had secluded herself in a corner with her flowerpot, acorn and glass sphere of sunlight, a pile of herbology books in front of her. Though she would have dearly liked to join the party, she simply couldn’t afford to waste a single minute, and nothing Daphne or Tracey said could change her mind. If she didn’t make the acorn grow that evening, she would fail Snape’s challenge. That wasn’t an option. She’d never failed at anything since she started at Hogwarts.

“Having fun?”

It was Draco, his blond hair slicked back as always, a wild grin on his face. He threw himself into the chair opposite her and put his feet up on a stool.

“You seem cheerful,” Victoria said.

Draco looked around surreptitiously. “Flint gave me some wine,” he said, “you could probably get some too, if you asked nicely. I saw Becca letting Daphne have more than a little out of her glass.”

Victoria snorted. “Figures. But no thanks—I’m busy.” She gestured to the books in front of her.

“So I see,” Draco said, “honestly, I thought you’d have given up by now. You must really want that pass.”

“All the books on alchemy are in the Restricted Section,” Victoria explained, “and Professor Flamel won’t teach me alchemy unless I already know some.”

Draco’s eyebrows rose. “Flamel promised to teach you alchemy?”

“Um, I wouldn’t say promised … but he wouldn’t have tested me if he wasn’t open to the idea, would he?”

“Well then,” he said, taking his feet off the stool and sitting up properly, “what seems to be the problem? Perhaps I can help.”

It was just like Draco to think that he would be able to immediately solve a problem that had been troubling Victoria for months.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to ruin your party.”

“Nonsense!” he declared. “Now, let’s see…” He examined the flowerpot and acorn. “So I know these are from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw… which means this—” he picked up the glass sphere “—must be from Gryffindor. No idea how you got in there.”

Victoria blinked. “You got the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw items?”

“Of course,” Draco said, “those are the easy ones, after all. But what’s the problem? You’ve got the items, why haven’t you just combined them?”

“I don’t know how,” Victoria explained, “I’ve waved the sunlight over the seed, and tried burying it in there, but it doesn’t do anything. If nothing else works, I think I’ll just try smashing it, but I’d prefer to avoid that if… what?”

Draco was laughing. “Could it be? At last, I know something that the great Victoria Potter doesn’t!”

“You actually know the answer?” Victoria said, dumbfounded. How could he, when he hadn’t
even collected all the items? “Tell me!”

But Draco just grinned. “Hold your hippogriffs! If this pass is so important to you, I think I should get a fair reward for my help, don’t you?”

Victoria’s jaw clenched. She was so close! “What do you want?”

“Half,” he said, “you have the pass half the time, I have it the other half.”

“That’s not fair. I got all the items, you only got two.”

Draco just smirked at that. “But you still need my help to win, don’t you? And I wouldn’t be able to win without that sphere. So the way I see it, that makes us equal partners.”

“Fine,” Victoria said, crossing her arms. Once again, she had no choice. “But I’m not giving you the sphere. You tell me how to put them together, and I go to Snape to get the prize. Not you.”

“But—”

“Take it or leave it.”

She had learnt that lesson with Pansy. There was no way she was going to go on trust again.

Draco sighed and extended his hand. “Deal.”

They shook on it.


He chuckled again. “I still can’t believe I have to tell you this… there are four houses at Hogwarts, not three.”

Victoria gaped at him, his words taking a moment to register. “No…” She covered her face with her hands, groaning as Draco continued to laugh. It was so painfully, embarrassingly obvious. How had she not seen it? Why hadn’t Susan pointed it out?

But that wasn’t fair. Susan only knew about the challenge through Victoria, and, thinking back, Victoria had clearly told her that she had to retrieve items from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor. It had never occurred to her that there was an item in Slytherin too.

She looked at the objects. It was clear what she needed. “Water!” She leapt to her feet, snatched the items up, and ran to the stairs. Draco’s footsteps followed, and they raced to the top. He overtook her somewhere around the fifth year dorms.

The sound of rushing water greeted her at the summit, past the seventh year landing, where a ladder led up to a long, stone tunnel. Victoria arrived just in time to see Draco’s form disappearing through the waterfall at the end of the tunnel, and she raced to follow him into the cavern beyond.

It was as beautiful as it had been the first time: below them, bisected by a stone bridge, a deep pool of water was fed by a series of overflowing pools, and above them were hundreds of free-floating fairy lights, their glow just enough to see by.

“What now?” Draco said, “we didn’t bring any swimwear!”

Victoria pointed to a series of stone ledges which led down to the highest of the pools. “That’ll do!” She passed the flowerpot to Draco and slipped the glass sphere into her robe pocket. Doing so
freed her hands, essential for the treacherous scramble down from the bridge to the top ledge. The last thing she wanted was to fall into the pool while still in her robes, especially given how cold the water looked.

“Now pass me the pot!” she called when she reached the ledge below, having to shout over the sound of the waterfall. Draco did so with only a few nervous glances at the water, leaning over as far as he dared while Victoria reached back up towards the bridge. Her fingers brushed clay, and then the pot was in her hands.

A few careful jumps and she was beside the pool.

Kneeling down, she made sure the acorn was still buried properly, then used both hands to cup freezing water into the pot. “And now the moment of truth.” She fished the sphere out of her pocket and, all doubts cast aside, cracked the glass on the rim of the pot like an egg; sunlight burst forth, filling the cave with its warm, golden rays. The fairies buzzed angrily, but Victoria only had eyes for the pot. A sapling sprouted from the soil, its slender stem rising to a height of almost six inches, and from its top grew three green oak leaves.

“Yes!” she cried, pumping both fists into the air, and she could have cried from the surge of deep satisfaction that filled her. Finally, after so many hours of work, after all the frustration and betrayal, she’d done it.

Draco offered to take the plant while she ascended back towards the bridge, but she refused to let it leave her hands. Could she trust him, or would he run off with it and claim her victory? She couldn’t risk it. Not when she was so close.

They rushed downstairs, pushing their way through the busy common room and out into the corridor leading to Snape’s office.

“You will keep to our deal, won’t you?” Draco asked as they walked, a hint of nervousness in his voice. No doubt he had realised that, if she wanted to, Victoria could now easily ditch him.

“Don’t worry,” she said, “I’m not Pansy. You’ll get the pass—half of each month, just like I promised.”

Draco looked relieved. “Good. You’re not the only one who thinks Pansy was wrong, you know. Father always says it’s important to have a reputation for keeping your word. If you don’t, then who’s ever going to do business with you?”

“Sounds like good advice.”

They stopped outside Snape’s door. “This is it,” Victoria said, suddenly nervous. What if she’d done something wrong?

“Go on,” Draco said. “I’ll be waiting.”

Victoria knocked.

“Enter!”

She did so. The interior of Snape’s office was in disarray, half-filled boxes everywhere, books and jars of ingredients strewn higgledy-piggledy across every surface. In the midst of it all loomed Professor Snape, arms raised like a conductor, his brow furrowed in concentration as objects sailed through the air into boxes. A number of them had clearly missed their targets, but to be fair, he wasn’t using a wand.
Victoria wasn’t sure which surprised her more: the fact that someone else could do wandless magic, or the revelation that the teachers didn’t live in the castle during the holidays.

Snape’s dark eyes fell upon Victoria’s plant and he lowered his hands. “Miss Potter. Cutting it a bit close, aren’t we?” She didn’t quite know what to say to that. It was true—she should have figured it out much sooner.

He proceeded to examine the sapling, holding a magnifying glass to the leaves, tapping the stem with his wand, and even sniffing it. Victoria tried not to fidget as he did so, though his close proximity made her rather uncomfortable.

“Very well,” he said at last, “it appears to be the genuine article. May I?” He took the plant from her and placed it on his desk. “If I recall, I offered a year’s pass to the Restricted Section?”

Victoria nodded eagerly, and Snape rummaged through the desk for a roll of parchment and a quill. He scribbled something on the parchment, tore off the end, and passed it to her. It read:

_I, Professor Severus Snape, Head of Slytherin House and Potions Master of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, hereby grant the bearer access to the Restricted Section until 1 June 1993._

“Thank you!” she said with a grin. She was going to spend the entire summer dreaming about the books she could read.

But Snape just sighed. “Another year, another disappointment.”

Victoria frowned. “What do you mean, sir? I completed the challenge, didn’t I?”

“You completed the challenge I described,” Snape said, “but you failed the one I didn’t.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you know what this is?” he asked, gesturing towards the plant. She shook her head. “Precisely. For your information, Potter, it is an extremely rare species known as the Founders’ Oak. It grows only under very special conditions—namely, when its four ingredients are obtained through acts exemplifying the qualities valued by the founders of Hogwarts.”

Suddenly the challenge made sense. She’d obtained the flowerpot through friendship, the acorn by cleverness, the sunlight through bravery, and the water… she’d got that by striking a bargain.

“You tricked us! You couldn’t make it yourself, could you?”

Snape smiled. It was not a pleasant smile, all yellow teeth and glimmering eyes. “Indeed. For an adult wizard, an act of bravery would require a much greater investment of time and effort… but for an eleven-year-old? Passing through fire is bravery enough.”

Victoria couldn’t believe it. He was supposed to be a teacher! Using kids to collect rare plants was cheating! And she’d just given it to him. “So what’s so special about it? The oak, I mean.”

“The tree, once mature, is a powerful anchor for spells of all kinds… so long as the tree survives, the spell tied to it cannot be broken. Legend has it that there are seven such trees within the Forbidden Forest, planted there by the founders themselves, and that the school’s protective
enchantments are bound to them. Now do you understand? You just exchanged a powerful magical artefact, without knowing its true value, for a scrap of paper."

She looked down at the pass in her hands. Suddenly, it didn’t bring her nearly as much joy. “It doesn’t matter,” she said stubbornly, trying to persuade herself as much as him, “I got what I wanted.”

Snape’s lip curled. “Foolish girl. If you truly believe that, then not only have you failed the challenge, you have also failed to learn the lesson it imparts. Now leave me, before I lose my patience. As you can see, I’m quite busy.”

* * *

The next morning, Victoria woke to chaos. Slytherin was in disarray, littered with robes, books and potions equipment. Contrary to appearances, however, Peeves the Poltergeist had not managed to break in overnight. A rather more benign cause was to blame: the Hogwarts Express was due to depart at ten o’clock and the majority of the house had yet to pack.

Adder Dorm was no exception. Only Pansy was ready to go, her enormous wardrobe pressed, folded and neatly arranged within her trunk days ago. She’d even organised it by colour. The rest of them had barely started: Millicent was still sleeping, Tracey was swearing as she rummaged through a mountain of dirty laundry, and Daphne’s trunk was already full, despite the fact that she still had over half her robes (which equaled Pansy’s in volume, if not organisation) piled on her bed.

“It doesn’t make sense!” Daphne was saying, “it all fit at the start of the year!”

Pansy laughed from her perch on top of her trunk, where she was eating a slice of toast while watching Daphne pack like it was a spectator sport. “Last time it was packed by a house-elf. You haven’t folded it properly, of course it’s not going to fit.”

Being generally tidy (a habit instilled by the Dursleys), and having much less stuff than the other girls, Victoria was the next to finish. Only a tower of library books remained, taken out over the course of the year and never returned. She sighed—she was going to have to skip breakfast. Books levitating before her, she headed off to the library where she joined the long queue of students returning books at the last minute. The librarian Madam Pince glared at each one of them, her beady eyes checking the books fastidiously for any sign of damage. The whole process took so long that even Millicent had finished packing by the time Victoria returned to the dorm.

They made their way to the entrance hall, which put the chaos of Slytherin house to shame. Pandemonium ruled: the entire student body was milling around, an obstacle course of trunks, owls and cats, and the noise was incredible, a boisterous racket of shouting and laughter.

“Out of the way!” a boy shouted, just before a pretty girl ran past, jumping over Tracey’s trunk. The boy followed immediately after, almost knocking Daphne to the ground.

“Moon!” he shouted, “give me my wand back!”

Pansy sniffed. “Those two are a hazard.”

They headed further into the crowd, wanting to get as close to the doors as possible—that was
where the carriages would be leaving from. Professor McGonagall was standing next to the entrance, her voice ringing out above the hubbub: “Remember your reports!” she was saying, waving a sheaf of parchment above her head, “we expect your parents to sign them!”

The crowd lurched forward when the doors opened, and it wasn’t long before they were climbing into a carriage. Victoria looked back at Hogwarts for the entire ride to the station, trying to fix the sight of the castle in her memory. It was going to be a long summer, and the Muggle world was going to feel dreadfully dull compared to the excitement of magic.

The journey back to London was therefore filled with a sense of approaching doom, a feeling which intensified when the girls opened their reports. Victoria had of course received an Outstanding in all her subjects, but that wasn’t what worried her. No, the concerning thing was the short notice accompanying the report:

*Students are reminded that the use of unsupervised magic while under the age of seventeen is strictly forbidden by the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery.*

Victoria sulked for the rest of the journey, staring glumly out the window with her forehead pressed against the glass. She was to be cut off not only from Hogwarts and her friends, but also from magic itself. It was so unfair!

Mountains became hills; hills became farmland. The signs of Muggle civilisation began to appear, with electrical lines crossing overhead and walls sprayed with graffiti lining the tracks. The trolley witch distributed sandwiches and juice, and soon after that they pulling into Platform Five and a Half at King’s Cross Station.

The students spilled out onto the platform where their families awaited them. Hugs, kisses, and even some tears followed. Victoria hung back from it all, having no one to greet her. The Dursleys would be waiting on the Muggle side.

“Victoria! There you are!”

It was Susan, her trunk and father in tow.

“Hello, Mister Bones,” Victoria said, greeting the lanky man with a little bob that was almost a curtsey.

“I thought I told you to call me Bruce?” he said, looking down at her with kind, brown eyes. “You’re going to need to remember my name if you’re spending the summer with us, after all!”

Hope fluttered in Victoria’s heart. “Stay with you?” She looked between Susan and Mr Bones; Susan was beaming.

“All got to sort out all the details with Dumbledore, of course,” Mr Bones said, waving his hand, “security and whatnot. But you should be with us for August, if you’ve no objection?”

Victoria pounced on Susan, enveloping her in a tight hug

“Thankyou-thankyou-thankyou!”

Mr Bones smiled. “I’ll take that as a yes. Shall we?”
They made for the portal to the Muggle world, where the Dursleys were waiting, dressed in their Sunday finest. Vernon’s face reddened the moment he saw her; Petunia glanced around nervously. Victoria grinned and swished her robes a little as she walked towards them, watching as Vernon’s eye began to twitch.

Mr Bones extended a hand in greeting. “You must be Victoria’s family.”

“Extended family,” Vernon said, a battle playing out on his face as he stared at Mr Bones’ hand. Clearly he was struggling to decide which was worse: touching a wizard, or being rude in public. Eventually he settled upon gripping Mr Bones’ hand extremely tightly. “A pleasure to meet you. Now come on girl, before too many people see you in that ridiculous get-up.”

The Boneses looked distinctly nonplussed, but Vernon was already striding away, Petunia and Dudley scurrying behind him.

Mr Bones coughed. “Charming fellow.”

“Er, see you soon, I guess,” Victoria said, feeling rather embarrassed about the whole thing. “Write me?”

Susan hugged her again. “Twice a week! And, um, try to have a good holiday.” She scowled at Vernon’s retreating back.

“Don’t worry about the Dursleys. I know exactly how to handle them.”

And then Victoria was off, hurrying after her family, calling out at the top of her voice so that all the station could hear:

“Uncle Vernon, wait! Don’t you want to see my magic report? I got an Outstanding in Potions, you know!”

End of Part One
The Wizengamot voted to approve the Muggle Protection Act on Tuesday night, putting months of debate to rest. The Act, which was introduced by Head Obliviator Emmeline Vance, grants the Ministry wide authority to sign Decrees prohibiting the enchantment of objects of apparent Muggle origin.

It is understood that the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, headed by Arthur Weasley, has an array of Decrees drafted and ready to sign. The purpose of these measures is to prevent magical items passing accidentally into the Muggle world, where they can inadvertently cause harm. “We’ve been anticipating this moment for over a year,” Mr Weasley explained to the Herald, “now that the Act has passed, we’ll be wasting no time in putting it into force.”

The passage of the Act into law was greeted enthusiastically by business leaders, who state that it will protect the wizarding economy from a growing flood of cheap, low quality Muggle imports. The robe industry has been hit particularly hard, with three Diagon Alley closures in the last decade. Many in the industry consider the newcomer Sickleland responsible.

The Herald caught up with Madam Madeline Malkin, who explained the problem. “They can import a Muggle dress for a sickle or two and have it enchanted on the cheap by an unlicensed seamstress. It’s just not possible to compete with a business model with such low costs. No one seems to care that their charms fail after a few months, and the fabric not long after.”

However, not everyone has welcomed the Act, which passed by a narrow margin of 73 votes to 71. Warlock Melissa Abbott had the following to say: “While the protection of Muggles is of course a noble pursuit, no moderate could support such a draconian Act, which will effectively criminalise the vast majority of the British witches and wizards. We all have enchanted Muggle artefacts in our homes, and compliance with these measures will place an intolerable burden on the average citizen.”

Critics have also stressed that the Ministry did not lack for legal powers in this area. It has long been illegal for an enchanted object to pass into Muggle possession or ownership, and the Ministry has wide authority to appropriate such objects and punish those responsible.
“This Act is a cynical overreach by the Ministry,” stated Warlock Cantankerous Burke, the most senior member of the Wizengamot, “it is clear that the true purpose is not to protect Muggles, but to give the Ministry the power to invade the homes of private citizens and seize their family heirlooms.”

Ministry representatives reject these allegations, claiming that their pre-existing powers were inadequate to the task of preventing magical items falling into Muggle hands. Over sixty enchanted items were found in Muggle possession last year, with several Muggles seriously injured.

But many have raised concerns over the cost of protecting these Muggles. “Of course we must protect Muggles, but we must do so in a proportionate way,” stated Mr Lucius Malfoy, widely considered the richest wizard in Britain, “as a taxpayer, it gives me great concern to see the budget of a singular office so widely inflated for so little gain. Wizarding gold should be spent on wizarding problems.”

In the face of such opposition, it is easy to see why the Act was expected to be voted down, and the Warlocks of the Wizengamot must have considered themselves in for a short session when they arrived on Tuesday afternoon. But after many hours of debate, the great upset came at nine o’clock, when Amos Diggory threw his support behind the Act. He brought with him eight votes, just enough to see the Act into law. In explaining his change of heart, Mr Diggory declared himself convinced that the number of magical objects finding their way into Muggle possession presented a serious threat to the International Statute of Secrecy.

It was that argument which won the day, and many Warlocks departed with ashen faces. The Ministry will now commence their visits to wizarding households in order to collect unauthorised Muggle artefacts.
The Workshop

Victoria Potter

By Taure

Part Two: Second Year

Chapter Thirteen: The Workshop

The Muggle world felt wrong.

Hogwarts was filled with nooks and crannies, hidden alcoves and spiral staircases, but everything was neatly rectangular at Number Four, Privet Drive. The anaemic electric lights were a pale imitation of a flickering, crackling fire, and the front garden was little more than a patch of grass, not a single blade out of place, its perimeter brimming with meticulously arranged flowerbeds. Just like everything else in the Muggle world, there was nothing wild there, nothing truly alive.

Claustrophobia was setting in, and Victoria found herself longing for wide, open spaces—forests and valleys and sprawling castles perched atop tall cliffs. Little Whinging’s park offered some respite, but even that felt cramped, the busy road never out of sight. She was therefore jumping at every chance to leave the house, accompanying Petunia on trips to the bank, post office or the shops.

When they weren’t out and about, she was put to work in the garden, weeding, watering and planting new flowers. It was awfully dull compared to herbology—the Muggle plants didn’t even fight back when you pruned them—but under Victoria’s magical touch the garden had blossomed to become the envy of the neighbourhood. As word spread, Petunia’s friends began visiting for afternoon tea with increasing regularity.

“Never seen roses that colour before,” they would say, “bright purple! A new breed, is it?” Or: “Tulips in July! Well I never!” No doubt Petunia suspected that Victoria was doing something unnatural, but she seemed content to feign ignorance so long as the garden continued to draw admiring comments from the members of the Little Whinging Garden Association.

For her part, Victoria hadn’t intended to use herbology—it had just slipped out, an instinct that was difficult to control. She wasn’t even sure if she could tell the difference, now, between magical and non-magical handling of plants. Was stamping on the soil to summon worms magic, or was that something Muggles did too?

It was curious, however, that her herbology had not attracted the attention of the Ministry of Magic, in spite of the warning she had received with her end-of-year report. Victoria had a growing suspicion that certain magic was too subtle for the Ministry to detect, a suspicion which was confirmed when, in a moment of recklessness fuelled by boredom, she animated one of her origami birds. After several days without punishment, she decided it was safe to use a little bit of magic.

She didn’t dare cast anything with her wand—a proper spell would surely gain the Ministry’s ire—but as July wore on, Victoria took great joy in experimenting with new ways to draw out her
powers. She found an old skipping rope and discovered that, with just the right rhythm, she could linger at the top of her jump for longer than was natural. She figured out that slamming her bedroom door as hard as she could (something which annoyed Petunia no end) would fix the door handle in place, effectively locking it. And, quite by accident, she learnt that swearing at a burnt slice of toast would cause all the burnt bits to fall off.

Though unimpressive compared to what she could do with a wand, these little magics helped Victoria to overcome her feeling of isolation, connecting her in a small way to the magical world she missed. She was so busy, in fact, that she entirely forgot about her approaching birthday at the end of July.

Her birthdays were never so much celebrated by the Dursleys as they were begrudgingly recognised. It was always the same: whereas Dudley would receive a small mountain of colourfully wrapped presents, Victoria would come to breakfast to find a single white envelope resting on top of her plate.

“... hundred metres tomorrow,” Vernon was saying as she entered the kitchen, a copy of *The Telegraph* obscuring him from view, “looks like we might have a shot with Christie.”

“Lovely, dear,” Petunia said distractedly.

Victoria took her place at the table while her aunt bustled about, frying some bacon and fiddling with their new, very expensive coffee-maker. The Dursleys took great pride in it, being the only family on the street to own such a machine. They fancied that it made them more American.

“Of course, this Christie fellow isn’t really British,” Vernon continued, “Jamaican, I think, but we’ll take what we can get, eh? What do you say, Dudders? Worth a watch?”

Victoria reached forward for the *Coco Pops*. “Dudley’s still in bed.”

Vernon let the top of his broadsheet flop forwards, giving him a view of Victoria. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Here we go!” Petunia announced, passing Vernon a steaming mug of coffee.

“Ta, Pet.” He took a sip and pulled a face at the bitter taste. “Delicious,” he lied, smacking his lips together, before looking down at the envelope in front of Victoria. “Well, what’re you waiting for? You only turn thirteen once, you know!”

She reached for the envelope, muttering under her breath.

“What’s that, girl?” Vernon said, “speak up!”

“I’m twelve, not thirteen.”

“More’s the pity,” Vernon said, looking sideways at Petunia, “yet another year before you can move out. Now, get on with it! I have to go to work soon.”

Already knowing what she would find, Victoria fixed a smile on her face and braced herself for the usual disappointment. Inside the envelope was a card, and inside the card was a folded sheet of paper containing a poorly-typed list of expenses. Vernon wrote it each year, thoroughly detailing the costs of her room and board, before generously writing off her “debt” as a birthday gift.

If only he knew that Victoria had a huge pile of gold sitting beneath London… but then, even if he did know, she would sooner kiss Pansy Parkinson’s feet than pay Vernon a single galleon of wizarding gold.
“Well?” Petunia said, “what do you say to your uncle?”

“Thank you,” Victoria said, not willing to risk a thirty minute lecture on the importance of gratitude. “Even the goblins would be impressed.”

Vernon’s eyes narrowed, no doubt suspecting sarcasm, but he was clearly unwilling to engage in an argument which might involve the word “goblin”. Petunia finally took a seat at the table with half a pink grapefruit.

“Young lady, what have we said about *M-words*?” she said, “let’s not spoil your birthday with that nonsense. Now, after breakfast, I thought we might go clothes shopping. How’d you like that? You’re getting a bit big for some of your old dresses.”

“That sounds nice,” Victoria said. While she would never spend her own money on Muggle clothes—not when she could buy robes instead—she wouldn’t say no to a couple of extra dresses.

Vernon left for work, and soon enough Petunia drove Victoria down to Great Whinging high street, where a number of charity shops were to be found. As they looked for a parking space, once again Victoria was struck by the strangeness of the Muggle world, all concrete and plastic and glass. It was as if the Muggles were determined to kill off all connection to nature.

She had been thinking about this a lot over the summer. Muggle technology depended on the laws of nature, and yet Muggles seemed so disconnected from everything green and living. Meanwhile, wizards lived in close contact with the natural world, even though their powers continuously defied it. At first Victoria thought that it was simply because wizards didn’t need things like electricity and roads, but her time in the garden had made her rethink that idea. Magic was supernatural, yes, but it was also closely connected to nature. It was an interesting contradiction.

Eventually they found a parking space and made their way to the shops. As Victoria browsed the racks, even the clothes seemed odd, lacking the elegant flowing lines and grandeur of wizarding robes. She just couldn’t understand the appeal of jeans, all scruffy-looking and rough on the skin. This, at least, was a viewpoint which Petunia shared, and her aunt made noises of approval when Victoria picked out a couple of flowery dresses. They couldn’t quite pass for dress robes—their short sleeves saw to that—but she might be able to use them as inner robes.

After paying for the dresses they went to the supermarket, where Petunia let Victoria push the trolley as a birthday treat. It was a decision she came to regret: Victoria took the opportunity to race around the shop floor, Petunia hissing at her to behave as she narrowly avoided collisions with other customers and shop displays.

Their winding, hazardous route at last brought them to the cake section.

“Hurry up and pick one,” Petunia said, looking rather frazzled, and Victoria quickly selected a sponge cake, placing it in the trolley. Petunia frowned. “Why don’t we have a chocolate one? Everyone likes chocolate.”

Chocolate cake was Dudley’s favourite.

Victoria sighed. “Yes, Aunt Petunia.”

It was past noon by the time they returned home. Victoria helped put the food away and set the table for lunch, at which point Dudley finally surfaced. He too had spent the last year away from home, boarding at a posh all-boys school called Smeltings, and he had returned a very different boy. He slept late, avoided his family like the plague, and every other word out of his mouth was a
swear word. Victoria could tell it bothered Petunia, but Vernon waved off her concerns: “boys will be boys”.

“How about some salad, Popkin?” Petunia asked, loading up Dudley’s plate with sandwiches, crisps, pork pie and a slice of pizza. Dudley simply grunted and took the plate, tucking in without another word. He didn’t touch the salad.

They ate in silence. Victoria had pizza, some coleslaw and a packet of crisps. It was quite a satisfactory birthday lunch, and she was eagerly looking forward to the chocolate cake, even though it wasn’t her favourite. But then, just as they were clearing away their plates, a heavy thump came from the top of the house. Petunia shrieked, dropping a glass which smashed loudly on the floor, and a moment later footsteps could be heard coming from directly above them. A man’s voice followed, drifting in through the open kitchen window:

“I say!” he said, and the voice sounded familiar to Victoria, though she couldn’t place it, “where’s their skydoor?”

“Maybe Muggles don’t have skydoors,” responded the voice of Susan Bones, Victoria’s best friend. “They don’t have brooms, do they?”

An “eep!” of happiness escaped Victoria’s lips and she jumped up from table. “Excuse me!” she cried, hurrying out the kitchen door and into the back garden.

“Now, Susan, don’t be prejudiced,” Mr Bones was saying, his voice coming from high above, “the Muggles know how to fly, there was a programme about it on the wireless.”

He was standing on the roof, balancing awkwardly on the sloped tiles. Mr Bones was tall and lanky, with coppery-red hair like his daughter, and was wearing beige, linen robes suited to the summer heat. Floating next to him was an extremely long broom with three saddles down its length. Susan was sitting in the middle saddle, waving down at Victoria with a grin on her face, her long hair tied up in a bun.

“Ho there!” Mr Bones called, spotting Victoria in the garden below. “Where’s your skydoor?”

Victoria had never heard of skydoors, but she could easily figure out what they were. “We don’t have one! Can’t you come down?”

“Told you!” Susan said, sticking her tongue out at her dad.

“Yes, yes,” he said in a long-suffering tone. “Be down in a tick!”

He mounted the saddle at the front of the broom and pushed off gently, not so much flying as floating down into the garden. The moment they were on the ground, Susan jumped off the broom and engulfed Victoria in a hug.

“Happy birthday!”

Meanwhile, Mr Bones was pulling his wand out and pointing it at the roof. “Obliviate Muggletum!” There was no visible effect, but he nodded in satisfaction. “That should do it, I think.”

“Do you want to come in?” Victoria said, gesturing at the kitchen door, “we were about to have cake.”

She led them into the house, where Petunia was clearing up the smashed glass with a dazed look on
her face. Dudley was still eating, apparently oblivious to everything around him.

“Mind the glass!” Petunia said as they entered, “I don’t know how I did it…”

“Allow me,” Mr Bones said, and with a flick of his wand the shards of glass floated up and came together like the pieces of a puzzle. He plucked the repaired glass out of the air and handed it to Petunia, who had now lost her dazed look and was instead scowling at Mr Bones’ wand.

“None of that here, thank you,” she snapped, quickly placing the glass on the counter like it might give her a disease. She took in the visitors, noting their robes with a slight curl of her lip. “You’re here to take her away, are you?”

“With your permission,” Mr Bones said, “I’ve cleared it with the Ministry of Magic, of course, and we’ve had a charm-mason lay down extra security. Nothing like what you’ve got here, but I understand it’s been several years since the last—”

“That sounds fine,” Petunia interrupted, her voice strained, no doubt distressed from the sudden invasion of magic into her home. “Will you be leaving straight away?”

Mr Bones seemed to pick up on Petunia’s state of mind. He looked to Victoria, a question in his eyes, and she nodded. “Perhaps that would be best.”

Susan pulled on her father’s sleeve. “But Dad,” she whispered, “what about the cake…?”

“Oh!” Petunia said, “why, I completely forgot…”

“Victoria will need to pack her things,” Mr Bones said. “Why don’t we see to the cake while Susan helps her?”

The girls left the adults in the kitchen and made their way upstairs. Susan was looking around with curiosity, her eyes lingering on the unmoving photographs hanging on the walls.

“Well, here we go,” Victoria said, opening her bedroom door, “welcome to chez Victoria.” The room was as neat as ever, though not as bare as it used to be. The desk was piled high with books and parchment, and the pale pink walls had several dog-eared posters stuck to them, each one depicting wand movements. Like all magical posters, the drawings moved.

“So that’s where Flitwick’s old posters went,” Susan said. She tapped her finger on the radiator beneath the window. “What’s this?”

“You use it to heat the house in the winter,” Victoria explained. “It’s not on at the moment.”

“And that?” Susan said, pointing at the lightbulb. “Is that an eclectic light?”

Victoria giggled. “Yes it is,” she said, not correcting her friend. “Here, watch.” She flicked the switch and the bulb lit up with a pale yellow light, barely visible in the daylight.

If Susan was underwhelmed, she didn’t show it. “How clever! It’s just like bottled lightning!”

“The cooker downstairs is eclectic too,” Victoria said, “maybe I can show you that on the way out.”

It didn’t take long to pack, as most of her things were already in her trunk—she couldn’t wear robes in the Muggle world, after all. Together they managed to carry the heavy trunk and Dumbledore’s carry-case down the stairs and back into the kitchen.
“Ah, here they are,” Mr Bones said. He was holding three slices of cake wrapped in paper towels, which he gave to Susan after levitating the trunk. “All ready?”

They went back outside where the broom was waiting for them. There was a wooden box at the rear of the shaft which Mr Bones now swung open, levitating the trunk and Dumbledore’s carry-case inside. Victoria stared—the trunk alone had been several times larger than the box, yet seemed to fit inside it easily. The slices of cake were next into the apparently bottomless space, and then Mr Bones was clambering into the front saddle. “Hop on, girls!”

It was at that point, as Susan mounted the middle saddle with practised ease, that Victoria realised that she was about to fly for the first time. She hesitated.

“Uh, so, I’ve never actually—”

“Nothing to it, my dear!” Mr Bones said, “never fear, we’ve got all the latest charms. You’ll be plenty warm.”

The temperature hadn’t even occurred to her. She was rather more concerned with falling off.

“But don’t you need training to fly?”

“Not to be a passenger,” Susan said. She patted the saddle behind her. “Come on, you’ll love it, I swear.”

Victoria mounted the broom awkwardly, making sure to firmly secure the skirt of her dress underneath her. Her legs dangled either side of the saddle in a distinctly unladylike manner and she was suddenly quite glad she was at the back. At least the saddle was comfortable.

“Now, we’ll need to be invisible until we reach the clouds,” Mr Bones explained. “You girls up for a bit of peddling?” He pushed a button and a set of pedals dropped down beneath each saddle, at just the right height for Victoria to slip her feet beneath the straps.

“Maybe I could just ride in the box,” she muttered, but no-one heard her. Mr Bones lowered a pair of goggles over his eyes.

“Here we go!”

They rose slowly into the air, the broom tilting so that its front was pointing skyward. “Oh no,” Victoria moaned, having to lean forward just to feel like she wasn’t hanging off the end. She clutched the shaft of the broom in front of her. “You lied! I don’t like this at all!”

Susan laughed, and then they were shooting upwards like they’d been launched from a catapult. “Pedal, girls, pedal!” Mr Bones was shouting, barely audible above the whistling of the wind, and Victoria pedaled for her life, her loose hair blowing in every direction. The broom and its occupants began to shimmer into invisibility.

Victoria’s eyes widened as the broom disappeared. She screamed and she swore, chanting “crap-crap-crap,” to the sound of Susan whooping; her thighs were gripping the saddle so hard that they began to wobble from the strain. Though she could still feel wood beneath the death-grip of her fingers, it looked like there was nothing between her and the rapidly diminishing ground. She couldn’t even see her own arms.

Then there was dampness, like someone had sprayed a fine mist of water in her face, and a moment later the broom leveled off before slowing to a stop. They had broken through a cloud and were floating above it in glorious sunshine.
“That’s enough peddling for now!” Mr Bones called. The broom returned to visibility and Victoria’s shoulders slumped in relief. She began to cry and laugh at the same time: though it had lasted mere seconds, she felt completely drained, her dress sticking to her skin in a clammy sweat.

Mr Bones twisted in his saddle to get a look at her. “All right back there?”

Victoria sniffed. “No.”

“She’s fine,” Susan said at the same time. She glanced over her shoulder, a grin on her face. “Your hair’s a mess, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Victoria replied grumpily. She shook her head and her hair came alive, winding itself into a tight plait.

Mr Bones raised an eyebrow. “Don’t worry, it’s rather more leisurely from here onwards.” He pushed the broom forward, a pleasant breeze blowing in their faces as they accelerated. The broom was just skimming the top of the white, fluffy clouds, so close that their feet could almost touch them. Through the gaps in the clouds she could glimpse the world far below, the buildings and roads so small that they could have been a toy model, and though the sight made her feel quite dizzy, she couldn’t help but keep looking.

As they made their way north over London, Victoria noticed something interesting: though there were in fact very few clouds, their route never took them into clear skies where Muggles might spot them. It was as if the clouds formed a constantly shifting network of roads in the sky, acting to conceal them from view.

She began to relax. The sun and wind had dried her out quickly, and now the broom was level she could sit back in the saddle without having to clutch it with her thighs. At first she didn’t think they were going that fast—certainly the breeze wasn’t too strong—but when she risked another glance down, she noticed that the clouds where zooming past beneath them, faster than any car. They quickly left London behind, the urban sprawl giving way to farmland dotted with small towns. Victoria took a deep breath of the cool, clean air. At last she was out of the crowded Muggle world with its smog and litter. This was where she belonged.

Every so often they would pass other flyers in the sky, from lone riders to families on long tandem brooms like their own. Each time they crossed paths with another flyer, Mr Bones would slow down to greet them, often calling out to them by name:

“Afternoon, Lincoln!”

“Byron, old chap! Perfect day for a spot of flying!”

“Leaky on Saturday, Abbott?”

One time they were even overtaken by a greenish blur on a racing broom.

“That’s a Cleansweep Six, girls!” Mr Bones shouted as their own broom wobbled in its wake. “Probably one of the Holyhead Harpies!”

Not long after their encounter with the racer, they came across a wooden signpost sticking out of a cloud, directing flyers towards Diagon Alley, Godric’s Hollow, Mould-on-the-Wold, Appleby and even Hogsmeade. It was here that they began to veer to the east, heading into the Fens. The land below became flatter, a lush green riddled with rivers.

“Not long now!” Mr Bones said, “but a spot of cake wouldn’t go amiss!”
Victoria groaned; she was the only one who could reach the travel box. Carefully, with her heart in her mouth, she turned around in the saddle, each and every wobble convincing her that she’d fall off and plummet to her death. She lifted the lid with shaking hands and thrust her arm inside, feeling around for the cake. Luckily it hadn’t shifted much during the flight and so was still near the top.

She passed two slices forward and watched with disbelief as Susan and her dad tuckered in, barely seeming to notice that they were perched precariously thousands of feet into the air. Needless to say, Victoria didn’t join them. Her hands would remain firmly attached to the broom, thank-you-very-much.

They began to follow the path of a wide river, winding this way and that, and in the distance a tall cathedral could be seen at the centre of a small market town.

“This is us!” Mr Bones said as they passed another signpost, this one reading *ELY: 13 MILES*. “Time to pedal again!”

If ascending had been bad, descending was even worse. The nose of the broom pointed downwards, and for one awful moment Victoria actually thought she was going to tumble forward into the air, but her feet were still tucked into the straps on the pedals, giving her just enough purchase to squeeze her legs together and lean backwards.

“Oh no, oh no,” she kept repeating, her hands flailing for something to grip, eventually settling for the edges of the saddle.

“Victoria!” Susan shouted, “you’re not pedaling!”

“I hate you!” Victoria cried, but she pedaled nonetheless, and they passed into the damp cloud. They were invisible by the time they emerged from the other side, and they shot down towards a tall, irregularly shaped building on the east bank of the river. A water wheel jutted out from its side, turning steadily in the rapid current, and ivy grew all over the stone walls. The house—for surely this was where Susan lived—was surrounded by vegetable plots, and beyond them were fields in which a handful of cows grazed. There wasn’t a road or electricity pylon in sight.

A flat platform occupied around half of the roof, almost like a Muggle helicopter pad. They circled it as would a carrion bird, each circuit bringing them closer, spiraling downward until they were coming into land. When they did, Victoria jumped off the broom eagerly, her weak legs rejoicing at the feel of solid stone beneath her feet.

“Perfect landing!” Mr Bones said with satisfaction, taking off his goggles and running a hand through his hair.

Susan dismounted casually. She looked windswept, with rosy cheeks and hair coming loose from her bun, but she didn’t wobble in the slightest as she got off the broom. “Well done, Dad. Much better than last time.”

Mr Bones coughed. “Yes, well, we won’t mention that one to your mother when she visits.”

Victoria listened to their conversation with alarm. What had happened the last time?

“Oh, don’t worry,” Susan said, coming over to her and giving her a hug, “I can see what you’re thinking already. You’re fine, aren’t you?”

Victoria leaned into the hug. She was still feeling a bit unsteady. “I’m sorry,” she muttered, remembering what she had said on the broom. “I don’t hate you.” She let go of Susan and turned to
Mr Bones, who was extracting her trunk from the travel box. “Thank you for coming to get me.”

“Say nothing of it! It’s your birthday, after all.” He led them over to a sturdy oak door at the edge of the platform, rummaging through his pockets for the key. “Er, Susan, do you perhaps have…?”

Susan sighed and fished an iron key from a hidden pocket at her hip. The door unlocked with a clunk, and she swung it open to reveal a spacious entrance hall with wooden floors and a high, slanted ceiling. The room had the warmth of a greenhouse, a fire burning merrily in the hearth and sunlight streaming in through the many skylights. Exotic house plants were placed artfully between the couches and coffee tables, and at the far end of the room the rail of a spiral staircase led down into the house.

Victoria hadn’t known what she was expecting—an attic, perhaps, or a small landing—but it wasn’t this. It was as if the house had been built upside down, with the front door at the top.

Mr Bones smiled at her expression.

“Welcome to the Workshop.”

While Mr Bones was putting the broom away, Susan gave her the grand tour. The house was spread over five floors, large enough that in the Muggle world it would have been considered generously proportioned. The top floor was taken up entirely by the entrance hall, and below that were the reception rooms and a large, well-equipped kitchen. There was a certain rustic, cluttered elegance to it all, with walls of exposed stone, wooden floors littered with rugs, and ornaments from all over the world. A Nigerian face mask hung next to the kitchen window, a large Moroccan vase sat next to a fireplace in the drawing room, and in the sitting room, each armchair had a side table next to it shaped like an Indian elephant.

Victoria was surprised: though the house was beautifully decorated, there was something a bit too clean about it, with little sign that it was lived in at all. She hadn’t figured Mr Bones for a neat freak.

“We don’t really use these rooms much,” Susan explained, “not since Mum left. Now it’s just me and Dad, it feels a bit empty up here.”

Susan had never mentioned her mother before. It was a topic which Victoria had tried to avoid, assuming that either divorce or death were involved, but now it seemed like Susan was giving her permission to ask.

“When did she leave?”

“When I was eight,” Susan replied. She didn’t seem upset by the question, but she wasn’t looking Victoria in the eye either, busying herself with re-arranging the cushions on an already-tidy settee. “She ran off with François. They live in the south of France now, near Narbonne.”

“But she comes to visit you? Your dad said…”

“Maybe once a week,” Susan said, “it’s a new thing we’re trying. She’s actually coming over tonight, I hope you don’t mind…”

“Of course not!” Victoria said. “It’s your house, you can invite who you want.”

Susan’s eyes lit up. “But it’s your house too, now! Come on, let me show you.”

The next two floors down were full of bedrooms, most of them empty, each of them en suite and
bigger than the sitting room at Privet Drive. Susan’s room was on the lower of the two floors, the wooden door carved with stars and unicorns and bearing a brass plaque with her name on it. There was another bedroom immediately opposite. Its door was carved like Susan’s, this time with cats and snakes, and it too held a plaque:

VICTORIA

A lump formed in Victoria’s throat. “This is for me?”

“Take a look inside,” Susan urged, practically bobbing on her feet. Like the other bedrooms, Victoria’s room was massive, with a king-sized bed and large, bay windows that jutted out from the side of the house. The walls were painted light pink (her favourite colour, as Susan well knew) and several fairy-lamps hung from the ceiling, their shutters currently closed. There was a wardrobe, a well-stocked bookcase and a desk, over which hung a banner reading “HAPPY BIRTHDAY”. Her trunk had already made its way there, and Dumbledore was stretched out in a ray of sun by the window.

“It’s amazing,” Victoria said. She stepped further into the room. Like the rest of the house, everything had been made with care and built to last: the feet of the bed were sculpted in the shape of a lion’s paws, the desk chair had a Cushioning Charm engraved into it, and the wardrobe was charmed to be bigger on the inside.

There was a framed photograph on the bedside table. Victoria picked it up and gasped: it was a wizarding photograph of her parents, standing on a rocky beach and waving enthusiastically at the camera. Her mother was red-haired and beautiful, with green eyes like her own; her father was tall, dark-haired and handsome.

“Professor Dumbledore brought that when he came to enchant the room,” Susan said, peering over Victoria’s shoulder. “I think it’s connected to the spells, somehow.”

Victoria didn’t know what to say. Not even the discovery that she was a witch had left her so speechless. “Thank you,” she said softly. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“Well, we wanted to,” Susan said. “Besides, you’re gonna be here for a whole month, so it’s not like you’re just visiting. Now you have a magical home as well as a Muggle one!”

The tour concluded on the ground floor, which was far more homey than the rest of the house. It was clear that this was where the Bones really lived. A second kitchen looked out upon the vegetable patches, much smaller than the one upstairs but well used, with muddy boots next to the back door, half-melted candles on the kitchen table, and jars holding tea leaves and coffee beans by the stove. The kitchen was connected to a cosy den heaped with cushions, blankets and board games, and that in turn led to a small library, the shelves overflowing with generations of accumulated books.

Mr Bones was sitting at the kitchen table reading the paper. “FUDGE BACKS WEASLEY” declared the headline, and the cover photo depicted a short man in a bowler hat shaking hands with Ron’s father. The Minister kept looking distractedly at something out-of-frame, before seeming to remember that he was supposed to be smiling at the camera.

“Episode of Quizarding World tonight,” Mr Bones said as they entered. He was looking over the
wireless listings. “Might be fun for Victoria.”

Victoria nodded. “Sounds interesting.” Presumably it was some kind of quiz show.

They had some juice and biscuits—shortbread from a Muggle bakery in nearby Eley, which Mr Bones made them promise to keep secret from Arthur Weasley—before going outside to explore. Susan led her past carrots and cauliflower, rhubarb and raspberries, Victoria’s Muggle trainers getting increasingly muddy as they made their way towards the river. The house was shaped like an ‘L’, with the ground floor extending out towards the river, and it was this extension which held the water wheel.

“What’s in there?” Victoria asked, curious as to why a wizard would need such a thing.

“Dad’s workshop,” Susan explained, “I’m not allowed in but we can look through a window.”

They peered in through perfectly clean glass. The inside held an eclectic mix of equipment, with a carpenter’s bench and tools, an anvil next to a small furnace, an array of wands hanging on the wall, and even a sewing machine. The room was open where it met the water wheel, which fed into a trough of continuously running water.

Victoria wondered how one person could need all of it. “What does your dad actually do?”

“He repairs broken artefacts,” Susan said, “you know, brooms that only turn left, coolboxes that don’t stay cold, that sort of stuff.”

“And the water?”

Susan shrugged. “I’m not really sure. I think it’s got something to do with removing spells from things.”

The afternoon was spent outside. They wandered down the river, several times having to hop across mossy rocks to the other side when the east bank became too steep. They climbed trees, played pooh sticks, and looked for frogs, shrieking and running away every time they actually found one. Eventually they doubled back to the house, where Susan rooted out a skipping rope so that Victoria could show her how to hover in the air. Unfortunately Susan wasn’t quite able to get the hang of it—she learnt the rhythm easily enough, but she couldn’t understand Victoria’s instructions to do a “happy jump”.

“But I’m smiling as hard as I can!”

“Oh, I’m explaining this all wrong,” Victoria moaned, “it’s like… a jump with strawberry jam in it.”

“Thanks,” Susan replied flatly, “that makes loads more sense.”

They abandoned the attempt before frustration set in, instead taking turns with the rope, singing skipping rhymes and seeing how long they could keep going. While they were skipping, a visitor arrived at the top of the house by broom.

“Customer!” Mr Bones called out of the kitchen window, “and look at the state of you!” They were splattered with mud, with grass stains on their dresses and messy hair. “Upstairs to clean up, before your mother arrives for tea!”

The girls retreated back to their bedrooms, where they washed and changed while Mr Bones was meeting the new customer. Victoria took her time about it: the day had already been eventful, and
it all caught up with her as she lowered herself into the hot water of the bath. She explored the toiletries that had been left for her, scrubbing her face with half a sugar-lemon and washing her hair thoroughly with *Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion*, which smelled strongly of coconut and left her long, dark hair gleaming in the fairy light.

She decided to dress up for the evening, wanting to look nice for her birthday and make a good impression on Susan’s mother. She selected the same velvet green dress robe she had worn to Dumbledore’s party, slipped Mrs Malfoy’s silver charm bracelet onto her wrist, and put up her hair up into a waterfall braid. After vacillating on the matter, she even used the tiniest amount of the makeup Pansy had given her for Christmas, applying some lip gloss and, after several failed attempts, eyeshadow.

It was fortunate that she’d gone to the effort, because when Susan bounced into her room (knocking was apparently not known to Hufflepuffs) she was similarly attired, wearing an embroidered white dress robe and daisies in her hair.

The doorbell rang.

“That’s her!” called Mr Bones, and the girls hurried upstairs to the entrance hall, arriving just in time to see Susan’s mother step through the fireplace. Mrs Evelyn d’Ivoire was the image of the classic English rose, with cascading chestnut brown hair, fair skin and an hourglass figure. Like most witches in their forties, she could have been mistaken for a woman in her late twenties.

“Oh no!” Susan hissed. “She brought Madeleine!” At Victoria’s look of confusion, she added: “My step-sister!”

Madeleine brushed soot off her yellow dress robes and curtsied. “Bonjour, Monsieur Bones.”

“Ah, Madeleine,” Mr Bones said, clearly surprised by her presence, “um, *bonjour* to you too.”

“You don’t mind, do you, Bruce? She needs to practice her English, and I thought the girls ought to get to know each other!” Evelyn said, “now, where’s my Susie?” She didn’t wait for an answer, descending upon Susan, fussing over her hair and exclaiming how grown-up she looked. After Susan was suitably embarrassed, it was Victoria’s turn. “And who is this?”

“Victoria, ma’am,” she said, introducing herself with a curtsey.

Evelyn’s eyes widened. “Not Victoria Potter?”

“*La Survivante?* ” Madeleine said, gazing at Victoria with undisguised curiosity, like an animal in the zoo. “*Mes amis ne me croiront pas!* ”

“English, Madeleine,” Evelyn said, before turning back to Victoria. “Well, aren’t you just the prettiest thing. You’ll have the boys eating out of your hand in a few years, mark my words. Or the girls, if that’s your thing!”

“Mum!” Susan gasped as Victoria blushed heavily, “you can’t say things like that!”
Mr Bones coughed. “Shall we?”

They made their way to the ground floor kitchen, where the table had been laid for dinner.

“Really, Bruce, you have a perfectly good dining room,” Evelyn complained as they were climbing down the spiral staircase, “why not use it?”

Victoria preferred the kitchen. The candles were lit and the door had been left open, a gentle summer’s breeze drifting in with the distant sounds of cattle lowing. When they took their seats, a strange creature holding a tray of food popped into existence, making Victoria jump in surprise. It was just a little shorter than a goblin, with large, bat-like ears, bulging eyes and long fingers. Completely bald, someone had tied pink ribbons at the tips of its ears, and it wore a crisp white pillowcase. She—Victoria was assuming it was a she, given the ribbons—was surely a house-elf.

“Thank you, Topsy,” Mr Bones said as the house-elf served each of them a fillet of cod with a mint and pea crust, a green bean salad on the side. “This looks wonderful.”

Topsy quivered with excitement. “Master is too kind!” she squeaked, and Victoria wondered if Professor Flitwick had house-elf blood in him. “Topsy is happy to be having visitors again!”

She popped back to wherever she had come from and they began to eat, making all the usual polite sounds of approval that people make when they eat together. Only Madeleine was less than enthusiastic, pushing the fish around on her plate without putting any in her mouth. The adults made small talk about politics and the summer’s vegetable crop, but soon their attention turned to the children.

“Did you know the Muggles don’t have skydoors?” Mr Bones said, “found out when we went to pick Victoria up earlier. For a moment I thought I’d have to jump down the chimney!”

Victoria giggled. “It’s a good thing you didn’t! The Dursleys have an eclectic fire, you wouldn’t have been able to get through.”

“How strange,” Evelyn said, “and stranger still that you live with Muggles in the first place! I know I’ve been out of the country, but how did that happen?”

“Family is family, even if they are Muggles,” Mr Bones said, and everyone nodded in acceptance.

Evelyn reached for a bottle of white wine and began to pour herself a generous glass. “But still, it must have been quite the experience. Do you find that you enjoy the Muggle world? I understand that for some it holds a certain gauche attraction.”

“It’s… different,” Victoria said, thinking back on her summer, about all the things that had once seemed normal to her but now felt strange. “It’s actually a lot like going back in time. In the magical world, everything just kinda… works. Like, you take a shower and the water’s always at just the right temperature. But in the Muggle world, you have to fiddle with all these buttons and taps just to get the water right, and even then it might suddenly change.”

“Fascinating,” Evelyn said, “of course, we should be happy they have hot water at all! It wasn’t so long ago that they invented this eccentricity business. They are quite the industrious people, aren’t they?”

Mr Bones nodded. “They’ve come so far in such a short time. And yet in some respects, I can’t help but feel they’ve gone backwards… you see it when you’re flying, cities that go on for miles, dirty rivers and poisoned land… I wager there are a fair few Muggles who’ve never tasted fresh air in their lives.”
Madeleine still hadn’t taken a bite of her fish. Evelyn told her to stop being fussy, and an argument broke out in rapid French, a distinct whine to Madeleine’s voice which transcended language.

Susan met Victoria’s eye. “Ooh la la!” she whispered, mimicking Madeleine’s accent, and the two of them giggled, throwing imitations back and forth.

“Sacre bleu!”

“Zut alors!”

“Baguette!”

“Girls,” Mr Bones said chidingly, and the two of them looked up to find that their conversation had become public. Madeleine was glaring at them. “I think you owe Madeleine an apology.”

“Sorry,” they muttered.

Evelyn snorted. “You’re too easy on them, Bruce. Do you think Amelia would stand for that sort of thing?”

“Amelia doesn’t have children,” Bruce said. He turned to Victoria. “My sister, I don’t know if Susan has mentioned her. She’s the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

Victoria’s lips twitched. “Is she really?” she said, her voice innocent, ignoring Susan’s scowl, “I don’t think Susan ever said.”

Mr Bones didn’t seem to twig that she was joking. “I’m surprised she never mentioned it, we’re all very proud of Amelia. But I suppose law enforcement isn’t rad for you young people.”

Susan rolled her eyes. “No one says rad anymore, Dad.”

“Come on, even I know that,” Evelyn said with a laugh.

Topsy returned to clear away their plates. Her ears drooped when she came across Madeleine’s barely touched fish. “Is it not being good? Topsy can make something different for young Mistress!”

“That’s quite all right,” Evelyn said kindly, “Madeleine just wasn’t very hungry today. She won’t be having anything for pudding.”

“Maman!”

Evelyn held firm. “No dessert unless you finish your mains.”

Topsy brought them tarte au citron for pudding, her ears perking up as they all complimented her cooking. Victoria thought she was beginning to get a sense of Topsy’s role in the household, somewhere between a servant and a beloved pet. Madeleine watched them eat with envy, and then they retired to the den where Mr Bones tuned the wireless to Radio Minus Four.

“It’s just starting!” he called, and they hurried to settle down, burying themselves in the couches with cushions and blankets.

“Welcome to Quizarding World, the weekly quiz where anyone can be a winner! So get your quill at the ready, because tonight might just be your night!”

Mr Bones rummaged through a chest and pulled out some parchment. “Team name?”
“Same as always,” Susan said. “Bone-Headed!”

“As usual, our first category is on current affairs. Question one! Which internationally renowned member of the Dark Force Defence League recently accepted the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts Master at Hogwarts School?”

“Easy,” Mr Bones said, and he scribbled a name on their parchment.

“Who is it?” Victoria asked.

“Only Gilderoy Lockhart!” Susan exclaimed.

“Who?”

But Susan waved her off. “I’ll explain later.”

“Looks like you all got that one,” the announcer said, “no surprises there. Question two…”

The quiz made its way through the categories of history, geography, music, and spells. Victoria was mostly useless, though she did get a question right in the section on spells, while Susan single-handedly carried them through the music round. But it was Mr Bones who was the true hero, quietly contributing the vast majority of their answers.

Perhaps uncharitably, Victoria had been wondering how exactly Mr Bones had ever snagged a woman like Evelyn. She was absolutely stunning, possessing the kind of beauty that would land you the front cover of a magazine. Not only that, but it was clear that she was a forceful woman, with far too strong a character for the affable, bookish Bruce. But as Victoria watched him unassumingly answer almost every question, she began to understand... the real question was how Evelyn ever lost interest.

“And now we come to an audience favourite, the quick-fire round. Quills down for this one folks, and voices at the ready, because the first team to shout the answer gets the points! But be careful… if you give the wrong answer, points will be deducted from your score!”

Victoria grinned. “This is so much better than Muggle shows.”

“Question fifty-one! What is the incantation to the Self-Immolation Jinx?”

Mr Bones laughed.

“Just kidding folks! But hopefully someone in Team Belcher remembers the Flame Freezing Charm. A bonus point to that team for commitment to the quiz! Here comes the real question fifty-one: what is the first of the three Essential Potions?”

“Draught of Sparta!” Mr Bones called, barking it out almost immediately. Victoria looked to Susan, who shrugged. They hadn’t studied the Essential Potions yet.

“Congratulations to Team Bone-Headed!” the announcer said, and a cheer went up in the den, “question fifty-two…”

They didn’t win any of the other quick-fire questions, but one was enough to make them flush with victory, proud to have their team name read out on the wireless. Nine short questions later and the quiz was at an end. The host delivered the results:

“Well folks, I’m afraid they’ve done it again.” Mr Bones groaned. “Team Pigpimple once more
storms to victory with a clear lead of seven points. Meanwhile, second place goes to Team Quibbler…”

Mr Bones sighed. “One day we’ll get it.” He turned the volume down and switched the channel over to the sound of Celestina Warbeck performing live in New York.

The rest of the evening was spent quietly. Mr Bones did the crossword while Evelyn painted the girls’ nails. The music washed over Victoria, and she found her eyelids drooping as the relaxing feeling of brush on nail lulled her further into sleepiness. When it was time for Evelyn to leave, Victoria and Susan were herded upstairs, the climb up the spiral staircase waking them up just enough to change into their pyjamas.

The sheets on Victoria’s bed were soft and smelt of lavender. The mattress was large enough that she could reach out like a starfish and not touch the edges. As she drifted off to sleep, her last thought was that it had been the best birthday ever.
Victoria quickly settled into the easy-going rhythm of life in the Bones household, where the pace of the day was dictated largely by food. There was freshly baked bread every morning, the smell tempting her out of bed earlier than at Privet Drive, and long, lazy breakfasts would follow, Mr Bones reading the *Hogsmeade Herald* while Susan and Victoria grazed on cereal, croissants, toast and fruit. Dinner, on the other hand, was always something special: the family ate by candlelight late in the evening, like they did on the continent, and they dressed up for the occasion.

It was a stark contrast to the Muggle world, where the Dursleys would generally eat in front of the television; no wireless was permitted during dinner at the Workshop, and they would talk for hours before being sent to bed.

Occasionally a new customer would appear on the roof to commission Mr Bones’ services, but he otherwise appeared to live a life of leisure, working when it suited him, which was rarely more than a few hours a day. The rest of his time was spent either in the gardens or reading. Victoria had come to eagerly anticipate those times when he would look up from a book and speak enthusiastically on some obscure topic.

She and Susan spent most of their time outdoors, where their Herbology skills were put to good use in helping Mr Bones take care of the vegetables. He showed them how to carve bamboo into wind chimes that would ward off pests, and where to plant sunflowers around the gardens so as to correctly spread the sun around. Though Susan frequently grumbled about having to spend her holiday working, Victoria looked forward to these impromptu lessons, marveling at the daily, simple magic of wizarding life. It didn’t hurt that the fruits of their labour were quite delicious: fat, sharp raspberries, earthy beetroot, sweet plums and juicy apricots, all of them put to great use by Topsy in salads and pies.

Dumbledore would often join them in the gardens, swatting his little paws at insects and rubbing between their legs as they were trying to pick tomatoes. It was clear that he much preferred the Workshop to Privet Drive, and he had taken to disappearing for long stretches of time, no doubt hunting mice in the surrounding wilds. Victoria wasn’t worried; there weren’t any cars here, and if he was gone for too long she could always call him back.

When they weren’t helping with the vegetables, the girls liked to explore, returning home each afternoon with flowers in their hair and scratches on their legs from the wild undergrowth. Victoria was developing a tan from all the time under the sun, and Susan’s normally clear skin was coming out in freckles. Further and further they ventured, beyond the vegetable patches, past the fields where cows grazed and into the woods.

It didn’t take long before they encountered the edge of the Boneses’ land. A low stone wall cut through the woods where the property ended, its surface a jigsaw of irregularly shaped rocks. Mr
Bones had made them promise not to cross into the Muggle world, so they followed the path running alongside the wall, which led them in a giant semi-circle that would eventually take them back to the river.

“They put this in over the summer,” Susan explained as they walked, “we used to have a few wooden posts marking the boundary, but Dad said we had to get something more secure.”

“Because I was visiting?” Victoria asked, remembering what Mr Bones had said to Petunia. She felt rather guilty about the whole thing—building a wall around their land couldn’t have been cheap. “Really, everyone’s making such a fuss over nothing.”

“They’re probably just worried about something like those Death Eaters happening again.”

Victoria frowned. “What do you mean?”

She had read about the Death Eaters, of course: Voldemort’s followers, feared by all, their true identities unknown; they had been rounded up and imprisoned in Azkaban after Voldemort’s fall. But what did they have to do with her?

“But surely you know?” Susan said, her face surprised, “it was all over the news!”

“Muggle-raised, remember?”

“Right. Well, it was years ago now. I must have been, like, seven, so I don’t remember it all that well. But there was this big scandal about a group of Death Eaters going after... well, you.”

A chill went down Victoria’s spine. Why had no one told her?

“I assumed you knew,” Susan continued, “your photo was in the paper, I remember Dad showing it to me. Everyone thought the Death Eaters were all locked up, you see. It was a big surprise that there were still some of them out there... people weren’t happy. I think that’s why the old Minister resigned... Millicent someone or the other. Dad didn’t let new customers come to the house for ages.”

Susan seemed unaware that she was turning Victoria’s world upside down. She’d come to view her time at the Dursleys as a kind of exile from the wizarding world, one which had come to an end with her Hogwarts letter. But now it appeared that the exile had been one-way: while Victoria had lived in ignorance of the magical world, the magical world had not been ignorant of her. Who knew what dark forces might lurk on Magnolia Crescent, just one street away from Privet Drive?

She looked nervously at the wall. It didn’t look very sturdy. “How does it work? The wall, I mean.”

Susan shrugged. “I’m not sure. There’s spells on every stone, but I think different stones have different spells. I watched the charm-mason put it down; it took him weeks to finish.”

“I wish I could have watched too,” Victoria said. Looking at the stones now, there was no sign at all that they were enchanted. She wondered what spells they had used. “Maybe one day I can give it a go myself.”

It rained that afternoon, a downpour that came out of nowhere, and the girls had to run back to the house, completely soaked by the time they returned. Such sudden changes in the weather were an intrinsic risk of the British summer, but there was still plenty to do while they were stuck inside. They were steadily making their way through the board games in the den, and Victoria could spend whole days looking through the jumbled shelves of the library. She never quite knew what she
might find, hidden between books on cleaning charms and Herbology, and there were some titles in there which Mr Bones would surely have confiscated had he realised she’d found them.

Of particular note was a book on jinxes which she and Susan had smuggled out of the library and into Victoria’s bedroom, where they concealed it inside her underwear drawer. They dared only to read it at night, when Susan would sneak into Victoria’s room and they huddled beneath her sheets with a fairy lamp, giddy with the excitement of forbidden knowledge. They learnt about the Biting Jinx, which made an object bite anyone who touched it, the Jelly-Legs Jinx, used to turn the target’s legs wobbly, and the Crybaby Jinx, whose victim would weep uncontrollably.

When they weren’t playing, Susan was completing her summer homework. Unfortunately Victoria had finished hers within a week of returning to Privet Drive, which now left her with a substantial amount of time alone. In addition to reading, she filled this time by writing long letters to Daphne, Tracey and Draco, handing the envelopes to Mr Bones to be taken to the Owl Office in Ely.

Daphne always responded promptly, her letters even longer than Victoria’s own and written upon perfumed parchment. Victoria couldn’t help but envy her elegant script, and she spent many hours practising with her quill, trying to emulate the flowing, rounded lines. The result was perhaps less spindly than before, but was still far from beautiful.

Tracey’s responses were rather more perfunctory, though Victoria didn’t hold this against her. Tracey was not the type to write long letters. She made up for it by always enclosing a photograph, each one depicting the petite brunette with her two older brothers, who were apparently teaching her how to fly properly.

Draco didn’t respond.

“I thought he was your friend?” Susan asked as Victoria listed the pros and cons of sending him another letter. “Why wouldn’t he write?”

Victoria snorted. “He’s a boy.”

Eventually, a week after she had written to him, she received a reply—not from Draco, but from Narcissa Malfoy, his mother. She thanked Victoria for her kind letter and apologised profusely for Draco’s rudeness in not responding, bemoaning the manners of young men everywhere.

“Regretfully, like so many young wizards, and indeed some older wizards who should know better, Draco is not epistolarily inclined.”

It was not just her friends sending her letters. As the second week of August came to a close, a pair of owls arrived bearing envelopes sealed with the Hogwarts crest. Contained within were their school lists for second year, and that could only mean one thing: a trip to Diagon Alley.

After receiving an urgent request from a customer, Mr Bones was unable to take them shopping. It was decided that Evelyn would accompany them instead, and she arrived the next morning by Floo, this time without Madeleine. Victoria had never travelled by Floo before, and it was with some trepidation that she threw a handful of green powder into the fireplace, shouting “Diagon Alley!” before stepping into the flames.

It was not a pleasant way to travel. Her stomach lurched as she plummeted downwards, as if dropped through a trapdoor—she was spinning around and around, fireplaces whooshing past so quickly that she could barely glimpse the rooms beyond, the roaring green flames obscuring much of her vision—and then the spinning began to diminish, the chain of fireplaces slowing like a slot machine losing momentum, and Diagon Alley crept into view. She stepped forward quickly, not wanting to miss her stop, and emerged into the beating heart of wizarding Britain.
The crooked street was absolutely swarming with people, not just witches and wizards but goblins, ghouls and hags as well. There were even a couple of ghosts floating out of a shop without a door, their translucent forms barely visible in the summer sun, each of them carrying an ethereal shopping bag. Busiest of all was the courtyard into which Victoria had exited. Located at the west end of the alley, it was lined on three sides with tall fireplaces, with its centre occupied by various stalls selling street food and Floo powder. One stall in particular was doing a roaring trade, a large blackboard declaring:

**BRAND NEW! NO-SPIN FLOO POWDER, S2 PER PINCH!**

Victoria rather wished she’d had a handful of that when she’d left the Workshop.

Evelyn and Susan soon emerged from the fireplace behind her, and the three of them pushed their way through the crowd towards Gringotts Bank, its grand, classical construction sticking out amid the Elizabethan timber-framed shops. There were long queues for the carts down into the vaults, and Evelyn tapped her foot impatiently as they waited in line.

When their turn came, a goblin named Snaggletooth took them into the tunnels below. They visited the Bones vault first, and Victoria was surprised to see that it contained perhaps half as much gold as the Potter vault—but when she thought about it, she had rarely seen Mr Bones purchase anything. Aside from Susan’s Hogwarts supplies, and of course the new wall around the property, she imagined that he rarely had need to dip into his vault, with most routine expenses being funded by his work.

They visited her own vault next. Susan didn’t seem surprised when she saw the mountains of gold and silver, and Victoria was reminded of what Mr Lupin had said about the Potters being a well-known family. Apparently that included their wealth. She counted out ninety galleons, bearing in mind that she already had a trunk, wand and so on, but Evelyn stopped her when she turned to leave.

“Darling, you’re going to need much more than that.”

She ended up leaving with one hundred and twenty-five galleons, wondering what on earth she would be buying that cost so much.

Shopping with Evelyn was an experience. Everyone seemed to have come to Diagon Alley with the same idea, no doubt also having received their Hogwarts letters, but Evelyn had little time for the long queues in every shop.

“You, boy!” she called as they entered the chaos of *Flourish & Blotts*, addressing a spotty teenager who was arranging books at the front table. She thrust the Hogwarts book list at him. “We need two sets of these books!”

The boy took the list by reflex, and that was his first mistake. “I’m a bit busy, Miss. The Hogwarts’ team will be happy to help you, though.” He pointed to a corner of the shop marked *HOGWARTS*. It was crammed with waiting families, the line snaking around display tables, a harassed witch attempting to serve as many of them as she could.

“Nonsense!” Evelyn declared, and she grasped the name badge on the front of his robes, as if to get a better look at it. “Are you not an Assistant, Robert? Assist me.”
He proceeded to lead them around the shop to locate their books, skipping queues where necessary. Each time that they found a book he would attempt to escape—“I really should get back to work!”—but Evelyn would always insist that they find “just one more”. It was left to Susan to apologise for her mother, muttering “sorry” with each fresh demand, but to Evelyn’s credit she slipped the boy a couple of sickles when they were finished. By the time that they left Flourish and Blotts with their books, which included the entire collected works of Gilderoy Lockhart, the queue in the Hogwarts section had barely moved.

It occurred to Victoria that Evelyn and Pansy would probably get on very well with each other. She was about to say as much to Susan, but thought better of it.

Next on the itinerary was Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions. Evelyn moved between shops with a determined stride, parting the crowds by force of will alone, and Susan and Victoria trotted along in her wake, unable to do more than gaze longingly into the windows of the stores they passed. If it existed, Diagon Alley sold it, from racing brooms to jewellery to garden plants. Susan was particularly taken with a display in Trevor’s Toys: a group of animated teddy bears were having a picnic, with one of the teddies pouring tea for the others.

“Hurry along!” Evelyn called when she noticed Susan slowing to watch, “you’re too old for that now, dear.”

Susan blushed. “I was only looking.”

It wasn’t just goods on offer, with plenty of offices wedged between the colourful shops. Some, like Pyre’s Dirigible Cruises, advertised services which would have been broadly familiar to Muggles, but others were quite unusual, with signs like Gamble & Wagner: Investment Diviners and Uberrimae Fidei: Bonders-at-Law. Here and there they would pass empty buildings with “TO LET” signs hanging outside. One such building was Sickleland, a large shop which looked to have been recently boarded up, and a sheaf of parchment was nailed to its door:

MINISTRY OF MAGIC

MISUSE OF MUGGLE ARTIFACTS OFFICE

MUGGLE ROBES COMPANY LIMITED

DISSOLVED WITH IMMEDIATE EFFECT

(MUGGLE PROTECTION ORDER 034 MUG)

Victoria pointed the notice out to Susan. “Looks like Ron’s dad has been busy.”

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” Evelyn commented, “I purchased one of those Muggle robes, back when they first opened. Came out of the Floo looking like a chimney sweep! I had your father take a look at it—not even a trace of a Repelling Charm in the fabric, can you believe it?”

They arrived at Madam Malkin’s to find it busier than the year before, but once more they commandeered an assistant who led them into a side room to take their measurements. While they hadn’t grown so much that they needed new cloaks or outer-robes, a full set of new inner-robes
were required.

“They’ll want new summer robes too, with a bit of extra room,” Evelyn said, “the way that school feeds them, they’ll have grown even more by the time May comes around… hopefully upwards, not outwards.”

The assistant tittered.

“Mum!” Susan whined. Her protests were ignored.

Their school robes were just the start of their robe shopping. Armed with their measurements, Evelyn set the girls loose on the store with the goal of expanding Victoria’s wardrobe. They left with several bags of casual inner-ropes and a fashionable cloak, all of them vetted by Evelyn.

If Victoria thought that she now possessed enough clothes, she was to be proven mistaken. After Madam Malkin’s they visited the more expensive Twilfitt and Tatting, where she purchased a selection of dress robes. From shop to shop they went, buying robes and shoes, Victoria’s purse rapidly emptying of galleons. They even stopped off at a jewellers, where a qualified mediwitch pierced their ears.

The last of the clothes shops was Gladrags, the closest thing Diagon Alley had to a department store. To Victoria and Susan’s mortification, Evelyn marched them straight to the underwear section, a forest of frills, ruffles and lace. Victoria kept her gaze firmly on the polished marble floor as Evelyn led them around the displays, talking loudly about cups and bands and straps; she could almost feel the eyes of the other customers on them, the line of tills just one aisle away.

Eventually they tracked down an assistant, who measured them up with a rather invasive, animated tape. The whole affair was extremely embarrassing—not least when, tired by the girls’ constant use of euphemisms, Evelyn threw up her hands and declared, “Breasts, girls, breasts! Half the population have them, no need to act so coy!” Her outburst drew many curious looks, including from several boys. Victoria wondered if there was a spell to make the ground swallow you whole.

They left Gladrags with their purses lighter still. Victoria was beginning to resemble a moving pile of bags more than a person, and Evelyn had to call Topsy to take them away, the small house-elf barely visible underneath the day’s purchases.

It was mid-morning by this point and, having grown used to elevenses, Victoria’s stomach was beginning to grumble. Evelyn, however, was determined to press on. They purchased parchment and ink from Scribbulus Stationery, a set of new Potions’ ingredients from Slug and Jiggers’ Apothecary, and finally visited The Magical Menagerie for cat food.

Shopping complete, Evelyn declared it time for lunch. They retreated to La Rose de Rose, a small French café on the quieter, east side of the alley, where the shops gave way to brick townhouses and restaurants. Susan ordered a croque monsieur, oozing with béchamel sauce and melted cheese, and Victoria had an omelette.

“Well, girls, it’s been quite the productive morning,” Evelyn said as their food arrived. “I hope you’re not too exhausted after all that shopping, because we’ve still got a long afternoon ahead of us.”

“We do?” Victoria asked, “we’ve already got everything on the list, haven’t we?” As much as she loved getting new robes, she wasn’t sure if she could face much more of it.

A ghost of a smile crossed Evelyn’s face. “We’ve finished shopping, yes. But there is still the
matter of your birthday.”

“My birthday? But that was weeks ago.”

Susan was grinning. “But you didn’t get to have a proper birthday party! So I asked Dad and—well, you’ll see.”

A thrill of excitement ran down Victoria’s spine; she’d never had a birthday party before. “See what? Where are we going?”

“Not telling!” Susan said around a mouthful of sandwich, “it’s a surprise!”

“Manners, Susan,” Evelyn said chidingly, but Victoria was far too curious to care about propriety.

“No fair!” she declared, “you can’t say there’s a secret then not tell me what it is!”

She whined and she cajoled, but Susan refused to break her silence. Victoria was left to fidget in her seat as she forced herself to finish her omelette, far too excited to eat. She leapt to her feet the very moment that Evelyn took the last bite of her salad.

“Let’s go!”

It didn’t take long to get there. They went further east, the crowds rapidly thinning as they entered a residential area of the alley. Their destination lay at the far end, where the cobblestone street broadened into a wide square full of fountains. Georgian townhouses lined the square, but the far side was dominated by what looked like a Roman temple. Colourful posters hung from the columns.

“Oh my god!” Susan squealed, pointing at one of them. “That’s the one we’re going to see!”

Gilderoy Lockhart presents…

BREAK WITH A BANSHEE

An extremely handsome blond wizard dominated the poster. His blue eyes sparkled with warmth, his hair was perfectly windswept, and he held his wand aloft as if about to duel. Next in precedence was a glamorous blonde witch with a rather buxom figure, and behind the two stars was a crowd of smaller faces.

Victoria’s smile now matched Susan’s own. “A play? That’s the secret?”

“It is,” Evelyn confirmed, and Victoria engulfed Susan in a hug.

“Oh, thank you!”

A further surprise was waiting at the steps to the theatre. Everyone was there: Daphne, even prettier than Victoria remembered, her golden hair shimmering in the sun; Tracey, the only member of the group shorter than Victoria, wearing a skirt and blouse rather than robes; Millicent, looking distinctly uncomfortable in a summer dress robe; and Pansy, who was of course turned out perfectly, her shoes colour-coordinated with her headband.
“Sorry, we had to invite her,” Susan muttered as Victoria waved eagerly to the Slytherin girls. “It would’ve been rude not to.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Victoria said. She was too happy to care about her argument with Pansy, which seemed so long ago now. “After all, she is one of us, even if things are a bit awkward.”

The girls greeted each other with hugs and laughter, a dozen conversations overlapping as they all tried to catch up simultaneously.

“Vicky, you’re so tanned!”

“I love that robe—”

“—where’d you end up going—”

“—your arms! Can tell you’ve been flying—”

“— visit France?”

“—god, don’t mention brooms to me—”

“—look, Daphne’s almost as tall as Millie now!”

“LADIES!”

The conversation came to an abrupt halt; they all turned to look innocently at Evelyn.

“The play starts in twenty minutes.”

A red carpet welcomed them inside the foyer of the theatre. The place was unsurprisingly packed, with lines winding this way and that as guests queued for drinks and programmes. As the girls waited in line for the box office, Susan provided them with a running commentary on the history of the play.

“I can’t believe we’re going to see Lockhart himself in action,” she was saying, “it’s gonna completely change how they make plays, just you see.”

“He’s playing himself?” Victoria asked, “how’s he going to teach Defence if he’s acting in a play every day?”

“But that’s just it!” Susan said, “it’s not him, it’s his memories!”

“What’s so special about that?” Pansy asked, “I’ve seen it dozens of times.”

Susan shook her head. “Sure, for scenery and stuff like that, but not a person mixed in with the other actors—that’s completely new.”

They collected their tickets, which came with a golden mask each, and were directed to Chamber Two.

“This is where I leave you,” Evelyn said at the rope separating the foyer from the chambers, “I’ll see you outside in a few hours.”

Chamber Two was not what Victoria had been expecting. It was much smaller than a Muggle theatre, seating not more than thirty, and the stage was at the centre of the room, surrounded on all sides by ascending circles of tiered seating. In front of each seat was an empty stone basin
connected to a system of troughs. The others didn’t seem surprised by the arrangement, and Victoria tried to look like she too understood what was happening. They took their seats in the third row and continued talking in hushed voices as other guests filtered in.

“Make sure you’re in a comfortable position,” Susan said, leaning over so the other girls couldn’t hear, “if you don’t, you’ll have an awful cramp when you come out.”

Her words only confused Victoria more. “Come out? Out of where?”

But Susan didn’t have time to answer. The lights dimmed. The crowd fell silent and moved to cover their eyes with their golden masks; Victoria hurried to follow suit. Then they were clapping: the cast was filing onto the stage, moving to stand in a ring facing the audience, a basin in front of each actor. They were the only ones not wearing masks. As the audience applauded, the sound of running water could be heard, and the troughs and basins filled with a silvery liquid.

Then, quite abruptly, everyone leaned forward and submerged their faces into the basins. Victoria blinked, suddenly alone in a room of people with their heads underwater. A surreal moment passed in silence. None of them showed any sign of surfacing.

She looked into the basin, peering down into the water, and through the silvery mists she could make out a scene, as if looking down on it from a great height: it was a children’s playground, just like the one in Little Whinging, with swings, a roundabout and a see-saw, but there were no children playing. It was raining heavily, and the playground was swarming with Muggle policemen, their distinctive yellow tape cutting the play area off from the park around it. Surrounding the scene was a small crowd of people wearing golden masks.

Somehow, the play happening inside the water! Victoria sighed, took a deep breath, and plunged her face in.

The play began.

* * *

The moment Victoria’s nose touched the water, the world changed. It was like gravity had shifted, and the scene at the bottom of the basin was the new down —her stomach lurch ed, a feeling not unlike stepping into the Floo, and she felt herself tipping forward into the water. For the second time that day she was falling, this time through a dark void, but she didn’t have time to scream—the children’s playground rapidly approached, and she landed with a wet thud, her feet hitting the soft grass without any pain.

She looked up in disbelief. There was no sign of the theatre above them; the sky was dark and overcast, little droplets of rain landing on her face. She shivered slightly—it really felt like she was outside, and her robes were actually getting slightly wet.

“There you are,” Susan said. She had clearly hung back to wait for Victoria, as the rest of the audience had already moved forward to gather around the yellow tape. “I was wondering where you’d gone!”

“What’s—”

“Shh!” Susan hissed, “come on, it’s starting!”
They hurried forward and squeezed into a gap in the audience.

“Coming through!” came a voice, and a tall, dark-haired man in a trenchcoat approached the scene. He barged a couple of audience members out the way, ducked under the yellow tape and made his way towards the policemen at the centre of the playground.

“Detective Blaggard!” said one of the policemen. He had a strong Irish accent. “Thank goodness yer here! Just like the last one, it is.”

The detective looked down and shook his head. “Looks like we’ve got a serial killer, son. The public will have to be told.”

Victoria followed his gaze and gasped. There, at the base of the swings, was a body. It was obviously dead, the skin pale and mottled, and there was blood matted around the ears. It looked so real that for a moment she thought she might lose her lunch.

She nudged Susan. “This is fake, right?” she whispered.

Susan nodded, looking a little pale herself, before waving her hand at the yellow tape. It went right through, the tape parting like smoke only to reform the moment her hand had passed out the other side.

The police officers continued to discuss the body, making special note of the blood around the ears. As they started to take samples, another figure sidled onto the scene, lingering in the corner of the playground. This character was clearly a wizard, wearing breeches and a long over-robe buttoned at the waist. He had a camera hanging around his neck and was carrying a quill and parchment.

The audience shifted, most of them moving closer to the newcomer, though a few oddballs stayed behind to continue listening to the policemen. One or two people had even decided to ignore the scene entirely and were wandering off into the nearby town.

Victoria and Susan followed the crowd.

“Well, well,” the wizard said, apparently to thin air, “fancy seeing you here, Auror Quinn.”

A woman shimmered into existence next to the wizard. A murmur of excitement ran through the masked audience: it was the blonde woman from the poster, who was somehow even more beautiful in person. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that her white robe had turned semi-transparent in the rain, or the way it clung to her figure rather suggestively.

“O’Connor,” the witch said, and like the rest of the cast she spoke with an Irish accent, “as usual, you seem to be butting your nose into Auror business.”

“Come now, Ciara, is that any way to greet an old friend?”

Quinn snorted. “The Daily Prophet is no friend of mine. You still work for them, don’t you?”

“I work for myself,” the wizard replied. “Go where I want, cover the stories I want.”

“Stories like murder?”

“There’s always a good galleon in murder, that’s for sure,” he said, before nodding towards the crime scene, “what d’you reckon, rogue banshee?”

Auror Quinn looked pointedly at his poised quill. “I don’t do quotes.”
O’Connor raised an eyebrow. “We’re in a children’s playground, the victim’s bleeding from the ears, and there’s a forest nearby. I’m telling you, it’s a banshee for sure.”

“That remains to be seen.”

Detective Blaggard approached.

“The Muggle’s coming,” O’Connor said, “how can he see us? Didn’t you put a Repelling Charm up?”

Quinn sighed. “I was invisible,” she said, “quick, wands away.”

“Good evening!” the detective called, “don’t think I’ve seen you round these parts before.” He nodded to O’Connor’s camera. “Journalist, are you?”

“That’s right,” O’Connor replied, “from London.”

“Well, imagine that,” the detective said, “who’d have thought they’d be interested in little Bandon all the way in London. What are you, BBC?”

O’Connor shared a look with Quinn. “Something like that,” she said, “perhaps you’d like to give us a comment, officer.”

The detective rubbed his chin. “It’s a funny one. Downright peculiar in fact, the doctors can’t figure out how it is they’re dying. The public need to take care.” He paused. “I’d be happy to do an interview, if you want. Live on air, like.”

“Sorry, we work for a newspaper,” O’Connor said. “But thank you for the comment.”

The detective seemed to lose interest after that. He warned them not to interfere with the investigation and walked back to the crime scene.

“What an odd man,” Quinn said, “but then, he is a Muggle.”

“Oh, it’s not just Muggles. You see it all the time,” O’Connor remarked. “Law enforcement do love their five minutes of fame.”

Quinn glared at him.

“So, how do you fancy your chances against the banshee?” he continued, “they’re not to be taken lightly, I hear.”

“Don’t you worry about me,” Quinn said, “I can handle myself. I’ll be back in Dublin tomorrow with a banshee’s head.”

O’Connor smirked. “Not if I get there first, you won’t.”

The scene ended and the characters split up. The audience was then faced with a choice: would they follow the Auror, the journalist, or the detective? Pansy and Daphne went after the Auror and Victoria made to follow, but Susan pulled on her arm, holding her back.

“Not the Auror! Let’s follow the Muggle.”

“What?” Victoria asked, “why?” He was the least popular of the cast, with most of the audience following the wizards.
Susan looked around guiltily. “There was an article in *Witch Weekly*,” she whispered, “you get to see Lockhart first if you follow the Muggle.”

“Oh, all right.”

They had to run to catch up with the detective, who was heading into the cobbled streets of the small Irish town. Dated cars drove past, making it clear that the story was set at least a decade ago, and the detective made his way back to his house, where he started to make a cup of tea.

By this point, only a few very dedicated audience members remained, the others having wandered off when they realised the Muggle wasn’t going to do anything exciting. But for Susan’s insider knowledge, Victoria would have joined them—watching someone make tea was not exactly the most dramatic scene.

Just as she was about to give up on the detective, a loud *bang* came from outside the house, like a car backfiring. Victoria jumped, a small shriek escaping her mouth, and the detective leapt to his feet.

A knock came at the door.

“Who’s there?” the detective called, and Victoria tried to look outside through a window, but the angle wasn’t right to see the front door.

The knocking came again. The detective moved to a chest in the corner of the room, from which he retrieved a curious object: it looked like the arm of a mannequin, only it was made of a dark metal. “I’m warning you!” the detective cried, pointing the arm like a rifle, the hand aimed at the front door, “I’m armed!”

The door burst open; the detective shouted something, and a blast of fire launched from the metal arm at the figure stepping through the doorway—a shimmering shield appeared, parting the fire, and through the flames stepped Gilderoy Lockhart. He was every bit as dashing as the poster, with perfectly coiffed blond hair, robes of lilac and a stern look on his face.

The detective dropped his firearm and fell to his knees. “Please, don’t hurt me!”

Lockhart smiled, his white teeth gleaming. “Never fear, Muggle, for I come not for you!” he declared, his voice raised as if speaking to a large audience and not a small room, “foul deeds in your charming town have reached my ears, and so I offer you my aid, such as it is.”

“Your aid?”

“In banishing the monster, of course!” Lockhart said. He moved further into the room and helped the detective up. “Come, we must venture into the darkest part of the forest, for that is where monsters are known to lurk.”

Lockhart took hold of the detective’s shoulder. “We are about to apparate, Muggle,” he said, “anyone who is touching me will be able to accompany us.”

Susan and Victoria looked at each other.

“Do you think...?” Victoria said.

Susan nodded. “Quickly!”

They rushed forward to grasp Lockhart’s ethereal robes, and just in time; the house shimmered out
of view, replaced by a dark and mysterious forest. Shafts of moonlight pierced the canopy and owls were hooting in the distance.

That was more like it.

They followed Lockhart and Blaggard through the trees, listening as Lockhart explained the existence of magic to the stunned detective. It was easy to forget that he was just a memory, talking with a real actor—their conversation flowed so smoothly that it was like Lockhart was really there.

“Stop!” Lockhart hissed, and they all froze. “I sense danger.”

“Stupefy!” called a woman’s voice, and a nimbus of red light shot through the bushes, heading straight for Lockhart—but he was already moving, somersaulting through the air with his wand, and the spell splashed against a rock.

“Who’s there?” Lockhart called, “face me like a man, coward!”

Auror Quinn stepped out of the bushes. Her robes were torn and hanging precariously off her figure, with one shoulder strap completely severed. “I am not a man,” she said, pointing her wand at Lockhart, “who are you and what are you doing in these woods?”

“I am Gilderoy Lockhart, despatched here by the Dark Force Defence League!”

Gasps came from beyond the bushes, and large number of masked audience members appeared, pushing their way through the undergrowth to get a good look at Lockhart. Pansy and Daphne were among them, but Tracey and Millicent must have been following the journalist.

Quinn lowered her wand. “Then let us work together to vanquish this foul beast.”

They ventured deeper in the forest, and it grew so dark that they could barely see where they were going, the only light coming from Lockhart’s wand. Even with the low light, it didn’t take them long to realise that the detective had vanished.

Lockhart and Quinn noticed at the same time.

“The banshee!” Quinn cried, “it took him!”

An inhuman scream erupted from all around them, high pitched and wailing, and the play’s first action sequence began. It repeated as if in a cycle: a pair of glowing eyes would appear in the darkness, and Lockhart and Quinn would shoot spells at it, causing the screaming to stop. But then, a moment later, the eyes would appear in new position and the screaming would begin anew.

Just as Quinn looked like she would fall victim to the banshee’s power, a burst of fire erupted from all around them. The screaming stopped and through the fire stepped Detective Blaggard, his ears bleeding and his firearm raised.

“Quickly!” he shouted, “back to the station!”

“You go!” Lockhart called, “I’ll hold it off!”

Once more the audience split, most staying with Lockhart while others followed Quinn and Blaggard back to the town. It was at this point that Susan and Victoria parted ways: Susan wanted to stay with Lockhart, but Victoria was determined to follow the Auror this time.

She was glad she did, because the Auror’s storyline turned out to be quite dramatic. The detective
took her to the police station, where the two of them recuperated over some whiskey.

“That banshee, eh,” Blaggard said, “she’s got quite a pair of lungs on her.”

Victoria realised it at the same time as Quinn did.

“I don’t think we ever said anything about a banshee.”

Blaggard smiled, his mouth stretching open wider than was humanly possible, with two rows of serrated teeth growing from his gums. His skin turned a pale green and his features shifted to become more feminine, while his dark hair grew and grew until it reached the floor.

“Oh, Blaggard, how much did you know?”

Quinn had no chance. She dived for her wand, but the banshee was ready, and with a swing of Blaggard’s firearm, the scene faded to black.

After that, the play built rapidly to its climax. Quinn awoke in a prison cell, her wand out of reach, but after a few failed escape attempts she was rescued by Lockhart and O’Connor, who was now missing an ear. The journalist’s story line had apparently focused on unearthing the banshee’s plan.

“Didn’t you think it was strange that Blaggard was so keen for an interview?” O’Connor explained, “it’s the wireless she’s after. She wants to appear on air, posing as the detective, and once she’s live she’s going to scream into the microphone.”

“Merlin’s beard,” Quinn said, “she’ll kill thousands!”

Lockhart shook his head. “Millions.”

They had to obliviate the police of their memories (the spell was performed by Lockhart, who declared it one of his specialties) before converging on the nearby radio tower for the final confrontation. The trio was forced to fight their way to the top after discovering that the tower had been occupied by a clan of goblins in league with the banshee. Tragically, O’Connor fell to an enchanted throwing axe, jumping in front of it to save Auror Quinn from certain death.

When they reached the summit of the tower, Lockhart and Quinn split up to find a way to interrupt the broadcast. Once more Victoria followed Auror Quinn, who made quick work of the tower’s electronics with Grindelwald’s Jinx. It was then that the screaming began—the banshee had come to the tower. Quinn rushed towards the sound to find Lockhart already confronting the banshee on the balcony.

“Gilderoy!” the banshee cried, “you won’t get away with this!”

“Get away with what?” Lockhart said, “enough of your nonsense, beast! Begone!”

And with a thrust of his wand, the banshee was launched back through the air, flying over the edge of the balcony and plummeting off the side of the tower.

Lockhart peered over the railing and smirked. “Now you feel the gravity of your crimes.”

Of course, he got the girl in the end. The play ended with Lockhart and Quinn kissing atop the tower, lit by the orange glow of a glorious sunrise. Then the view faded, and suddenly Victoria was back in her seat in the theatre, her bum completely numb.

The cast took their bow to thunderous applause, with a particularly loud cheer for the actor playing
“That was amazing,” Susan said, grinning from ear to ear and clapping enthusiastically, “don’t you think?”

Victoria nodded. The Muggle world didn’t have anything like a wizarding play. “It was so real!” she said, “and the best part is you could see it again and follow different people. It’d be like seeing a whole different play! I bet there’s all sorts of hidden scenes going on, if you follow the right people.”

“And to think—it’s all true!” Susan cried, “all that actually happened!”

“Well,” Victoria said, thinking back to Detective Blaggard’s firearm, or the way Lockhart had basically told the audience to apparate with him, “most of it, at least.”

* * *

That night, after everyone had gone to bed, Victoria crept across the hallway to Susan’s bedroom. She tapped lightly on the door, using the secret rhythm which she and Susan had developed, and a moment later the door swung open.

Susan looked nervously down the hall. “Quick!” she hissed, ushering Victoria inside and closing the door behind them. Her room was cast in shadow, lit only by moonlight and a couple of candles, and the curtain to the balcony fluttered in the gentle summer breeze. There was rather more clutter here than in Victoria’s spartan room: framed photographs hung from the walls, and every free surface was occupied by the accumulated bric-a-brac of Susan’s childhood—pressed flowers in glass jars, curiously shaped seashells retrieved from the beach, and semi-precious stones used as paperweights. Her ongoing battle against summer homework was also in evidence, with spell books and stationery spread across the floor.

It was, in Victoria’s opinion, exactly what a witch’s bedroom should look like.

Susan pointed her to a pile of cushions located just inside the balcony door. Amidst the cushions was a collection of chocolates, sweets, and some oranges.

“Brilliant,” Victoria said, her voice low but not quite a whisper. She settled down on the cushions. “How’d you get all this?”

“Topsy helped,” Susan replied. She opened a Chocolate Frog. “Technically she has to tell Dad, but only if he asks.”

“Very sneaky. I’m guessing the fruit was her idea,” Victoria said. She took an Acid Pop and a Fizzing Whizbee. “I wonder what happens if you have the two together…?”

“Dare you to try.”

Giggling followed as Victoria coughed and spluttered her way through the intensely sour combination. She followed it up with a Chocolate Frog, needing something rather more comforting, and then it was Susan’s turn to brave the acidic sweets. Soon enough the two of them had eaten enough sugar to last a week. They rolled onto their backs and blew bubbles of gum up at the ceiling, seeing who could make a bigger pop.
“I can’t stop thinking about the play,” Victoria said after blowing a particularly large bubble, “just imagine all the things you could do. Like, why limit it to a few main characters? You could have a huge cast, all of them with their own story lines…”

“I guess that’s why they don’t do it,” Susan said, “with so many characters, you’d have to go back and see the play again to get the full story. Sure, we could go back and see Banshee again if we wanted, but we don’t need to. So you’re happy either way.”

“Fair,” Victoria acknowledged, “but maybe if you made it less about the story… no talking, just things to watch. That way it doesn’t matter if you only see bits of it.”

“Like a circus?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Susan frowned. “But then… why not just go to the circus?”

Victoria threw a cushion at her. “Stop poking holes,” she said. “Speaking of, I was thinking... isn’t it weird that Lockhart went to the Muggle detective’s house first? You never find out why he did that. I don’t know about you, but ‘let’s pick up a Muggle’ wouldn’t be my first thought if I was going after a banshee.”

“Well, there must have been a reason,” Susan said, “it happened, after all. Maybe he secretly suspected Blaggard from the start.” She sighed. “He’s very handsome, isn’t he?”

A memory of Lockhart came to Victoria’s mind; he was parting a wall of fire, his robes billowing out behind him. “He’s not bad, I guess.”

“Not bad?” Susan gasped, “who counts as good, then?”

Victoria lowered her voice to a whisper. “Cedric Diggory?”

Cedric Diggory was a Hufflepuff boy several years their senior. He had dark hair, grey eyes, and was said to be very handy with his wand. Between that and his position as Hufflepuff Seeker, he was widely considered one of the most fanciable boys in the school.

“Ooh,” Susan said, “good answer.” She paused, then hesitantly said, “Draco looks a bit like him, don’t you think?”

“Like Diggory?”

Susan snorted. “Like Lockhart.”

Victoria glanced at Susan out of the corner of her eye. She’d always suspected that Susan had a thing for Draco, but this was the first time that she’d come out and said it. She would need to respond carefully. “I don’t see it, myself. But I can see why you would.”

“Oh,” Susan said, and Victoria could hear the relief in her voice, “that’s good.”

She wondered how long Susan had been wanting to ask her that. “You know you can talk to me about anything, right? We’re best friends, after all. We can talk about Draco and… other stuff.”

“Other stuff?”

Victoria shrugged. “I don’t know. Stuff like your mum. You never said anything about it, back at school.”
“I know,” Susan said, “and I wanted to tell you. But… well. ‘By the way, did I mention my parents are separated?’— it’s not exactly the kind of thing you can just come out and say.”

“You seem okay with it, though,” Victoria said, “or at least, not angry. You have family dinners and stuff.”

Susan hugged a cushion. “It’s not the same,” she said. “I wish you could have seen us, before everything happened. The house wasn’t empty like it is now… I love Mum, I do, but I don’t think I’ll ever forget what she did.”

Forgive, but don’t forget. It was a familiar sentiment—hadn’t Susan told her to do exactly that, after Pansy’s betrayal?

“But your dad doesn’t mind having her around, does he?”

“He doesn’t mind anything,” Susan sighed, “that was the problem. Mum’s a Rosier, you know? I think Dad was just too… no, that’s not fair. He shouldn't have to change just because she thinks being nice is weak.”

“I think your dad’s great,” Victoria said, “he’s so clever!”

“Thanks,” Susan said, “and Mum thought that too, once. It’s not like she never liked him. But you saw her today. After a while, I guess cleverness wasn’t enough for her. Francois owns a quidditch team and a manor and can take her to all the galas and balls. Poor Dad just couldn’t compete.”

Susan rolled onto her side so that she was facing Victoria. “Enough about me! Now it’s your turn.”

“Oh no,” Victoria groaned.

“Oh yes,” Susan said with a grin, “I shared, which means you have to as well. Tell me a secret.”

She thought for a time, trying to come up with something suitable. “Well, this thing happened during my Transfiguration exam—”

“Boring!” Susan interrupted, “not something about magic. A proper secret.”

Victoria bit her lip. There was one thing, but… “You have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“So… okay,” Victoria began, “you already know I’m a metamorphmagus. And… you know what your mum was saying today in Gladrags? When I was being measured? About me being, er, lucky? So… yeah.”

Susan gasped in delight. “You didn’t!”

Victoria buried her face in a cushion; she was blushing harder than she had in her life, and she didn’t trust the darkness to properly hide her. “Maybe a little,” she said, her voice muffled by the fabric, “just to, um, keep up with Daphne.”

Needless to say, Susan thought this was a great secret. She declared herself incredibly envious before peppering Victoria with questions about her powers, asking her just how far she could push them.

The cuckoo clock down the hall chimed one o’clock.
“It’s getting late,” Susan said with a yawn, “sleep time?”

“Okay.”

Susan cleared away the remains of their midnight feast while Victoria went to the bathroom to re-brush her teeth—she hated going to bed without feeling minty fresh. Unfortunately, she lost all of her sleepiness in the process. She slipped into Susan’s bed, which was easily big enough for both of them, and stared at the ceiling.

“I can’t sleep,” she declared after what felt like an hour.

Susan didn’t even open her eyes. “It’s been five minutes.”

She waited some more.

“Susan?” she whispered, “are you awake? I still can’t sleep.”

A heavy sigh came from the direction of Susan’s pillows. “I think I have something. Hang on.”

Susan got out of bed and padded across the room to a chest of drawers. It took her a lot of rummaging to find whatever she was looking for.

“Aha! Got it.”

She appeared to be holding a long, thin stick, like a quill without the feathers. She placed the end over the flame of a candle and held it there for a moment—the end glowed crimson as it caught light, but she immediately withdrew the stick and blew it out in a puff of smoke. She then walked around the room while waving the stick above her head. The smouldering end continued to give out smoke, which drifted in swirls created by Susan’s movements and the breeze from the balcony. With the smoke came a beautiful fragrance, heady and rich in jasmine and sandalwood.

Victoria immediately felt her eyelids begin to droop. “Wow,” she said, “what is in that thing?”

Susan placed the incense into a long wooden box with holes in the top, through which the smoke continued to rise. “Sleeping Charm. Feel better?”

“Yup,” Victoria said and she let out a little giggle. She couldn’t help it—she was feeling a bit light-headed. She rolled onto her side. “G’nite, Susan.”

“Good night, Victoria.”
The end of summer came more quickly than Victoria was expecting. As enjoyable as the holiday had been, she could barely contain her excitement to return to school: she had read all of her textbooks several times, planned her outfit for the Hogwarts Express, and hatched multiple schemes for the use of her pass to the Restricted Section.

Gilderoy Lockhart’s books had proven particularly interesting. They were written more like novels than textbooks, but there were still plenty of references to spells within them, often used in quite inventive ways. Victoria had a lot of fun searching through the Bones library to locate further information in more academic tomes, and Mr Bones was quite horrified when he saw her making notes in the margin of Voyages with Vampires, an old copy of The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5 propped up next to her.

For her part, Susan did not share Victoria’s enthusiasm for the end of summer. As September drew inexorably closer, she began to exude the desperate energy of a condemned prisoner, with each activity gaining new significance by virtue of the words “one last time”. While Victoria had never shared her peers’ aversion to schooling, for the first time she understood it: after such an idyllic summer, it was easy to see how wizards could view the study of magic as a chore rather than a delight. The spells used in daily wizarding life were generally simple, and a practically-minded witch might conclude that Hogwarts provided a somewhat excessive education. Why waste your time learning advanced magic, when you could spend your days gardening, eating, and reading Gilderoy Lockhart’s latest book?

It was no wonder that only half of all invitations to Hogwarts were accepted; according to Mr Bones, the other half chose homeschooling instead.

When the first of September arrived, Victoria had rather more difficulty packing than the previous year. Between all of her new clothes, two years’ worth of books, plus equipment like her cauldron and telescope, even her magically expanded trunk was struggling to accommodate everything. But she managed in the end, and it was with a much heavier trunk in tow that she, Dumbledore, Susan and Mr Bones left the Workshop.

She had wondered if they might fly to King’s Cross, but apparently the Ministry took a dim view of hundreds of wizards descending by broom on a Muggle train station. Instead they took the Floo to Diagon Alley, where they crossed into the Muggle world and made their way to Leicester Square Underground Station.

The stairs down into the station were packed. It was rush hour on a Tuesday morning, and they had to push their way through the scrum of suit-clad Muggles, their heavy trunks thudding on each stair. Fortunately, their Muggle-Repelling Charms also served to provide a small bubble of free space around them.
“This way, girls!” Mr Bones called as they reached the bottom of the stairs. He led them towards the electronic gates and drew his wand. “Alohomora!” The gates opened and they made their way through, their trunks having to be levitated over the top.

Victoria looked around, surprised by Mr Bones performing magic so openly. “Won’t the Muggles see? They have cameras, you know, and it’s not like we’re invisible.”

But the Muggles were rushing past them, oblivious to the magic being performed in their midst.

“Even without the Muggle-Repelling Charm, I doubt they’d notice,” Mr Bones said, “not very observant, these Muggles. But you needn’t worry… the charm will take care of any unusually curious Muggle looking at us through one of their cine-graphs.”

The Tube was cramped and extremely hot, making Victoria wish that she had thought to wear her charm bracelet. Even though it was just four stops to King’s Cross Station, her Muggle dress was sticking to her skin by the time they escaped the train into the cooler air of the station. A crowd was gathered there in front of the departures board, which refreshed itself with the clack-clack of moving tiles just as Victoria, Susan and Mr Bones approached.

**Platform 5 - Edinburgh**

**Platform 8 1/2 - Hogwarts Express**

**Platform 9 - Manchester Piccadilly**

**Platform 9 3/4 - Tromsø**

Even though the Hogwarts Express was departing from a different platform to the year before, the portal onto the platform was exactly the same. They walked through the barrier to the familiar chaos of five hundred students saying their farewells, a mess of trunks, pets and tearful mothers. The scarlet train was ready to depart, clouds of steam already gathering around the locomotive.

“Susan!”

Hannah Abbott approached with her family in tow. Blonde and somewhat pear-shaped, she shared the Hufflepuff dorm with Susan. Victoria didn’t know her very well, though she knew that Susan often sat with her in class.

“Hi Victoria,” Hannah continued when she reached them, kissing both girls on the cheek, “good summer?”

“The best,” Victoria said with a grin, “Susan had me round her house.”

“Oh, how lovely,” said Hannah’s mother, who was dressed in Muggle clothes and carrying an owl. She smiled at Mr Bones. “I hope they didn’t bully you too much, Bruce.”

Mr Bones laughed. “I seem to have escaped with all my limbs.” He looked at his pocket watch. “Better hurry up, girls, the train leaves in ten minutes.”

They wandered down the length of the train to find a carriage which wasn’t so busy. The crowd thinned out the further they got from the entrance to the platform, and soon enough the girls were
helping each other to load their trunks onto the train. They left the adults behind with a wave before searching for an empty compartment. As usual, the corridor was packed with students coming and going, reuniting with their friends and fighting over the best compartments.

“Vicky!” called Daphne, her head poking out of one of the compartments they had just passed. “Come on, we’re in here!”

Victoria glanced at Susan, torn. She was keen to catch up with the Slytherin girls, but didn’t want to abandon Susan, especially after staying with her for the summer. Mercifully, the decision was taken out of her hands.

“Hannah! Susan!” came the voice of Ernie Macmillan, another Hufflepuff. “Next carriage along! Justin’s saved us a compartment!”

Susan met Victoria’s eyes and shrugged. “See you later?”

They parted ways. Victoria followed Daphne into the compartment, where Pansy, Tracey and Millicent were already gathered. They were all wearing headbands in green and silver.

“Good, you’re here,” Pansy said, standing to kiss her on the cheek, “we saved a spot for you.” She indicated a position on the seat next to Tracey, where a fifth headband awaited her. It was clear that she was expected to wear it.

Victoria picked it up and placed it carefully in her hair. “Thanks,” she said, trying to catch her reflection in the window, but it was too bright outside. “How’s it look?”

Tracey rolled her eyes. “I forgot you do that.”

“Be careful,” Millicent added, “I think you might have a single hair out of place.”

“Don’t be mean,” Daphne said, but a smile was tugging at her lips, “after all, it’s probably been at least ten minutes since Vicky looked in a mirror. She’s struggling here.”

The girls laughed; Victoria blushed. “You’re one to talk!”

They lifted her trunk into the luggage rack just as the train’s whistle sounded. Unlike the year before, there was no rush to the window to wave goodbye to their families—they weren’t first years anymore, and they all keenly felt their newfound seniority. It wouldn’t do to act like homesick children. The train pulled out of the station and made its way through north London at a steady pace. As they passed through tunnel after tunnel, Pansy regaled them with a not-so-brief summary of her summer.

“... and, oh, Paris was so amazing,” she was saying, “they’re so much more fashionable over there, none of these bulky robes like the Hogwarts uniform. Mother took me to the fashion show—”

“The one on the river?” Daphne asked.

Pansy nodded. “That’s right, you buy these special glass shoes that let you walk on the water, and then the models come down the Seine past the Eiffel Tower. It’s so beautiful, you simply must come next year.”

“Pass,” Millicent said, not hiding her boredom.

Pansy ignored her. “Anyway, that was Paris,” she continued, drawing breath for the next item of her itinerary, “after that was—”
“You weren’t there, Daphne?” Victoria asked, interrupting before Pansy could build momentum, “weren’t you in France too?”

“I was further south,” Daphne said, “we were yeti hunting in the Alps… of course, it was pretty much just me and Daddy, as always. Mummy and Astoria stayed at the chateau the whole time.”

Pansy crossed her arms. “Sounds sensible if you ask me. Who wants to get eaten by a yeti?”

Though she didn’t say so, Victoria rather agreed with Pansy. She’d never understood the appeal of hunting, especially when the hunter might easily end up the prey, and trekking through miles of snow sounded awfully wet and cold. Surely Astoria had the right idea, enjoying the scenery from somewhere warm and comfortable. “It must have been beautiful, though,” she said, “all those mountains covered with snow…”

“Who cares about that?” Millicent said, “did you manage to see a yeti?”

“Well, no,” Daphne admitted, “but that’s not the point, really. There’s so much to do… you can go avalanche riding with the Barbegazi—they’re, like, mountain dwarfs—or visit the hot springs, or climb up to where Grindelwald defeated Le Défenseur … I think we pretty much gave up on the yeti bit after the first day.”

“That sounds awesome,” said Tracey, whose eyes had lit up at the mention of avalanche riding. “How come the others didn’t go with you?”

Daphne snorted. “Too busy sunbathing.”

It wasn’t much later that Draco paid them a visit, carrying a small stack of envelopes. He was visibly taller than when Victoria had last seen him, but otherwise appeared unchanged: his platinum blond hair was slicked back and his robes were impeccable, the silver buttons gleaming almost as much as his shoes.

“Morning, all,” he said. He took the last seat in the compartment, the one next to Daphne. Pansy’s gaze was fixed to the envelopes, which he set down on his lap.

“Afternoon,” Tracey corrected.

“Is it really?” Draco said, pulling out his pocket-watch, “I’ve been making my way down the train with these——” he waved an envelope in the air “—I could’ve sworn we only left a few minutes ago.”

“Draco,” Pansy said carefully, “are those…?”

“Invitations,” Draco confirmed, “now, let me see… ah, yes, Parkinson, here we go…” He passed one of the envelopes to Pansy, who took it reverently, breaking the seal with a slide of her finger and pulling out a rectangle of thick parchment with a silver border.

Victoria recognised it immediately: it was an invitation to the Yule Ball at Malfoy Manor, identical to the one Pansy had spent several weeks flaunting the previous year. She supposed she would have to endure the process all over again.

“Oh, thank you!” Pansy cried, her eyes still fixed to the invitation, “look, Daphne, I’m on the fourth table!”

Daphne was busy receiving her own invitation, which she accepted rather more casually than Pansy. “Me too,” she said, “looks like we’re sitting next to each other.”
Meanwhile, Draco was still rifling through the stack of envelopes. “Just one more,” he muttered, “McKinnon… Orpington… there it is!” He held out an envelope to Victoria, who took it with a growing sense of excitement.

“You remembered!” she said, thinking back to Draco’s somewhat flippant invitation the year before, “I wasn’t sure if you were serious.”

She opened the envelope and removed her invitation. Daphne gasped, and it was immediately clear why: where the other invitations were trimmed with silver, Victoria’s had a border of golden thread. The invitation read:

\begin{center}
\textit{The Keeper of the Keys}\newline
is commanded by Mr & Mrs Lucius Malfoy to invite\newline
Miss Victoria Potter\newline
to a Yule Ball at Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire\newline
on Saturday, 19th December 1992 at 7 p.m.
\end{center}

“Oh, Merlin,” Daphne said, “Pansy, she’s on the high table!”

Pansy frowned. “Draco, there must be some mistake… she should be with us, surely?”

“No mistake,” Draco said. He turned to Victoria. “Mother saw to it herself, you’ll be sitting between me and the Minister.”

Her stomach made a vaguely unpleasant twisting motion. “The Minister? You mean the \textit{Minister for Magic}? But what are we going to talk about? He’s so… old.”

Pansy was nodding enthusiastically. “Did you hear that, Draco?” she said, “Victoria doesn’t want to sit with a boring old man. Why don’t you sit her on the fourth table with us? Of course, if that’s too much trouble, she and I could easily switch…”

Victoria’s eyes narrowed. “\textit{On the other hand},” she said pointedly, “I’m sure the Minister has all sorts of interesting stories. And besides, I’ll still be sitting next to you, won’t I?” She smiled at Draco. “You’ll rescue me if the Minister’s too boring?”

“Of course,” Draco said, looking between Victoria and Pansy with uncertainty. “Anyway, you couldn’t switch even if you wanted to. Mother already told the Minister that he’d be sitting next to Victoria.”

Millicent laughed. “Nice try, Pansy.”

Victoria looked back down at her invite, the awful feeling in her stomach beginning to give way to anticipation. She’d never been to a ball before, and Yule at Malfoy Manor had always sounded so glamorous, like a fairy tale come to life. And she was to be on the high table… right where everyone could see her.

“Oh god,” she said, “what am I going to wear?”
Millicent snorted. “A dress robe, I imagine.”

“Ohh, controversial choice,” Tracey said sarcastically.

Daphne shushed them both. “But of course we’ll help Vicky to pick something out! Won’t we, Pansy?”

“Naturally,” Pansy said, a bit too sweetly, the smile on her face looking rather fixed, “we wouldn’t want you to embarrass yourself in front of the Minister, would we?”

If Daphne noticed the dangerous look in Pansy’s eyes, she ignored it. “Oh, it’ll be so much fun! I’ll owl Mummy for some catalogues tomorrow; we’ll need time to pick something good out…”

“We’ve got until Christmas!” Victoria said.

Daphne looked at her with sympathy. “I know, but we’ll just have to rush it. If only we’d known earlier…”

“That wasn’t exactly what I meant.”

Draco coughed. “There’s actually something else in the envelope.”

Victoria looked back inside; she had completely missed the fact that her invitation was accompanied by a short note. “Oops.”

The note read:

_Dearest Victoria,

I was so glad that we were able to correspond this summer. Us witches must stick together, must we not? Indeed, it is on that very topic which I write now. I am not familiar with the details of your upbringing, but I am aware that you were raised in the Muggle world, and that your magical education has so far lacked a certain feminine touch. If you will forgive me for saying so, Severus Snape is not entirely suited to providing for the needs of young witches.

You may be aware that I frequently tutor the daughters of my close friends. It would give me great pleasure to offer you the same service, albeit somewhat abridged in nature. Perhaps you might spend your Christmas holiday with us? I know that Draco would welcome the company.

I shall eagerly await your response.

Yours,

Narcissa_

A smile spread across Victoria’s face. It was an extremely thoughtful offer, one that stirred feelings within her which she hadn’t realised were lurking: the yearning for the guidance of another woman, especially one who lived with such admirable elegance and grace, and the longing for a confidant who was not a peer; not a friend but an advisor, someone who could teach her to walk and talk like Pansy and Daphne.

“Well?” Draco said. He was watching her face closely as she read and re-read the note. “Can you
“Come?”

“Yes!”

Draco soon departed to continue down the train, leaving the girls to settle in for the long ride. They changed into their school robes, speculated about which teachers they would have—Tracey was hoping for Professor Winters in Transfiguration, as she was known to be more relaxed than McGonagall—and gossiped about how many boys Rebecca Hale would date that year. The weather became gloomier and gloomier the further north they travelled, and it wasn’t long before Victoria and Daphne ventured to the dining car in search of comforting snacks.

Half the school seemed to have had the same idea, and the girls were forced to jostle their way forward to the bar with a liberal use of elbows, where they ordered a selection of warm pasties and a slab of McDougal’s Double-Butter Scottish Shortbread (“Two Hundred Percent Butter Guaranteed!”). While they were waiting, Daphne jerked her head towards a short boy with blond hair and a Muggle camera hanging from his neck.

“He hasn’t taken his eyes off you since we got here,” she whispered with a giggle. “Looks like someone’s got an admirer!”

Victoria made the mistake of looking in the boy’s direction. He seemed to take it as some kind of invitation, scuttling towards them with star-struck eyes.

“Hi!” he said eagerly, “I’m Colin Creevey! You’re Victoria Potter, aren’t you? Everyone’s told me about you!”

“I suppose that’s me,” Victoria said, rather wishing that he would keep his voice down. Lavender Brown was in the queue behind them, which meant that their entire encounter would soon be relayed on to Parvati Patil and, from there, most of the train.

“Creevy, was it?” Daphne asked, “I don’t think I recognise the name.”

“Oh, I’m Muggleborn,” he said, “not a trace of magic in the family! Do you think—that is, if it’s not too much trouble—could I take a picture?” He lifted his camera. “Just to prove I’ve, you know, met you?”

Victoria froze. What was she supposed to say? If she let him take it, everyone would say she was vain. If she didn’t, they’d say she was rude. Fortunately, Daphne came to her rescue:

“No,” she said firmly, “she doesn’t do photos.”

Colin’s face fell. “Oh. It was just… all this magic stuff is new to my dad—he’s a milkman—so I’m taking loads of photos of magical things to send back home. So he doesn’t feel so confused, you see?”

“How sweet,” Daphne said, but her voice was unimpressed, “well, in that case… yeah, definitely not. We’re not going to help you break the Statute of Secrecy. I’ve half a mind to report you to Amelia Bones.”

“Amelia Bones?” Colin asked, now looking very nervous, “who’s she?”

Victoria’s lips twitched; she instinctively looked around for Susan, but she wasn’t nearby. “She’s the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

“Now get lost,” Daphne said, “before I call a prefect.”
They returned to the compartment with pasties, shortbread, and a story which Daphne took great joy in repeating several times. Victoria tried to ignore them, her face heating up every time Daphne imitated Colin’s wide, adoring eyes, and eventually she buried herself in her heavily-annotated copy of *A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration*. She turned to the section on Simultaneous Transubstantiation, which they were due to study that year, and settled into her old habit of letting the conversation wash over her as she read.

It was still light when the train pulled into Hogsmeade Station, though the sun was low in the sky, casting an orange glow over the looming trees of the forest. Being second years, the girls would be taking the horseless carriages up to the castle, and they couldn’t help but look at the first years gathering around Hagrid with a certain smug superiority. As their carriage clattered towards the castle’s walls, Victoria’s nose was glued to the cool glass of the window, her eyes fixed on the approaching towers and ramparts. She was finally back where she belonged.

In many ways, it felt like she had never left. The Great Hall was as warm and inviting as ever, lit by thousands of candles, the sky finally turning dark beyond its stained glass windows, and the hustle and bustle of students competing for their favourite seats at the house tables had a familiar rhythm to it.

“Stebbins, you know that’s my seat!”

“Come sit with me, Cedric!”

“Finders keepers!”

Some things were different, however. There was a new Head Girl and Head Boy urging them to settle down, new prefects strutting around, and of course the biggest change of all: this year, Victoria would be a spectator to the Sorting rather than participating in it. The ceremony proceeded much as it had the previous year: the first years filed in behind Professor McGonagall, the lot of them looking small and nervous, and after the song—which was different to the year before—they took turns to try on the Sorting Hat and join their new house.

Victoria clapped with the others each time they gained a new Slytherin, of which there were fewer this year. The most notable of the new additions were a pair of twins named Flora and Hestia Carrow; Pansy clapped with extra enthusiasm for each of them, standing up to hug them when they arrived at the table.

“You!” she said to the first year boy who was sitting closest to the second years, “move up, you’re in Flora and Hestia’s spot.”

“But—”

“Move!”

The boy shuffled away and the twins squeezed onto the bench, plates and goblets popping into existence as they sat down. Victoria stared. The Carrow twins were like Pansy clones: their brown hair was cut in the same style, just reaching the shoulders, they sat with the same prim, straight-backed poise, and they wore matching bracelets. The main difference between them was that Pansy was prettier than the other two, whose eyes were slightly too close together—something which no doubt endeared them to her.

“Girls, you know Daphne and Millie,” Pansy said, “this is Tracey and Victoria.”

Victoria gave them a tight smile. “Charmed.”
When the Sorting was complete, Professor Dumbledore stood to greet them.

“Welcome! Welcome one and all to another year at Hogwarts! If you will indulge me, a few impatient announcements cannot wait until tomorrow to meet your ears, though I shall seek to delay the banquet no more than is necessary.” He paused, taking in his unusually rapt audience, whose eyes were fixed on the man several seats to his left. “My first announcement will be news to few of you. It gives me pleasure to welcome Professor Lockhart to our faculty, where he will occupy the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts Master.”

The hall erupted into applause, much greater than any student had received during the Sorting, and Professor Lockhart stood to receive it. He was dressed in robes of lilac, his blond hair perfectly coiffed, and he bowed several times as the clapping continued. More than one wolf whistle rang out from the Gryffindor table, earning them a roguish wink from the Professor.

“Thank you, Professor Lockhart,” Dumbledore said as the applause died, “I have no doubt that he will lead the department admirably. The second announcement relates to your Nastily Excruciating Wizarding Tests. Due in no small part to the dedication of Miss Penelope Clearwater and the petition which she presented last year to the Governors, I am pleased to inform you that Hogwarts will this year be offering a NEWT in Spellweaving. Let us put our hands together to welcome Madam Crimp, who will be visiting the castle on Wednesdays and Fridays to teach the course.”

Polite applause followed, somewhat ruined by the fact that half the female population had broken into excited chatter, many of them huddling to discuss this new development with their friends.

“Just a NEWT?” Daphne said, “but what if we want to try it?”

“You wait, I guess,” Pansy said, “But don’t expect me to join you. I’m happy buying my robes, thank you very much. Why would I make them myself?”

Professor Dumbledore coughed loudly. “No doubt many of you are interested in the course,” he said, having to raise his voice slightly as whispers continued, “but I must insist that you inform Professor McGonagall tonight if you wish to enrol, so that she may make all the necessary adjustments to the timetables.”

Professor McGonagall’s lips thinned. It sounded like she had a long night ahead of her.

“Finally, a reminder to all the quidditch enthusiasts to keep a keen eye on their tea-leaves tomorrow morning, which Professor Trelawney informs me will predict the dates of this year’s tryouts.” More whispering followed, and Victoria noticed Millicent sharing a hopeful look with the ginger-haired Octavia, her best friend. “And that is all! Now, let us eat, drink, and be merry!”

The rest of the evening passed in a happy blur of good food, friends, and the comfort of familiar surroundings. The girls left the feast promptly this year, not having to wait to be collected by the prefects, and made their way down to the Slytherin dungeon to claim their new dorm and unpack their trunks. They took a short break to watch the first years try to sit in the Dark Lord’s place, all of them being launched unceremoniously through the air by the cursed chair, and then returned to the dorm with smuggled bottles of butterbeer clinking under their robes.

At breakfast the next morning they received their timetables from a weary-looking Professor McGonagall.

“Oh god,” Daphne said, her eyes scouring the page, “double Transfiguration every Friday.” She glanced at Victoria, who was smiling widely: it was well-known that Transfiguration was her favourite class. “At least one of us is happy.”
“Look, we’ve got Defence second period!” Tracey said excitedly between mouthfuls of scrambled egg. “we’ll be the second class to have Lockhart!”

First, however, they had to get through two hours of Potions with Professor Snape. He stormed into the gloom of Laboratory Three with his customary scowl, slamming the door behind him before striding to the front of the class with his arms crossed.

“I will not waste time with introductory speeches,” he began, the class silent before him. “You are now commencing your second year of Potions, and I dare say it will proceed in much the same way as the first. This term, in addition to brewing potions of greater complexity, we will focus on so-called seasonal potions, which must be brewed in accordance with the motions of celestial objects. As is tradition, your studies in this area will culminate with the Draught of Sparta, which we will begin to brew following Halloween.”

At this announcement, a few brave souls dared to whisper to their neighbours, but Snape quickly cut them off.

“Silence!” he spat, his dark eyes landing on Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas. “Five points from Gryffindor for speaking out of turn. Now, let me make one thing clear. I have, to date, been lenient with this class—” Victoria looked at Tracey incredulously “—but I shall tolerate nothing less than perfection during the brewing of the Draught of Sparta. As one of the Essential Potions, it is a requirement of this school that every student brew it successfully. If necessary, you will serve detention every evening until you get it right.”

Professor Snape always had been a fan of negative reinforcement. The threat of detention proved to be an effective one, and the class was unusually attentive for the rest of the lesson, even though it was their first after the summer holidays. They took a dictation on the general characteristics of autumn, performed an activity in the storeroom involving identification of autumnal ingredients, and finished off the class with a series of exercises relating to the correspondence between certain ingredients and the constellations.

They were quite exhausted by the time the bell rang, but the promise of Defence Against the Dark Arts with Professor Lockhart served to lift their spirits. They were so eager to finally meet the famous Professor that they skipped their morning break to claim seats at the front of the Defence classroom, which had been decorated with a plethora of promotional materials for Lockhart’s books and plays. Gone were the instructional posters depicting wand movements and incantations, replaced with moving portraits of Lockhart himself, his pointy wizard’s hat perched jauntily on his blond hair. Gone too was Quirrell’s large collection of protective objects, the garlands of garlic and cabinets of silver weaponry replaced with the entire Lockhart library, which contained everything from hair-care guides to recipe books.

The Slytherins would be sharing Defence with the Hufflepuffs that year, and Victoria managed to save a spot in the second row for Susan, who arrived a few minutes later with Hannah and Justin Finch-Fletchley. The three of them eagerly took the seats around Victoria, just behind Daphne and Pansy. Finally, long after all the students had arrived, the bell rang and Lockhart burst through the classroom door.

“Welcome!” he cried jovially. He took off his turquoise hat and hung it on a peg next to the door, taking the time to cast his gaze across the expectant students, their attentive faces peeking over the stacks of books which sat on each of their desks. “Excellent, I see you’ve all come prepared. Now, make no mistake, your real education in magic begins today! In my time I’ve vanquished vampires, wrestled werewolves, and hunted hags. I’ve seen it all, boys and girls, and that’s why I’m here. The first Defence Master in history to be directly appointed by the board of governors themselves!”
He paused as if expecting a response; none came. Lockhart cleared his throat. “Yes, well, let’s get
down to business, shall we? Hands up, please, those of you who have seen my newest play, *Break
with a Banshee.*” A number of hands shot up, including Victoria’s own, but as she craned her neck
to look around the classroom she could see that the majority had kept their hands down.

“*Tut tut,* that won’t do at all,” Lockhart said, frowning at those students with their hands on their
desks, “your homework for the Christmas holidays is to see it, twice if possible... the Daily Prophet
didn’t rate it five stars for nothing, after all!” He winked and a few of the girls tittered. “Well, those
of you who *have* seen the play will surely recognise *this.*” He opened a large wooden chest and
withdrew a long metal arm. “For five points, who can tell me what this is?”

Hands went up again, though this time Victoria kept hers down. She knew what it was *supposed* to
be, but she also knew that wizards did not have the greatest understanding of Muggle technology.

Lockhart gestured to Pansy. “Miss...?”

“Parkinson, sir,” she said, “it’s a Muggle firearm!”

“Correct! Now, watch and learn!”

Lockhart took aim and, with a *whoosh*, fire launched from the arm’s outstretched palm. The
fireball rocketed across the classroom, over their heads and to the rear wall, where it splashed
harmlessly against the bare stone. Most of the class applauded, but Justin—who was the only
Muggleborn in the class—was frowning to Victoria’s left. He leaned closer so that he could
whisper to her.

“He doesn’t think...?”

“He does,” she replied, giving him a small smile to show that she understood. “Feel free to correct
him.”

But Lockhart was speaking again. “Very dangerous, particularly to an untrained wizard,” he said.
“This is what I’ll be teaching you this year. You’re a bit young, you see, for me to put you through
your paces on dark creatures like werewolves. Not even I tackled those ‘til I was fully trained! But
don’t be too upset now—” he smiled at them with paternal affection “—there’ll be plenty of time in
years to come for you to see me in my element. First, however, you have to know the basics.”

“But sir,” Tracey interrupted, raising her hand after she had already started to speak, “we did the
basics last year with Professor Quirrell, didn’t we? Jinxes and dark pests and stuff like that?”

Lockhart waved a hand dismissively. “Professor Quirrell got a bit ahead of himself, if you ask me,
going straight into jinxes like that. No, first you must learn basic survival! Being able to recognise
a doxy won’t help you if you’re attacked by a wolf, will it? In this class, we’re going to focus on
the three most common dangers you might face as children: wild beasts, the elements, and
Muggles. I’ll teach you how to banish snakes, repel wind, find fresh water, and how to confund
your way out of tricky situations. And at the end of the year, we’ll head off into the wilds for a
little trip to test out your skills! Under my supervision, of course, so you know you’re safe. Now,
how does that sound?”

His question was met with universal exclamations of approval. Victoria shared an excited look with
Susan: inaccurate Muggle technology aside, it looked like Defence was going to be much more
interesting than it had been in their first year—though she wasn’t sure about the “heading into the
wilds” part, which sounded suspiciously like camping.
Lockhart clapped his hands. “Wonderful! Then let’s get to it.” He drew his wand and, with a flamboyant flourish, summoned an easel from the corner of the room. It soared far too quickly through the air, and he was forced to duck as it clattered into the desk behind him. “Oops!” he said, rushing to pick it up, “forget my own strength, sometimes!”

He set the easel up next to the desk and flipped the first sheet of paper to reveal a drawing of a tall, gorilla-like animal. “Let’s begin by examining one of the most dangerous creatures in the world. Make sure to take notes, class! This could save your life one day. Now, the common or garden variety Muggle is found in all but the most extreme habitats…”

In the end, Victoria left Defence feeling a strange combination of uneasiness and excitement. She was unusually quiet throughout lunch, spending as much time frowning at her plate as she did eating. Even as Daphne and Pansy gushed about how handsome Lockhart was, she couldn’t help but think that something wasn’t quite right. How was it that he didn’t know what a real gun looked like, after having visited the real Bandon and having met the real Detective Blaggard? Who had created the obviously magical “firearm”, and how had it come into Lockhart’s possession? And there was something else nagging at the back of her mind, something that she couldn’t pin down… she shrugged, remembering to take a bite of chicken. At least he’d be teaching them interesting magic.

Following lunch, the whole school made their way down to the quidditch stadium for Flying. After several months away, it felt a bit strange to return to the unisex changing rooms, which Victoria had almost forgotten about, and which seemed rather more intimidating now that she had something worth hiding. By an unspoken agreement, the boys and girls changed at opposite ends of the room, with many of them hanging towels from the railings above the benches to create some privacy. Unfortunately, Victoria hadn’t thought to bring her towel, given that she always returned to the dorm to shower. Just as she had in first year, once more she simply had to muster her courage and change into her flying robes as quickly as possible.

Buckles and bracers secured, hair braided into pigtails, she and Susan headed outside just as the bell sounded in the distance. As always, it was complete chaos: the whole school was gathered in a boisterous crowd, with duellists strutting around accompanied by gaggles of fans, and quidditch players showing off on their brooms overhead. The fourth years in particular were drawing many admiring looks, with the Ravenclaw chaser Roger Davies competing with Cedric Diggory for attention. Both boys were tall and handsome, but of the two Victoria favoured Cedric, with his scruffy dark hair and friendly grey eyes. There was something a lot more open about Cedric… his casual confidence seemed more genuine, whereas Roger was always glancing around to see who might be watching.

Victoria let out a long sigh.

“Careful,” Susan said with a giggle, “if you keep staring like that you’re gonna end up looking like Colin Creevey.”

She groaned. “You heard about that?”

“*Everyone* heard about that.”

“Well, I wasn’t staring,” Victoria said, her cheeks turning pink, “I was just—”

“Drooling?”

“—wondering if I can avoid having to fly,” she insisted, quite pleased with the credibility of her lie, “we don’t have to, do we?”
Her question was answered by the arrival of Madam Hooch, who had to blow her whistle several times to get everyone’s attention.

“First years, wait here, I’ll be with you shortly. Second years, with me!”

She led them away from the crowd, up the path from the quidditch stadium and towards the eaves of the Forbidden Forest, where a small group of teachers and prefects were waiting. As they walked, she explained what they would be doing that year:

“I’ve had a year to toughen you up, though I don’t doubt you’ve all gone soft over the summer,” she said with a raised voice, “but you’re now old enough to start learning how to fly. You’ve got two choices: broom racing, or quidditch. For those of you who don’t want to fly—” her voice turned incredulous here, as if she couldn’t believe that anyone fell into that category “—you can take up hippogriff riding, dancing or duelling. Make your decision carefully, because you’ll be stuck with it for the year.”

Fierce negotiations immediately broke out as everyone tried to convince their friends to join them in their activity of choice.

Victoria looked at Susan imploringly. “Please say you don’t want to fly.”

Susan bit her lip. “Flying would be useful… but I think I wanna try duelling.”

“Duellng?” Victoria said. She glanced nervously at her nails, which she had spent half an hour painting a lovely sparkly green the night before. “Isn’t that a bit… rough?”

“Oh, come on, it’ll be fun!”

Victoria frowned. “You said that about flying.”

“Don’t be such a girl,” Susan said, “anyway, duelling is magic, isn’t it? I thought you liked that stuff.”

“I suppose…”

Decision made, Susan dragged Victoria towards the group of students gathering around Professor Flitwick. Victoria couldn’t help but notice that the vast majority of them were boys.

“I told you,” she hissed at Susan, but her protests were ignored. Meanwhile, not far away, Pansy could be heard having a loud argument with Daphne.

“I am not mucking out my own hippogriff,” she was saying, “please, Daph, why don’t we take dance…”

“We go riding all the time at home,” Daphne said, “you even have your own hippogriff, don’t you?”

Pansy sniffed. “That’s neither here nor there. I also have a stableboy.”

“Well, about time you learnt how to do all that for yourself,” Daphne said, “I’ve been doing it since I was six.”

Pansy turned to Tracey in desperation. “You’ll come dance with me, won’t you?”

But Tracey just laughed. “And miss out on quidditch?”
So Victoria watched as Tracey and Millicent went to join the quidditch group, before a very grumpy Pansy—apparently unwilling to take dance by herself—stomped over to where Hagrid and a number of prefects were holding the hippogriffs by their reins. They were beautiful but dangerous-looking creatures, with the head, wings and talons of an eagle on the body of a horse, and they absolutely towered over the prefects who were holding them.

“Looks like trouble in paradise,” Susan observed.

Victoria snorted. “Probably a good thing we didn’t pick dancing, or we’d have been stuck doing it with Pansy.”

Once everyone had chosen their activity, Professor Flitwick took the duellists to a large clearing just inside the forest, where a decent number of older students were already warming up under the direction of Joseph Deverill, the sixth year Slytherin prefect.

“Gather round, gather round,” Flitwick said with his customary eagerness. There were just over ten second years, so it was easy enough to huddle around Flitwick in a circle, all of them looking down at the short man. “A good batch this year!” he continued, “we’ll make proper duellists out of the lot of you, mark my words. Now, before we start, I don’t want you to get the wrong idea—we’re not learning honour duelling, here. You may have heard that I was once a champion, but that was long ago, before the Ministry saw fit to outlaw the noble art.”

“A champion, sir?” asked Hermione. She was the only girl there other than Victoria and Susan.

“Oh yes,” Flitwick said, his voice turning nostalgic, “before I was a teacher, I used to act as champion for many wizards and witches, representing them in contests of honour around the world. Why, those were the days…” He coughed. “But that was then, and this is now. As I was saying, what we’re learning here is the sport of duelling. That sport has its roots in the ancient code of honour, but I dare say it’s somewhat safer.”

Safe or not, Victoria did not have high hopes for the survival of her nails.

“Now, the first skill you need to learn in duelling is how to block spells,” Flitwick continued, “you’ll all be familiar with the reversal of spells from first year Charms, and blocking is not all that different. To block a spell, you make the same wand motion that you would use in its reversal, but you must do so while the spell is still in the process of forming.”

Victoria frowned. “But sir, how do we know which counter to use?”

“Aha!” Flitwick said, “that is the essence of duelling, Miss Potter. The Shield Charm is not permitted, you see... it’s not considered sporting. To defend yourself, you must correctly identify the spell being used against you, and either block or parry it.”

“Parry?” Susan asked.

“A much more advanced skill,” Flitwick said, “it works similarly to blocking, except that it must be executed in the brief time while the completed spell is travelling towards its target. Very difficult to pull off, yet it comes with the advantage of being able to deflect a spell back upon its caster. But don’t worry about that for now! Let’s get you warmed up.”

After a twenty minute run along the edge of the forest, they returned to the clearing to be split up into pairs. Unfortunately it was Flitwick who divided them up, and so Victoria got paired with a Hufflepuff boy called Zacharias Smith. He was one of the tallest boys in the year, with curly blond hair and a square jaw.
“Keep to the Trip Jinx, now!” Flitwick said as he paired them off, “the idea is to practice blocking, not to have a proper duel. Take turns to cast the spell against your partner, who will try to block it.”

Victoria and Zach found a spare patch of grass with plenty of space around it, counted out a duelling distance of twenty paces and turned to face each other.

“All right, Potter,” Zach said, taking a side stance and raising his wand over his shoulder, “I’ll start, shall I? Cadere!”

There was a flash of silver light. Still in the process of drawing her wand, Victoria had no chance of defending herself: she felt the spell hit her with a light push, just enough to make her try to step back to steady herself, but it was as if her legs were tangled in rope, and with an “eeep!” she toppled backwards, landing with a wet thud on the muddy grass.

She flushed with annoyance. “Hey! I wasn’t ready!”

“Too bad,” Zach said with a smirk, “your turn.”

“Finite,” she said, pointing her wand at her feet to cancel the jinx before struggling back to her feet. She raised her wand over her shoulder. “Ready? Cadere!”

A silver glow began to form around her wand as she brought it down, but Zach was in motion from the moment her hand had moved, swinging his wand in a crescent from left to right, and he completed the counter just as she finished the incantation—the light gathering around Victoria’s wand fizzled, spluttering out before the spell could complete.

“Excellent, Mister Smith!” Flitwick cried, “five points to Hufflepuff!”

Victoria immediately braced herself for another spell, not trusting Zach to wait until she was ready, but this time he just stood there, not casting anything. The moment stretched out, Zach’s wand raised above his shoulder, Victoria’s wand held protectively across her chest.

“Well?” she said, “are you going to—”

“Cadere!”

She jumped in shock, forgetting entirely to try the counter, and a moment later she was hitting the grass again, her left cheek landing right in a patch of mud. She grit her teeth. He was cheating! They were supposed to be practising, but he kept waiting until her guard was down. Well, she’d show him…

“Cadere!” she cried, casting the spell from where she lay on the ground—but somehow he was ready, his wand sweeping from left to right once more, and though there was a flash of silver light, Zach completed the block just before the spell hit him. He stumbled back a step, but didn’t fall.

“Cheeky,” he said with a boyish grin, “well, you’d better get up. You know, so I can put you back down on the ground.”

Victoria boiled with impotent rage. Again and again he knocked her over, always blocking her own spells in return. It wasn’t all through playing tricks either: he was just so fast, his wand seeming to begin the counter before she had even realised her own wand was moving to cast the spell. And each time that she hit the ground, he couldn’t resist making some little jibe about her:

“Dad always told me that girls can’t fight.”
“I think there’s a bit of mud over there you haven’t fallen in yet.”

“Who’d have thought the Girl Who Lived would suck at duelling?”

Something in her broke. She was muddy, bruised, and her hair was a mess. The varnish on her nails was chipped and her shoulder was sore. She’d had enough of Zacharias Smith and his snide remarks.

“Cadere!” she cried, putting all her frustration and anger into the spell, her arm snapping down with aggressive speed. Silver light flashed, brighter than before—

—and Zach’s wand was there, blocking the spell with ease.

“Oof, I felt that,” he said with the same cocky grin, “some proper power behind that one. Pity it didn’t do anything, eh?”

Victoria let out a sound that was halfway between a sob and a scream. “That’s it! I’m done.”

She turned her back and stormed off, passing through the thin line of trees and up the path towards the school, tears of frustration running down her face. She was supposed to be good at magic! That was her thing. Susan was kind and friendly, Daphne was beautiful and charming, Pansy was rich and sophisticated… and who was she? Victoria Potter, the mythical Girl Who Lived, who loved magic more than anything in the world… only now she didn’t even have that. She’d been beaten, repeatedly, by a smirking boy who she knew never scored above an “Exceeds Expectations”.

Susan came after her, of course. “Victoria!” she called, hurrying to catch up, “Victoria, wait!”

She paused next to a large boulder.

“Where are you going?” Susan asked, but then she saw Victoria’s face. “Oh, what happened? Here.” She pulled a handkerchief from a pocket and passed it to Victoria, who used it to dab at her red eyes.

“I can’t do it,” Victoria said, her voice coming out as a sob, “I can’t go back, Susan. Maybe I’ll go hippogriff riding. Or, hell, flying.”

“What?” Susan said, “but you hate flying! What on earth happened?”

“That—boy,” Victoria said, “I couldn’t land a single spell on him! And he just kept mocking me. But he’s right, Susan. I’m not good at duelling.”

Susan frowned. “And…?”

“And, well, what’s the point of doing something that I’m bad at? Maybe I’d be better with hippogriffs…”

“So that’s it, is it?” Susan said, and she sounded cross. “For the first time you’re not immediately great at something and you just, what, give up?”

Victoria gaped at her. That wasn’t what she was supposed to say. Susan was supposed to commiserate with her, not tell her off! “You don’t understand.”

“Oh, I think I do,” Susan replied, “this is what it’s like for the rest of us, you see. Every time you get a spell in class on your first try, or do something just by, I don’t know, clapping or jumping or whatever… how do you think everyone else feels?”
Victoria looked down, ashamed. She’d never thought about it that way. She just loved magic so much… she supposed she had got rather caught up in the thrill of it, never really thinking about how Susan felt.

“Sorry,” she muttered. “But he was just so much better than me.”

Susan wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Well, of course he was. He’s a Smith.”

“A Smith? What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Are you kidding?” Susan said, looking at her like she’d just said the world was flat, “the Smiths are practically wizarding royalty! They actually own a part of Hogwarts! He’s probably spent years learning to duel.”

“Oh.”

“Now, are you going to go sulk with the hippogriffs? Or are you going to come back with me and work hard and one day put that boy on his arse?”

Victoria sniffed. “All right. But you have to do my nails tonight.”

“Deal.”
Chapter Sixteen: Truths and Dares

It was surprisingly easy for Victoria to slip back into life at Hogwarts. She got used to waking up early within a few days, and soon enough her evenings were filled with a hectic mix of supervised homework (now held in the fourth floor aquarium), extracurricular reading, and relaxing in the common room with the Slytherin girls. Their group moved quickly to reclaim the two couches next to the gramophone, and Victoria had returned to her habit of sitting on a large cushion between the couches, where she could read or join the conversation at her leisure.

Although a part of her missed the relaxed approach to life at Susan’s house, the excitement of learning new magic was more than adequate compensation. In her first year, the teachers had taken months to let them use magic, but no such restriction applied to second years, for whom the phrase “wands at the ready” was becoming an increasingly frequent instruction. They were casting magic from their very first classes, beginning work on illusion charms with Professor Flitwick, liquefaction with Professor McGonagall, and evergreening with Madam Bloom, their new Herbology teacher.

There was, however, one way in which Victoria’s routine had changed. In the past, her evenings would have been spent in an entirely sedentary manner, idly stroking Dumbledore as she read about the Colour-Changing Charm, or Thales’ Primacy of Water, or the correct way to burn fallen leaves to ward away frost. But that had all changed since her spectacular failure at duelling. These days she could be found with her wand in hand just as often as with a book in her lap, and she would spend whole evenings practising different blocks over and over again.

The others responded to this new development in a predictable fashion.

“Watch where you’re pointing that!” Pansy would warn, “you could poke someone’s eye out if you’re not careful!”

“All that wandwork can’t be good for your hands,” Daphne might add, “are you sure you’re moisturising enough?”

Of the group, Tracey and Draco were the most supportive, each of them occasionally joining her practice, bemoaning the fact that they were forced to pick between quidditch and duelling. Along with Draco came the dark-skinned Blaise Zabini and rat-faced Theodore Nott, who was as weedy as Blaise was handsome. The boys had taken a sudden interest in hanging around with the girls, though more often than not the three of them would get bored and run off to play Aurors and Oathbreakers with Crabbe and Goyle. As for Millicent, she was increasingly absent, off somewhere with Octavia and the girls from the other dorm.

It was a comfortable routine. To her great surprise, the one class which Victoria was not enjoying was Defence Against the Dark Arts, where she continued to feel a vague sense of unease about
Professor Lockhart. The problem wasn’t exactly that his descriptions of Muggles were so inaccurate. While Justin Finch-Fletchley (the only Muggleborn in her class) was frequently outraged by Lockhart’s pronouncements, Victoria had always found wizarding ignorance of Muggle life more amusing than anything else, and she regularly entertained herself with the thought of Uncle Vernon’s likely reaction to some of Lockhart’s more ridiculous ideas. Nonetheless, there was something nagging at the back of her mind, something that didn’t quite add up.

The source of the feeling became clear in their second week of classes. They had begun learning the Imperturbable Charm, which could be used to divert the path of any projectile, and Professor Lockhart was expounding upon its usefulness against Muggles.

“Thereir use of the bow and arrow is well known by wizards,” he was saying, “and the Imperturbable Charm will of course protect you from any arrows that may come your way. But beware! Muggles are fiendishly clever, and have more than just arrows at their disposal.” He turned to a large object at the front of the class, which was covered by a white sheet. “Behold! The latest in advanced Muggle weaponry!”

He removed the sheet with a flourish to reveal a gleaming cannon. It was about the size of a small car and, despite its good condition, had to be at least two hundred years old. Victoria glanced at Justin, who was sitting next to her, and when she saw his incredulous face she couldn’t help but let out a short burst of laughter.

Lockhart’s gaze landed on the two of them. “You have something to add, Finch-Fletchley?”

Justin shook his head.

“I thought as much,” Lockhart said, before turning to Victoria. “And you might not be laughing once you see it in use, Miss Potter. Yes… a demonstration, perhaps?”

He summoned Victoria to the front of the class and positioned her directly in line with the cannon, where she could see down its long, looming barrel.

“Now, Victoria here is going to cast the charm on herself, just like we practised,” Lockhart said, “and then we’ll fire a bludger at her, and if everything has gone right, it should swerve out of the way before it hits her.”

She looked nervously at the cannon. “And what if it doesn’t go right?”

“Not to worry,” Lockhart said, “if anything goes wrong, I’m sure I can fix you up in a jiffy.”

“Fix me up?” Victoria edged away from the cannon, which felt altogether too close. “You know, I’ve, um, never actually cast the spell before.”

But Lockhart was already raising his wand. “No time like the present!” he said cheerfully, and he lit the fuse. The class leaned forward in anticipation.

No longer having any choice, Victoria quickly tapped her wand to her forehead. “Impervius!”

BANG!

The cannon fired with an enormous roar, spitting fire and smoke—Victoria cringed, her heart leaping to her throat, her ears ringing—and when the smoke cleared, she could see Lockhart pointing to her left, his mouth moving but his words drowned out by the ringing in her ears. Dazed, she followed his pointed finger and took in a scene of utter destruction. The cannonball had crashed...
right through his sturdy oak desk, splitting it cleanly in two and scattering its contents across the floor, before ending up embedded in the wall, where it had made a significant dent in the stonework.

Sound gradually returned.

“Bravo!” Lockhart was saying, clapping enthusiastically with the class following suit, “a fine show! Keep it up and one day you might even give me a run for my money!” He chuckled, as if the very thought were absurd. “Now, let’s get this cleared up… *Reparo!”*

The two sides of the broken desk slammed together, roughly binding themselves to each other such that their ends were not properly aligned; the diffuse contents of the desk flew back towards it, but landed on its surface in a messy heap; the cannon ball fell out of the wall with a thump, leaving a web of cracked stone behind.

Lockhart coughed. “Yes, well, that’ll do for now. So, who wants to go next? No need to rush now, you’ll all get your turn…”

But Victoria wasn’t listening. She was staring with horror at the shoddily-restored desk. What if that had been her? Lockhart had said he could fix her up, but his Repair Charm clearly left much to be desired. If he couldn’t repair a desk, there was no way he could put a *person* back together. And now that she thought about it, hadn’t he messed up his Summoning Charm in their first class as well?

The conclusion was inevitable. It was absurd, but the minute the thought entered Victoria’s mind, she knew it to be true.

When the class ended, Susan dragged her towards the Great Hall for lunch. “Here’s something strange,” Victoria said, keeping her voice conversational, knowing that Susan *adored* Lockhart, “have you ever actually seen Lockhart do any magic?”

“No, but I mean… like, proper magic. *Successful* magic.”

Susan frowned. “What are you trying to say?”

“It’s just…” She searched for the right words. “He doesn’t seem like all he’s made out to be, does he?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Susan said, a bit too quickly. “Is this because he picked on you in class? Anyway, you saw him cast loads of magic in the play, didn’t you?”

Victoria bit her lip. She didn’t want to argue about it. “I guess.”

“Come on,” Susan said, “it’s hotpot today and Ernie takes all the dumplings if you don’t beat him to it.”

Victoria ate quickly, having another task to complete during her lunch break. It had been almost two weeks since term started and, much to her frustration, she still hadn’t managed to explore the Restricted Section. But now a deadline was looming, with just two days left until Draco would come calling for the pass, and she was determined to find a book on alchemy before she handed access over to him.

The Restricted Section was separated from the main library by means of an age line, a glowing,
golden thread running across the stone floor which prevented anyone below the age of seventeen from trespassing. The barrier crossed the full width of the cathedral-like room to the left of the main entrance—by Victoria’s logic, that meant half of Hogwarts’ collection was hidden behind the line, protected from the prying eyes of those who had not yet achieved their OWLs.

She couldn’t count the number of times that she had lingered at the edge of the line, peering into those forbidden stacks, imagining the secret knowledge which lay beyond. In the past, she had always turned away and satisfied herself with the main library.

But not today. Today, Victoria turned left.

“Potter!”

Her foot barely over the glowing line, she froze at the sound of Madam Pince’s voice. A short, dumpy woman, Madam Pince wore a permanent scowl and tiny half-moon spectacles. The way she peered over those glasses always made Victoria feel like she was being examined under a microscope.

“Where do you think you’re going, girl?”

Victoria reached into her pocket. “I’ve got permission,” she said, holding the pass towards Pince, “here, see? Professor Snape gave it to me.”

“I’m quite familiar with Professor Snape’s little tradition, thank you,” Madam Pince said, “but pass or no, you can’t go into the Restricted Section without the proper equipment.”

She took Victoria to the front desk, where she rummaged under the counter for a fairy lamp, a whistle, a ball of red string, and a pair of worn dragon-hide gloves.

“Don’t touch strange books without the gloves,” Madam Pince advised. “In fact, best not to touch strange books at all—some of them are cursed, and don’t get me started on the ones that can read you back. Are you familiar with the tale of Theseus?”

Victoria nodded.

“Good. Use the string if you need to wander from the central paths. And if you do get lost, blow your whistle and wait... whatever you do, don’t keep going, you’ll only get more lost. It took us five days to find Montague, the fool boy.”

With Madam Pince’s advice in mind, Victoria entered the Restricted Section with rather more trepidation than anticipated. At first, as she walked down a wide aisle, the grave warnings seemed to be misplaced. It was not so different from the main library, with bright light streaming through the tall, stained glass windows, and ladders positioned against the towering bookcases, their endless shelves neatly organised by topic. There was a certain stillness to the air, like that of a dusty room which hadn’t been opened in a long time, but Victoria was far from alone, with older students sitting here and there at reading tables, no doubt working on NEWT-level projects.

Yet as she made her way deeper into the stacks, the character of the library began to change. The central aisle branched, and branched again, and each time the way became narrower, the bookcases pressing in like skyscrapers blocking out the sun. There were no students here, and whatever arcane system had been used to arrange the books was an impenetrable mystery. One bookcase was devoted solely to volumes with blue covers; another contained only authors whose names constituted a pun on their subject matter.

“Lumos,” Victoria said, raising the lamp. Its shutters slid open to release the pale glow of fairy
light.

She continued to explore. The Restricted Section was clearly much larger than she had thought, and she wanted to get a feel for the geography of the place. The library’s exterior walls were out of sight, blocked from view by the bookcases, and so it was difficult to get any sense of how far the labyrinth continued, or even where she was within it. Certainly it felt like it could be never-ending: if the central aisle had once been a wide thoroughfare, the way was now akin to a back street, winding this way and that, with dark and forbidding alleyways leading off on each side.

Just as she began to worry that she would get lost, the sound of footsteps approached. A short, redhead girl turned the corner, a lamp in her hand. Victoria didn’t recognise her, but she looked young—she too must have received a pass from one of the teachers.

The girl did not react to seeing Victoria, and showed every intention of passing her without saying a word.

“Excuse me,” Victoria said, “do you know where the alchemy shelves are?”

The girl paused and looked her up and down. “First time in the Restricted Section?”

Victoria nodded.

“Well, I don’t know about the alchemy section,” the girl said, “but there’s some alchemy books a little further along.” She pointed deeper into the library. “Go that way until you see the invisible books, then keep turning left until you end up back where you started. Do that loop thrice, hop straight ahead for a while, and you should find some alchemy books.”

Victoria couldn’t tell if she was joking. “How do you see invisible books?”

The girl just smirked. “You’ll see.”

Somewhat dubious, Victoria continued onwards. Sure enough, she soon came to a bookcase which appeared to be entirely empty. She wrestled her hand into a dragon-hide glove and reached out: as the girl had said, the shelves were full of invisible books, the shape of their spines unmistakeable beneath her gloved fingers. Satisfied that she was not the target of a practical joke, she proceeded to follow the rest of the instructions, walking in a loop three times and then—after checking that no one was watching—hopping down the aisle. With each hop, it was as if she was launching herself deeper into the library, the darkness growing, the books around her shifting and warping. A thick layer of dust appeared on the shelves, and the books written in English began to decrease in number, replaced with spines written in runes.

It was here that she found it: Natural Magic by Thomas Vaughan. An alchemy book.

She plucked it from the shelf with glove-covered hands and flicked to the introduction. It was written in archaic language, but it was at least in English rather than runes:

In the name of his Majestie Charles II, true King of Muggles and Wizards alike, and indorsed by his noble Council of Warlocks, restored to riteful rule following the expulsion of the treacherous Swanns, I, Thomas Vaughan, herein faithfully and truly describe my investigations into the mysteries of natural magic, continuing as I might the fine example of the Italian John Baptist Porta, and covering principally the field of alchemy and its sisters astronomy and herbology, being neither witchcraft nor wizardry but the magic of the Earth and Heavens themselves.

It took all of Victoria’s willpower to resist the temptation to keep reading there and then. This was exactly what she had been looking for, an answer to the questions which she had been pondering
ever since her return to Privet Drive for the summer. Where did the natural end and the supernatural begin? If her magic was supernatural, why did non-magical plants flourish around her? Wasn’t “natural magic” a contradiction in terms? Alchemy, it seemed, held the answers.

Satisfied with her discovery, and eager to share it with Susan, she hopped back the way she came. But nothing happened. The corridor didn’t shift around her, nor did she feel the slight vertigo of magical transportation. She was simply hopping down the aisle, each step echoing loudly off the stone floor.

Victoria tried to ignore the tendrils of anxiety taking root at the edge of her mind. She wasn’t lost. Not yet. Perhaps the hopping was just a shortcut—if she kept walking straight ahead, might she not arrive back at the invisible books?

Cursing herself for not using the string, she started making her way back towards the main library. Why hadn’t the redheaded girl warned her that she couldn’t get back with the same method? Had she deliberately tricked her?

It was when the path forked that the feeling of anxiety returned in force, banishing any hope that there might be a simple way back. Victoria was extremely aware of the whistle in her pocket, given to her by Madam Pince for a situation exactly like this. If she used it, how long would it take them to find her? It had apparently taken days to find Montague. And when they did find her, would they confiscate the pass? She couldn’t imagine them letting her keep it, if she needed rescuing the very first time she had stepped into the Restricted Section.

No, her only choice was to try to make her own way out. She followed the path this way and that, always picking the wider aisle when the way branched. Fresh hope blossomed when she found a central walkway, and that hope grew further when it led to a stone wall.

She had discovered the library’s edge. A large, heavy door of rusting iron was set into the wall, identical to the rune-engraved door next to Madam Pince’s desk. Was this a shortcut out of the library? Or perhaps it led to the forbidden books which only the teachers were allowed to read?

Those questions were destined to remain unanswered. Try as she might, nothing Victoria did could persuade the door to open.

She was at a dead end, and completely lost. The thought of retracing her steps was thoroughly disheartening, and she began to toy with the whistle in her pocket. Surely it wouldn’t take them so long to find her, positioned as she was next to a door on the outer edge of the library? Why, she might even get out in time for Herbology.

Her resolve to use the whistle solidified. But just as she moved to press it to her lips, she felt something very strange; the sudden sense that she had been there before. It was the strongest deja-vu which she had ever experienced, more concrete than any mere passing feeling, yet still possessing that surreal irreality which separated it from true memory.

Instead of fading, as deja-vu normally did, the feeling only grew stronger. Tentatively, Victoria took a few steps in a new direction, pausing after each one, cocking her head at the dreamlike haze descending over her mind. With each step, the sense of uncanny familiarity came to her afresh. She had travelled this path before. Excited, she began to walk faster, new purpose filling her. As she moved, she noticed a prickling, tingling sensation in her forehead, a light pressure hovering just above the skin. Each time she came to a crossroads, she followed that pressure, letting it guide her like a compass.

Quite abruptly, the feeling stopped. Victoria came out of the daze with a shake of her head, and she
looked around with despair: she wasn’t at an exit, or even close to one. If anything, she was even deeper in the library, the space between bookcases so narrow that she barely fit in the gap. What had she been thinking, wandering off at random like that? It was exactly the opposite of what Madam Pince had told her!

Her eyes landed on a book on the shelf in front of her. It was bound in a green fabric, and a long serpent was printed down its spine, which was otherwise blank. It was utterly unremarkable, just one book amid thousands of others, yet there was something familiar about it…

Without thinking, she reached for the book. It slid forward like a lever, and with the sound of grinding stone, the bookcase swung away to reveal a set of hidden stairs leading down into the darkness.

“This is such a bad idea,” Victoria muttered, but she found herself stepping into the stone passageway. The light of her lamp revealed cobwebs and dust, and her heart thudded heavily as she descended, her mind conjuring up images of skeletons, vampires, or, even worse, rats.

In fact the passageway led to a sturdy wooden door, which opened into a small, spartan study. A hearth sprung to life the moment she entered, casting warm light across the room, and Victoria looked around in curiosity. Though the study had clearly sat empty for a long time, it bore all the marks of having once seen heavy use: many books lined the shelves, no doubt spirited away from the library above, and the desk was covered with several mounds of parchment and half-melted candles. Right in the centre of the room was a small, circular pool of water, and judging by its murky depths, it seemed to go down a long way.

Most importantly, on the opposite side of the study stood another wooden door. A spy-hole was built into it, and Victoria stood on tiptoes to look through the warped glass.

Relief flooded through her. There, right on the other side of the door, stood the bookshelf full of blue books. She was no more than five minutes’ walk from the entrance to the Restricted Section, where the unmistakable light of tall stained-glass windows still penetrated the dusty air. It seemed likely that this door was also concealed within a bookcase, creating a secret passage which spanned a large part of the Restricted Section.

A grin grew on Victoria’s face. What luck! Not only had she escaped the labyrinth, she had managed to discover a secret place where she could study in private. She wondered who had created it, all those years ago.

Her curiosity was cut short by the distant sound of the bell ringing.

Victoria sighed. She was going to be late for Herbology.

* * *

In the weeks that followed, Victoria’s every spare moment was spent deciphering *Natural Magic*. It was easily the most difficult book that she had ever read, and her full focus was required to understand the author’s archaic style. It meandered from topic to topic, lacking any kind of sensible structure, with sentences that sometimes continued for more than a page. Indeed, it was not uncommon to start reading one of those sentences and, by the time it finished, to have completely forgotten how it had started.
To an outside observer, she must have looked quite mad as she hunched over the book in the common room, muttering to herself and making full use of Vernon’s colourful vocabulary to vent her uncharitable feelings towards the author. This display had become something of a spectator sport, with Tracey and Daphne eagerly anticipating Pansy’s looks of horror at each of her increasingly scandalous curses. Thankfully Draco wasn’t around to hear them: the moment she had given him the pass, he had embarked on his own adventure into the Restricted Section. She barely saw him outside of classes, and then, one Friday evening, he disappeared altogether.

As the weekend passed, his continued absence nagged at her. If anything, Susan was even more concerned, especially after having heard about Victoria’s own experience in the library.

“What if he’s been eaten by a minotaur?” Susan said at lunch on Sunday, “or a boggart could have got him. Or some kind of cursed book. We need to tell the teachers!”

By the time dinner rolled around, Susan was about ready to put together a rescue party, and Victoria mustered the courage to visit Professor Snape’s office to share her concerns.

“Let me make sure I understand you correctly,” Snape said slowly, his hands clasped before him, “Master Malfoy, who carries a pass signed by myself, is conducting a research project in the Restricted Section. He has broken no rules, nor has he been absent for no more than two days. And you think this is an issue worthy of my attention?”

Victoria fidgeted under Snape’s gaze. “But what if he’s lost?”

“Well, no, I suppose not, but maybe—”

“Then he does not wish to be found. Do not waste my time with this kind of nonsense again, Miss Potter.”

Luckily, Draco emerged from the Restricted Section several days later, a dazed expression on his face and a large, leather-bound tome clutched to his chest. He was covered with a number of strange scratches, some of which were bleeding, and he was taken straight to see the school nurse. But there was also a gleam of success in his eyes, and once he had escaped Madam Pomfrey’s care he too was to be found hunched over his book in the common room, joining Victoria in her evening reading.

“Oh, not you too,” Pansy moaned when she saw him bringing out the book, “I swear, the lot of you are becoming very boring. It’s beginning to feel like Ravenclaw in here.”

“At least you can tell your parents you’ve been spending more time around books,” Daphne said with a smirk, “are they still making you owl all your grades home?”

Victoria’s ears pricked, and she looked up with interest. Were Pansy’s parents unhappy with her grades? Judging by the glare which she was sending Daphne’s way, this information was not supposed to have been shared with the group.

“They’re just interested in my classes,” Pansy said with a defensive tone, before turning back to Draco. “What are you reading, anyway?”

But Draco refused to tell them anything about his book, and whenever someone tried to get a peek he would slam it shut with a scowl. It was all very mysterious, and Victoria couldn’t help but join in the speculation.
“Is it a book of hexes, perhaps?” Pansy suggested, craning her neck to try to see over the top.

“I hope so,” Victoria said, rubbing a bruise on her elbow, “I could use something special for Zacharias.”

Daphne sent her a sympathetic look. “He’s still winning?”

“I’ll get through his guard one day,” Victoria said. She ignored Pansy’s dubious laugh.

“Anyway, it can’t be hexes,” Tracey said, “it wouldn’t take days to find a book like that in the Restricted Section. I bet there’s tons of them.”

“Right,” Pansy said, nodding, “it must be something properly dark, like necromancy.”

Daphne’s lip curled in disgust. “Ew. Draco doesn’t want anything to do with dead bodies,” she said. “Does he?”

Draco didn’t respond.

Whatever the book contained, he clearly found it fascinating, becoming Victoria’s faithful but silent companion in the common room. As he made his way through its pages, she persevered with *Natural Magic*. It was slow going, and she was forced to take notes just to keep track of what the author was trying to say. If she had been any less interested in the subject matter, she surely would have set the book aside out of frustration. But chapter by chapter, she began to understand.

It turned out that there was a lot more to magic than just witchcraft and wizardry. In retrospect it seemed obvious: the very existence of magical plants, and of other magical creatures, suggested that magic was at work in the world around her. But Victoria had never paid these things much mind, having her plate full with learning how to use her own powers. She’d always assumed that magical plants and creatures were originally created by wizards. She was now coming to understand, however, that pretty much anything she could name had some measure of magical significance.

Magic wasn’t just an action that wizards performed. There was magic in the movement of the planets, in the lives of animals and plants, and even in the rock beneath her feet. And while it was true that wizards could harness those powers, they did so in a very different way to casting spells and brewing potions.

The anatomy of a spell was made up of human ideas—a theory here, a symbol there, all put together in a certain arrangement to perform a specific purpose. It was not magic in its natural form but rather a construct, a patchwork quilt of powers sewn together by human ingenuity and will. A world without wizards would be a world without spells.

Alchemy was different. Alchemy was something that wizards discovered, not invented. It concerned the composition of physical substance, and spoke of the strange connections between the celestial forces and those at work within matter. The book described the four elements, which were in fact no more than aspects of the single physical substance, and outlined magical experiments which could be performed to trigger and observe alchemical powers.

All of these concepts were ideas that Victoria could follow well enough, once she had translated the book’s flowery prose into normal language. Indeed, the part of alchemy which related to transmutation made a lot of sense, given what she already knew about transfiguration. Although an alchemical transmutation occurred naturally, with the wizard being no more than a trigger for the natural magic, a common theory of transformation underpinned both disciplines.
Much more confusing, however, were the sections of the book which strayed into the area of aetherial substance, which Professor McGonagall had mentioned only to dismiss as irrelevant. But according to Natural Magic, the aetherial and physical were closely interrelated: most significantly, in humans the elements came together to create the aetherial soul, which was apparently composed of a balance of brimstone, quicksilver and salt—the three primes. This was where the book completely lost Victoria, because as far as she was concerned, there was nothing aetherial about any of the primes.

It was clear that her study of natural magic was to be a long-term project. The more she read, the more she realised how little she understood.

Hogwarts did at least teach some natural magic, though it had never been described in those terms. From her Herbology classes, she was already familiar with the concept of the vital force which animated all living things, and her Astronomy lessons had taught her the links between the lunar cycle and dark magic. But the absence of alchemy from any of her classes was striking. Perhaps it was considered too difficult—Victoria was top of almost all her classes, yet even she was struggling with it. Nevertheless, until she could persuade Professor Flamel to teach her, it was clear that she was going to have to learn it by herself.

As much as she wanted to immerse herself in this new and fascinating subject, in truth she was limited in her ability to do so. The vast majority of her time was still spent on her regular school work, and her teachers continued to recommend additional reading to her in Charms, Transfiguration and Potions. After the events of Victoria’s first year exam, Professor McGonagall had become a particularly hard taskmaster, assigning her challenging exercises while the other students practised more basic techniques.

By the last Friday of September, the class was beginning to get the hang of water-shaping, a necessary prelude to the transformation of liquids and vapours. After several weeks of study and practice, it was no shock to find the desks of McGonagall’s classroom replaced with stone plinths, each one topped with a wide basin of water. The students were arranged around the basins in well-established groups, where they practised how to form waves, fountains, and water sculptures.

“Mutatio aqua!” Tracey said, taking her turn to cast the spell. Hesitantly, like a shy animal, a tendril of water rose up from the surface of the basin, wiggling this way and that under the direction of her wand. “Come on,” she muttered, twisting her wand impatiently, trying to tease the water into a figure of eight—for a moment, it looked like it would do as she commanded, but just as the water curved around, it slipped back, flowing back into the basin as if through an invisible tube. “Damn.”

“Bad luck,” Victoria said, giving Tracey what she hoped was an encouraging smile, “you were almost there.”

“I don’t get what I’m doing wrong,” Tracey said.

Victoria knew exactly what she was doing wrong. From the failure of the spell when the water was in complex motion, it was clear that she had forgotten the connections between the element of water and the form of the horse. “Perhaps you could read the section on Neptune again?” she suggested, “you might need a better bridge between water and motion.”

Tracey reached over to snatch a copy of A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration from Daphne and Pansy, who were unusually fascinated by the textbook, huddling over it and whispering to each other.

“Hey!” Daphne said, belatedly trying to keep a hold of the book, but she moved too slowly to
prevent Tracey from stealing it away.

“Calm down, I just need it for a mo’,” Tracey said, but when she looked down at the open page she frowned. “What’s this? Oh, Pansy... what _would_ your father say?”

Smirking, she angled the book so that Victoria could see inside. Secreted away within its pages was a _Twilfitt and Tatting_ catalogue, cleverly disguised to look as if it was a part of the book. A photograph of a model was twirling on the page, showing off a conservative dress robe with a long, flowing skirt.

“That’s a pretty nifty Chameleon Charm,” Victoria said, “so... I guess her father would be proud?”

“Oh, shush,” Pansy said, reaching over to take the book back, “we’re doing you a favour, aren’t we, looking at robes for the ball?”

“Well, I don’t want _that_ one,” Victoria said, waving at the open page, “it’s far too…”

“Stuffy,” Daphne said, nodding, “that’s what I was telling Pansy. It’s like a robe your mother would wear.”

“Fine,” Pansy said, and she flicked onto the next page, “but the classics don’t go out of style, you know.”

“Professor!” called Hermione from across the classroom, ”Professor, look!”

Inevitably, the entire class craned their necks to get a look at Hermione’s basin. She had formed the water into the shape of a single rose. It was hovering in the air and revolving under the direction of her wand, gleaming in the sunlight like the purest crystal. As McGonagall passed by their table, Hermione flicked her wand again, and individual petals began to fall from the flower, drifting down into the water below.

“Excellent work, Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall said, “five points to Gryffindor.”

Victoria turned back to their own basin and raised her wand. “My turn.”

She didn’t use the incantation, which she had long since mastered, and instead focused on summoning the unique mental state she associated with performing transfiguration by technique. It was a delicate thing, a balancing act where she held the spell just beneath her conscious mind. If she focused too hard, then she would end up thinking about a particular concept instead of the spell as a whole, but if she focused too little, the spell would lay dormant, too deep within her mind to take shape.

Patience was key. Like a word on the tip of her tongue, the spell had to linger at the top of her subconscious until it was ready to come forth.

“How about this one?” Pansy said loudly, completely shattering her focus. She had rotated the textbook around to face the others, a new dress robe displayed on the page. Despite herself, Victoria couldn’t help but take a closer look: it _was_ rather cute, simple but elegant, and a bit daring too, with a bit of a V-shape to the bodice.

“Ohh, yes,” Daphne said, “it’s so you, Vicky.”

But Victoria’s heart almost stopped when she saw the price. “Forty galleons!” she gasped, “for _one_ robe?”
“Well, it’s made from tumblegoat wool, isn’t it?” Pansy said, “you get what you pay for.”

“Tumblegoat?” Victoria asked. “What on earth’s a tumblegoat?”

“Here,” Daphne said, taking up her quill and leaning over to doodle in the corner of Victoria’s notes. With just a few deft strokes, an image took shape of a fluffy ball of wool, like a overgrown sheep without any limbs, the tip of its nose only just peeking out of its fleece. Daphne finished the doodle with a flourish, and then it came to life, withdrawing its snout into the wool before rolling across the page, bumping into a diagram of an ouroboros.

“Tumblewool’s just amazing,” Pansy said, rubbing her hands together at the mere thought of it, “it’s the softest thing you’ll ever wear.”

“It’s really warm, too,” Daphne added, “but as light as silk… perfect for a December ball, really.”

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Okay, I get it, tumblewool’s the best thing since Merlin. Still, forty galleons is a lot…”

Daphne and Pansy shared a look. “We’ll put it on the shortlist,” Daphne said, and she folded over the corner of the page.

Professor McGonagall approached their plinth.

“I’m hearing far too much chatter from this direction,” she said sternly, “I can only assume this means you have mastered the assigned material, and need additional work to keep you busy.”

Tracey looked rather alarmed by this prospect. “Um, not exactly…”

“Well then, let’s see how far you’ve got,” McGonagall said, before focusing on Victoria, “have you completed your task, Miss Potter?”

Victoria raised her wand once more, trying to ignore the pressure of McGonagall’s gaze as she concentrated on finding the right mental state. It was important not to rush it, to wait until the moment was just right…

There.

Her wand moved with practised confidence, like a conductor guiding an orchestra, and a small globe of water rose into the air. A forward jab and the globe began to shimmer, expanding and transforming into a thick mist, a cloud hovering over the basin. Victoria smiled, and with a downwards stroke of her wand, rain began to fall from the cloud, returning the water to its source and completing the oroborus.

“Awesome,” Tracey said.

McGonagall nodded with satisfaction. “Well done. I think you’re ready to start on true vapours… speak to me after class so we can discuss your reading.”

As had become the norm, she awarded no points. Victoria resisted the urge to sulk. That was the problem with raising her teachers’ expectations—it took a lot more to impress them.

As Professor McGonagall left them, Pansy turned back to her textbook.

“So, let’s talk colours…”
That evening, Pansy declared that their dorm would be hosting a sleepover to celebrate the end of the first month back at Hogwarts. A select group was to be invited, consisting of a number of girls from the other second year dorm, as well as those first years whom Pansy deemed “promising”.

Several hours of frantic activity followed as preparations were made to accommodate their guests, with a mousy-haired first year called Arabella Rudgwick recruited to do much of the heavy lifting. She diligently dragged mattresses up the stairs from the first year dorms, retrieved a large quantity of candles from the chandlery, and finally was sent to meet Fred and George Weasley, the unofficial managers of Hogwarts’ black market, to collect several packages of food and drink. In exchange for all her labours, Arabella was promised a place of her own at the party.

Their guests arrived as curfew came into effect, entering to find the dorm completely transformed. The warm glow of a hundred candles lit the room, and mattresses with pristine sheets had been placed between the four-poster beds, a stuffed toy resting on each pillow. Several racks of expensive robes lined the walls, selected from Pansy’s never-ending wardrobe, and every available surface had been colonised by an array of luxurious treats, from a large box of Honeydukes’ truffles to a bowl of juicy waterplums from Siam. The drinks on offer were no less exotic: there wasn’t a flagon of pumpkin juice in sight, and Victoria was having trouble choosing between the strawberry fizz, mint cordial, and Ogden’s Gingerfire Ale.

At the centre of the room was a circle of plump cushions. Pansy sat facing the door, straight-backed and regal, wearing a satin nightgown which made her look much older than she was. The Carrow twins were attending to her like handmaidens, and her arms were outstretched to either side, her hands resting on each of their laps to receive a skilled manicure.

“Come in, come in!” Pansy exclaimed, smiling brightly at the first arrivals, who were outfitted in an array of fashionable sleepwear. She proceeded to direct everyone to their allocated places. “Octavia, you’re next to Millie’s bed—no, not that one, the bed with the stuffed wolf—and Gertrude, you’re over there, between Tracey and Vicky…”

Looking at all the silk, chiffon and lace on display, Victoria was suddenly quite glad that she’d picked up some new nightgowns with Evelyn, else she would have stuck out like a sore thumb in one of her old cotton nighties. Only poor Arabella seemed to have missed the memo, dressed as she was in a set of very Muggleish flannel pyjamas.

Victoria shared a look with Daphne, who had joined her by the drinks. “Half-blood?” she asked quietly, jerking her head towards Arabella.

“Half-blood,” Daphne confirmed. She shook her head at the girl’s choice in pyjamas. “She’s going to need some friendly advice, that one.”

And for once, Pansy seemed to be in the mood to give it. “Goodness, Bella, are those men’s nightclothes?” Arabella blushed heavily and ducked her head. “No, no, that won’t do at all. Flora, darling, you’ll give her some help, won’t you? Second rail on the left, pick out anything you like…”

Flora released Pansy’s hand and led Arabella over to the racks of robes, where a number of Pansy’s spare nightgowns were to be found.

Victoria finally decided on the strawberry fizz and poured herself a glass. “Drinks, anyone?”
“Is that Mint Breeze?” asked Cecelia Chorleywood, a second year, “I’ll have some of that, please.”

“Ginger ale for me,” Tracey called out from her bed, where she was clutching a pillow to her stomach, “I forgot to take my moon potion.”

Victoria groaned. “Again?”

“Oh, you poor thing,” Pansy said, “we really ought to get you a calendar or something.”

“Maybe I could borrow Longbottom’s remembrall,” Tracey said.

“Can you imagine his face,” Daphne said with a giggle, “if you explained to him why you needed it?”

Everyone laughed, no doubt picturing the shy boy spluttering and blushing.

“Mind you,” Tracey said, “I don’t think I’d be much better. I can’t imagine a more awkward conversation.”

“How about you, Millie?” Victoria asked, waving an empty glass in the air, “drink?”

“Honestly, I’ve no idea how Longbottom even got into Gryffindor,” Pansy said, lifting her hand from Hestia’s lap to examine her nails, “he’s a born Hufflepuff if ever there was one.”

“Just water,” Millicent said, as she always did. Her choice was met with a series of boos and groans, but Victoria dutifully filled a glass with water.

“Maybe Neville has hidden talents,” Daphne said as she helped Victoria to distribute the drinks, “after all, his parents were Aurors. That kind of magic doesn’t just... disappear.”

As Daphne and Victoria were settling down on their cushions, Arabella returned from the bathroom wearing one of Pansy’s silk nightgowns.

“Well now, that’s better,” Pansy said, clapping in what appeared to be genuine approval, “look how pretty you can be, when you put some effort into it! Doesn’t she look beautiful, girls?”

Sounds of agreement made their way around the circle. Blushing once more, Arabella moved to take her place on the cushion closest to the door.

“Now that we’re all here, I have a little treat for everyone,” Pansy said, and she reached into a bag by her side to withdraw a bottle. The girls gasped—it was unmistakably wine-shaped. “Yes, it turns out those Weasley twins are good for something after all.”

Victoria grinned. She had missed the opportunity to try the wine at the previous year’s house party, having been rather preoccupied with solving Snape’s challenge, but the others certainly seemed to consider it an important milestone. This would be her chance to catch up with the rest of them.

“Vicky, would you do the honours?” Pansy asked, passing her the bottle.

“Sure.” She tapped the cork with her wand. “Alohomora!”

The cork popped out like it was a bottle of champagne, shooting across the room to hit Tracey, who was still on her bed.

“Hey!”
“Go on,” Pansy said, “try some.”

Victoria looked around. “We don’t have any more glasses.”

“Well then, bottoms up!” Millie said, and all eyes turned to Victoria as she brought the bottle to her lips. Hesitantly, she took her first sip of wine.

It was disgusting. She almost spat it out, the taste was so shocking, and all the girls laughed at the look on her face. She screwed up her eyes and forced herself to swallow the bitter liquid.

“Yes!” she said, gulping down some strawberry fizz to wash away the flavour. “I thought it would be sweet!”

And then the wine was making its way around the circle, all ladylike manners forgotten as they eagerly took turns to swig straight from the bottle. Like Victoria, most of them pulled faces at the foreign taste, but both Daphne and Pansy seemed to enjoy it, a fact that earned them admiring looks from the first years. Soon enough, it was Arabella’s turn.

“I don’t know…” she said, holding the bottle gingerly and taking a sniff. She cringed back, no doubt surprised at the smell. “Maybe I’ll pass…”

Everyone groaned.

“Boooring,” Tracey said from her bed in a singsong voice.

“Come on, it’s just a sip,” Daphne said, “what could it hurt?”

Pansy had the final word. “You can either join in, or you can go back to your dorm.”

For a moment, Arabella looked like she was seriously considering running off to her dorm, but then her face set and she took the biggest swig of them all. The first years cheered and Pansy pretended to wipe a tear from her eye.

“I’m so proud,” she said theatrically, before she broke out into a grin. “Watch out for this one, girls!”

The bottle went around the group two more times, enough to leave Victoria with a curiously warm feeling in her stomach, and each time she drank she tried to conceal her grimace. If Pansy and Daphne could enjoy it, then so could she.

A little bit of wine went a long way. Laughter came more easily, with simple jokes suddenly becoming great fun, and Victoria began to feel pleasantly lightheaded. Even Pansy’s plan of playing dress-up sounded like a good idea, with each of them taking turns to go through the robes and put together the most hideous outfit they could design. Gertrude started them off, picking out a red blouse and a green outer-robe that made her look like a walking Christmas tree, and Victoria followed it up with a purple dress robe matched with bright red shoes. Amusingly, Pansy refused to play her own game, claiming that she was the judge and therefore could not compete.

“My turn!” Daphne said excitedly, disappearing behind the lines of robes. She emerged several minutes later wearing pink and bronze, her long, golden hair catching the candlelight perfectly.

“How do I look?” she asked, striking a dramatic pose.

“That… actually kinda works,” Tracey said, cocking her head.
Daphne frowned. “Does that mean I lose?”

“I think it means you win,” Victoria said with a laugh.

Pansy huffed with annoyance. “Typical. Do try not to ruin the next game, Daph.”

By the time that they started on the dares, half the wine was gone. Emboldened by liquid courage, they gathered confidently around Pansy, who set her wand down on the floor.

“Dierdre the Daring Witch, who among us shall do your will?” Pansy intoned, before spinning the wand. It moved unnaturally fast, as if on a slippery surface, then slowed to land on Hestia Carrow.

Pansy smirked. “Hestia, I dare you to… hmm…” She drew the moment out, watching Hestia squirm nervously. “I know! I dare you to sneak into the boys’ dorms—and come back with Gregory Goyle’s stuffed unicorn.”

Everyone cheered except for Hestia, whose face was in her hands.

“Off you pop, then!” Pansy said with a grin, “oh, but don’t forget this!” She reached into the same bag as before and took out a pair of ornate handheld mirrors, one of which she passed to Hestia. “This way we can see what you’re doing!”

Hestia departed and the remaining girls gathered around Pansy’s mirror. It was an impressive piece of magic: the images on the mirrors had been switched, so that the girls could see whatever it was that Hestia’s mirror was pointed towards. They watched as she crept slowly towards the boys dorms, tiptoeing through the common room (which was mercifully empty of older students) and up the boys’ stairs.

“She’s actually doing it!” Flora whispered when Hestia reached the first landing. None of them had ever been up the boys’ stairs before.

After one more flight of stairs, she arrived at the second years’ landing, where she very carefully opened a door. Their hearts almost stopped when the door creaked loudly, but there was no sign that anyone had heard it. Although the room beyond was very dark, they could see that it was significantly tidier than their own dorm.

Pansy shook her head. “Draco’s such a neat freak, I bet he makes them tidy everything up.”

“Plus, they don’t have nearly as many robes as we do,” Daphne whispered.

“Uh, have you met Draco?” Victoria said, forcing Tracey to smother her laughter.

Meanwhile, Hestia was drawing back the curtain of a four-poster bed. Her hand was shaking visibly, but it was all for naught: it was Vincent’s bed, not Greg’s.

“She’s gonna get caught for sure,” Tracey said, shaking her head. “No way they sleep through her opening every curtain.”

But she got lucky on her next try. She pulled back the curtain to find Greg curled up, a worn-looking stuffed unicorn resting by his head. The unicorn looked up at Hestia with an expression of alarm before attempting to run away, but its little animated legs weren’t fast enough to escape. She grabbed it by its tail and ran for the exit.

“Yes!” Flora exclaimed, punching her fist, “she actually did it!”
“How did you know about the unicorn, anyway?” Daphne asked.

“Draco told me,” Pansy said, “apparently Greg’s mother gave it to him before she died, or something.”

Silence fell as everyone looked at Pansy in shock.

“What?” Pansy said defensively, “it’s not like we’re going to keep it.”

“Wow,” Millie said, shaking her head.

Victoria wasn’t surprised.

Hestia returned to the dorm in the flush of victory, receiving a standing ovation for her success. Millicent took custody of the unicorn, apparently quite concerned for its safety, and Pansy passed Hestia her wand.

“The next dare goes to the victor.”

Hestia spun the wand.

“Oh, no,” Arabella moaned when the wand landed pointing at her, but Pansy’s eyes lit up. She leaned over to whisper in Hestia’s ear.

“Hey, no fair!” Arabella complained, but the damage was done.

“I dare you to go to Professor Snape’s office,” Hestia said, “knock on his door, then run away.”

It was a brutal dare. Being caught by Draco and the boys was one thing, but being caught by Professor Snape? Victoria didn’t even want to imagine it.

But Arabella stepped up.

“Don’t forget the mirror, now,” Pansy said, “after all, it’s the only way for us to know if you did it or not!”

Arabella took a lot longer than Hestia. Pausing at every creek of a floorboard, it seemed to take forever for her to reach the common room entrance. She uttered the password and the wall parted to reveal the dark, empty corridor beyond.

And that’s as far as she got. She stood there, waiting by the common room entrance, staring out at the corridor beyond. Several times she moved as if to leave, but then she would waver before stepping back once more.

“She’s gonna bottle it,” Tracey whispered, shaking her head.

“Maybe she’s just working herself up to it,” Daphne said, but that was the moment that Arabella chose to turn and run, racing her way back up the stairs to the dorm.

“I couldn’t do it,” she confessed on her return, looking like she was about to cry, “what if Snape had caught me?”

“Fat chance of that,” Pansy said with a snort, “you didn’t even leave the common room.”

Arabella looked down in shame.
“Come on, she tried her best,” Daphne said, but Pansy just glared at her.

“Dares aren’t any fun if everyone can give up without even trying,” she said, “either you’re up for it or you aren’t. And if Bella isn’t, then she might as well go back to her dorm.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit harsh?” Daphne said, moving to wrap her arm around Arabella, who leaned into her, “she’s only a firstie.”

Pansy smirked. “Well, perhaps you want to take her place?” she said, “give the dare a go yourself?”

But Daphne was not so easily baited. “This is my dorm too,” she said, “I don’t have to do a dare to stay here.”

Victoria shared a look with Tracey. They’d never seen Pansy and Daphne argue before, and it was beginning to get very uncomfortable. Most of the girls were studiously avoiding eye contact, except for Millicent, who was obliviously making her way through the waterplums.

“Well,” Pansy said, “if you’re going to be a—”

“Ladies!” Victoria said, channeling her inner Evelyn, “how about we just get on with the game?”

Pansy and Daphne looked around, as if suddenly remembering that they were in public.

“Fine,” Pansy snapped. She snatched the mirror from Arabella, crossed the room to Victoria, and handed it to her. “Your turn, Vicky. I dare you to go to the entrance hall and push a suit of armour down the stairs.”

There was a pause as they all processed the insane dare. It was a recipe for detention, if not worse.

“There’s no way she’s doing that,” Millicent said, “no one’s gonna do that.”

It was probably the wine. Or maybe it was the simmering desire to show Pansy up, apparently not as buried as Victoria had thought. Whatever the cause, something made her say, “I’ll do it.”

Everyone, including Pansy, gaped at her.

“Vicky, don’t be silly,” Daphne said, “you don’t have to do a dare.”

But Victoria was already putting her slippers on. “I want to. Besides, I won’t be alone.” She whistled gently, opened the door, and Dumbledore came bounding into the room. She smiled down at him as he wound his way between her ankles. His fur was still warm from where he’d been lounging in front of the fire. “You’ll keep a watch out for me, won’t you?”

Dumbledore meowed, and the two of them set off into the darkness.

“Just like last year,” Victoria muttered as they crossed the common room, “I did it before, so I can do it again.”

Of course, the last time she had been wandering around after curfew, she hadn’t pushed a suit of armour down some stairs to draw attention to herself. She would need to run back to the common room as fast as she could, before the teachers had a chance to investigate. Even then, it was incredibly risky: she might happen across Snape as he made his way up from the dungeons, or a ghost might see her—or a portrait might tell on her, though portraits tended to forget things quickly.

Even though it was early autumn, the corridors outside the common room were cold enough to
make Victoria shiver. She dearly wished she had brought her bracelet with her, but she wasn’t going to double back for it now. So she braced herself against the cold and made her way up through the basement towards the entrance hall, emerging into the moonlit corridors of the ground floor. Fortunately, she didn’t run across any patrolling teachers on the way. By this time they were probably all in bed.

She arrived at the entrance hall via the small door built into the side of the grand staircase, where her entry would at least be concealed from most of the hall. The downside, of course, was that she too was only able to see half the hall, the other half being obscured by the staircase.

She paused at the door, listening keenly for the sound of any footsteps. The silence was broken only by the faint sound of muffled whispers coming from the mirror.

“Vicky, we can’t see properly,” Daphne whispered, “hold the mirror up, will you?”

She stepped through the door, the mirror held out in front of her like a camera. Dumbledore hissed, and she froze in place, her knees trembling as she braced herself for the inevitable approach of a teacher.

But there was no one there. As far as she could see, the entrance hall was completely empty. She edged further into the room with her back to the staircase, eventually coming to the point where she could poke her head over the banister to get a proper look around.

She almost dropped the mirror when she did. A message had been written high on the stone wall, right next to the enormous doors to the Great Hall:

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.
ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

A chill down Victoria’s spine. She didn’t know what the message meant, but something about the way it glistened in the darkness felt very wrong.

The voices in the mirror had gone quiet.

“Vicky,” Pansy whispered, “you need to get out of there.”

But then she saw it. Beneath the message, a person in black robes was sprawled on the floor. Dark liquid pooled around them, and she instantly knew that the message had been written in blood.

“Hang on,” she said, her voice shaking. She pointed the mirror downwards. “There’s someone there.”

“I’m getting Snape,” Tracey said.

“Wait!” hissed Daphne, “can’t you see how this looks? How’s she going to explain why she was there?”

Victoria ignored them. Against her every instinct, with her heart hammering in her chest, she approached the body.

It was Justin Finch-Fletchley. His face was deathly pale, and two puncture marks were clear on his
neck, blood still running from the wound.

For a split second, she wavered. Would the teachers think she had done this? She could still walk away and no one would know. But one look at Justin’s blue lips crushed that thought.

He was dying. She couldn’t just leave him there, no matter what punishment she would receive. She lifted the mirror up to her face.

“Get Professor Snape. Now.”
The castle awoke to the tolling of the North Tower bell. It rang through the stillness of the night, its deep, reverberating notes charmed to pierce even the deepest slumber, and on its heels came the distant sounds of slamming doors and raised voices.

In the entrance hall, fires leapt to life around Victoria. With the light came colour, confirming the gruesome source of the blood-red writing on the wall, and then Professor Snape was there, his robes billowing behind him as he rushed across the hall.

“Out of the way!”

He pushed past Victoria to descend on Justin with his wand in hand, waving it in patterns so complex that the line between spells began to blur. His casting moved fluidly from one to another, sometimes silently, sometimes with murmured incantations, and the blood which had pooled around Justin’s body started to flow in reverse, returning to its source. His face regained some of its colour and the blue tinge to his lips began to fade.

Through the numb shock of it all, Victoria couldn’t help but note a familiar element in the magic. “Ouroboros?” she muttered. It was just like her rainwater returning to the basin.

Snape ignored her. His face was set with concentration, and as she watched, she noticed that the movement of blood back into Justin’s body was slowing. A moment later it stopped entirely—the wound was resisting Snape’s spells. She knew of only one power that could achieve such a thing.

Dark magic.

“Blast!” Snape said, speaking to himself more than Victoria, and he clapped his hands. “Nippy!”

A house-elf wearing a pillowcase popped into existence, its large eyes widening as it looked between Professor Snape, Justin, and the writing on the wall.

“Go to Saint Mungo’s and inform them a healer is urgently required at Hogwarts,” Snape commanded, “a specialist in venoms, if possible.”

The house-elf disapparated just as Professors McGonagall and Flitwick arrived at the top of the marble staircase, gasping audibly when they saw the message on the wall.

“Severus!” McGonagall called, descending the stairs as quickly as her nighthobs would permit, “what on earth is going on here? Why is Miss Potter out of bed? And—” she caught sight of Justin “—is that a student?”

“All worthy questions,” Snape said without looking up. He had returned to casting spells on Justin,
fighting a losing battle against the venom which apparently ran through his veins. “But less urgent than Finch-Fletchley’s injury. A healer has been sent for. In the meantime, Filius, will you move him to the hospital wing? No doubt Poppy is ready to receive him.”

“Certainly,” Professor Flitwick said, and with a wave of his wand, Justin’s body lifted off the ground as if cradled by a giant invisible hand. The remaining pool of blood came with him, rising to form a floating sphere connected to Justin’s neck by a thin stream. “You’ll be brewing, I take it?”

Snape nodded. “I’ll start a batch of Mithridate immediately.”

“It’s that serious?” McGonagall asked.

“Perhaps,” Snape said, “much will depend on whether the healer can identify the venom. If not, a powerful alexipharmac will be required.”

“Then there’s no time to waste,” Flitwick said, “I will be assisting Poppy, if you need me.” He left abruptly, setting off for the hospital wing at a surprising pace for such a short man. Justin’s body floated after him.

“Go, Severus,” McGonagall said. She vanished the message on the wall and turned to Victoria. “I will handle matters here.”

The walk to Professor McGonagall’s office was one of the longest in Victoria’s life. Her chest was tight with dread, her mind blank as she tried to think of some way to explain her presence at such a macabre scene. Would she be suspended? Expelled? The mere thought of having to leave Hogwarts and return to the Dursleys made her hands tremble and her stomach twist. She was forced to remind herself repeatedly that she had done the right thing; that saving Justin’s life mattered more than avoiding punishment.

It certainly didn’t feel like she had done the right thing. Wasn’t altruistic action supposed to make you feel good?

They arrived at the Transfiguration corridor.

“In,” McGonagall commanded, opening the door to her office. It was rather austere compared to Professor Dumbledore’s, with none of his interesting knick-knacks, nor any concessions to comfort. A functional space dominated by filing cabinets, the only signs of character were a pair of bookcases and some half-empty shelves displaying Gryffindor’s trophies.

McGonagall sat at her desk and indicated for Victoria to take the wooden chair opposite.

“Miss Potter, I cannot stress the seriousness of this situation,” she said, her tone clipped and impersonal. “You were discovered out of bounds during curfew. A student is gravely injured, a message written in his blood for all the school to see. You will explain yourself.”

Victoria couldn’t bear to look at McGonagall’s face. “I didn’t attack Justin,” she said quietly, “he was like that when I found him, and the message too, whatever it meant. I didn’t see who did it… ask any of the girls from my dorm, they can tell you it wasn’t me. I found him, and then Tracey got Professor Snape, and then… well, I guess Professor Snape rang the bell.”

As she spoke, McGonagall picked up a quill, dipped it in some ink, and began writing on a sheaf of parchment. Once she had finished, she looked up and asked, “is that all?”

“I think so,” Victoria said.
“You can be sure that I’ll be investigating these claims further,” McGonagall said, “however, even on the assumption that you’re telling the truth, I remain dumbfounded as to what you were doing in the entrance hall at midnight. How did you come to be there in the first place?”

She hesitated. To explain that would be to explain the sleepover, the dares, and maybe even the wine. She was no tattle-tale. But what else could she say that would sound plausible?

“I… um… got the day mixed up,” Victoria said, her eyes fixed on her own feet as she spun the only lie she could think of, “I got confused and thought it was Thursday—we have Astronomy then, you know. So I was on my way to the Astronomy Tower and… that’s when I found him.”

Having completed her lie, she risked a glance up at McGonagall’s face. Her lips were very thin.

“Perhaps I have not been clear,” McGonagall said, “this is not a game. Nor is it a question of school rules alone. I do not exaggerate when I say that tonight’s events may well become the subject of a Ministry investigation. For your own sake if nothing else, you do not want to be caught in a lie by Ministry officials.” She paused and looked down at her notes. “In one breath, you tell me that you were on your way to Astronomy, presumably alone. Yet in another, you say that your friends can provide you with an alibi.”

Victoria swallowed audibly. Stupid! Why hadn’t she thought of that?

“One does not need to be an Auror to see the holes in this story,” McGonagall continued. “You’re not even carrying a telescope, just your wand and a…” Her eyes fell on the mirror, still gripped in Victoria’s left hand, and a look of dawning realisation crossed her face. “Give me the mirror, Miss Potter.”

There was no way to avoid it. She passed Professor McGonagall the mirror, getting a good look at its image as she leaned over the desk. It clearly depicted the empty dorm on the other side of the connection, the debris of the sleepover plain to see, with clothes, drinks and snacks strewn across the cushion-covered floor.

McGonagall set the mirror down on the desk and studied it for some time, her face inscrutable. “I see,” she said at last, with a tone of finality. She made some further notes. “Let us summarise the situation. From the story that you have told me, and from the evidence which I have seen, I do not believe that you had any role in Mr Finch-Fletchley’s injuries. Indeed, you may well have saved his life tonight. That must be taken into account—we are all very lucky that you happened to be there.”

Victoria blinked, looking up in hope. Was she going to get away with it?

But McGonagall wasn’t finished. “Nonetheless, such severe rule-breaking cannot go unpunished, even if by chance it had a fortuitous outcome on this occasion. I cannot imagine what you were thinking. This stunt was completely out of character for you, Miss Potter, and honestly I had expected better. Fifty points will be taken from Slytherin, and you will receive a detention to make sure you don’t forget it. Do not let this happen again.”

Somehow, the feeling of shame that accompanied her words was even worse than the fear that had preceded them. In spite of Professor McGonagall’s reserved and stern nature, no teacher’s opinion mattered more to Victoria. She had been the one to introduce her to the magical world, the one who had met the Dursleys and knew how they treated her, not to mention the teacher of her favourite class. It had always felt like they had a special relationship, and now she had thrown it all away for a dare. And that wasn’t even starting on the loss of fifty points—Slytherin was going to hate her. She just hoped it was all worth it.
“Justin will be alright, won’t he?” she asked.

A small measure of warmth returned to Professor McGonagall’s eyes. “Thanks to you, I believe so.”

* * *

News of the attack on Justin did not take long to spread around Hogwarts, nor did Victoria’s involvement remain secret for more than a few hours. By Saturday lunchtime, the school was abuzz with speculation regarding the identity of Justin’s attacker, the nature of his injuries, and precisely how the Girl Who Lived was involved.

The most popular theory was that Justin had been attacked by a vampire whose lair was to be found deep within in the dungeons. In a version of this story promoted enthusiastically by the Gryffindors, the vampire took on the identity of Professor Snape, and Fred Weasley had reportedly received a detention after asking Professor McGonagall if she had ever seen him in direct sunlight. The Slytherins knew this was all nonsense, of course: in their version of the story, Professor Snape had slain the vampire and saved the day.

Predictably, the teachers had not dignified these stories with a response; any questions about the incident were met with a stern look and an instruction not to spread rumours. But the flood of gossip running through Hogwarts’ halls could not be dammed, and it didn’t help that Justin was still in the hospital wing, with multiple healers spotted entering the school over the course of Saturday morning.

As for Victoria, her role in the story varied considerably, from bystander to accomplice. Stares and whispers followed her everywhere, as they had on several occasions before, but this time she wasn’t in the mood to share the morbid details. Eventually it all became too much, with several students outright demanding that she divulge her knowledge of events, and she was forced to leave the castle with Susan just to get a moment of peace and quiet.

They made their way to their favourite picnic spot, on the large flat rock overlooking the lake. The brisk autumn wind coming off the water guaranteed them privacy, and they huddled beneath their cloaks as Victoria told Susan everything: about the sleepover and the dares, the writing on the wall and the puncture wounds on Justin’s neck.

“So it was a vampire!” Susan said, her eyes lighting up. She had done well to conceal her urge to speculate while Victoria was venting her feelings, but it was clear that she could no longer contain herself. “But how could a vampire get into Hogwarts?”

“I’m not so sure,” Victoria said, “Snape was talking about venom… do vampires have venom in their bites? I’ve never read about them.”

Susan shrugged. “Me neither. But it’s not impossible, is it? Vampires are magical beings, after all… maybe they’re like werewolves, and their bite is cursed.”

“Well, won’t Justin be able to tell us, once he wakes up?” Victoria said, “surely he saw whoever attacked him?”

“Probably not, if it was a vampire.” Susan said, “in the stories they always surprise their victims. Or hypnotise them. Or—” she blushed “—seduce them.”
Victoria smirked. “At least that rules Professor Snape out.”

The conversation then devolved into giggles as they each imagined Professor Snape attempting to charm Justin.

“Mister Finch-Fletchley,” Susan drawled, her voice deep and nasal in an awful imitation of Professor Snape, “is that a new haircut? One million points to Hufflepuff.”

“No, no, like this,” Victoria said, before lowering her own voice, “Finch-Fletchley, your potion is… acceptable. Come to my office and I’ll show you my collection of eyeballs.”

For a moment, as they took turns to come up with ever more ridiculous scenarios, Victoria completely forgot that she was supposed to be worried. She was just a girl laughing with her best friend. But as the distant crack of apparition echoed from the direction of Hogwarts’ gates, their laughter came to an abrupt end. Another healer had arrived from St. Mungo’s hospital.

She sighed. “To be honest, I’d be happy if Justin could just tell everyone it wasn’t me… they’re all staring at me like I was the one who attacked him.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” Susan said, “I don’t think anyone really believes a second year could use such serious dark magic. If I were you, I’d be more worried about the rumour that you’re Justin’s secret girlfriend.” She paused and looked Victoria in the eye. “You’re not, are you? You do always sit next to him in Defence…”

“What?” Victoria said, genuinely surprised. For a moment she was so put out that she couldn’t form a response; it had never even occurred to her to contemplate Justin romantically. “Um, no. He’s just a boy, isn’t he?”

Susan snorted. “And aren’t you just a girl?”

“You know what I mean. None of the boys in our year are… well, none of them are like Cedric or Roger.”

“Or Professor Lockhart,” Susan sighed. “If only he’d been there when Justin was attacked—none of this would’ve happened.”

Victoria decided not to comment on that. “I’ll just be glad when everything goes back to normal.”

A return to normalcy turned out to be rather ambitious. In truth, only one fact about Victoria’s involvement was known: whatever she had done, she had managed to lose her house fifty points in a single night. Her housemates were aghast when they finally noticed that the Slytherin hourglass in the entrance hall contained fifty fewer emeralds than the night before, a loss so substantial that they were now dead last in the house cup rankings.

Blame was quickly allocated. The prefects apparently thought Professor McGonagall’s punishment was too lenient, and on Saturday evening they summoned Victoria to the semi-circle of armchairs around the fireplace, where the older students always gathered. They made her stand in front of the Dark Lord’s empty chair as they announced their judgment.

“Never, in all my six years at this school, have I ever seen a student lose fifty points at once,” Gemma Farley said, “it’s unprecedented. A few years ago, back when Selwyn was Head Boy, you would’ve received five strikes of the cane for it… but luckily for you, we live in a more civilised time.” She glared at Joseph as she said that, and Victoria was suddenly grateful that he hadn’t been the one to decide her punishment. She knew from duelling that he had a somewhat physical sensibility. “So, we’ve decided on an alternative set of punishments, which will last all of next
week. Firstly, you are to eat dinner alone, right at the end of the table with the first years. Secondly, you will obey a curfew of seven o’clock, even at the weekend. And lastly… we’re squibbing you.”

That did not sound good.

“Squibbing?” Victoria asked.

“You’ll hand your wand in to me,” Joseph said, sprawled across his armchair like it was a throne, “it’ll be given to you for classes and homework, but after dinner you’ve got to give it back. You’ll have to do everything like a Muggle.”

“What?” Victoria said, shock filling her. “No!”

They couldn’t take her wand. It just… wasn’t done. Even the cane would have been better—at least that would have been over quickly.

“If you disobey us, you won’t like the consequences,” Joseph said, and there was a dangerous glint in his eyes. “You must have heard the stories.”

She had. In many ways, the prefects wielded more power than the teachers did, their punishments being significantly more creative than those prescribed by official school policy. A boy might get a beating; a girl could have her hair shorn off, or all her underwear stolen.

There was no choice. “All right,” she said, her voice shaking, and, with great reluctance, she handed her wand—eleven inches, holly, with a phoenix feather core—to Joseph.

It was a very public punishment. The only saving grace was that the other participants in the sleepover seemed to share in the blame, with Pansy in particular receiving an unusually cold shoulder from the older students. They didn’t lose their wands though. That punishment was reserved for Victoria, and she felt naked without it.

Everything changed when, on Wednesday morning, word leaked of the message that had been written in Justin’s blood. One of the other girls must have revealed it, perhaps in an effort to regain standing with the upper years, and it launched a fresh wave of speculation, even more feverish than the last.

“I don’t get it,” Victoria said after lunch, as the Slytherin girls were making their way down to the Quidditch Stadium, “why’s everyone so excited about this Chamber of Secrets stuff? I’ve never even heard of it.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t know, what with your Muggle background,” Pansy said, ignoring the fact that the others were equally ignorant. “Basically, it all started when Salazar Slytherin wanted to make Hogwarts more exclusive, with higher standards than just… well, anyone with magic. Only people from proper wizarding families would be allowed to attend. But the other founders disagreed, so they threw him out of the castle.”

“And a good thing too,” Daphne said, linking her arm with Tracey’s, “else we’d never have a Davis in our group! Proper family or not, a witch is a witch.”

“Yes, thank goodness,” Pansy said sweetly, “after all, if all the half-bloods were gone, Vicky wouldn’t be here either, and wouldn’t that be such a pity.”

Victoria’s eyes narrowed. Pansy couldn’t have sounded less sincere if she’d tried.
“Don’t be silly, Vicky’s a Potter,” Daphne said, “her family’s almost as old as Draco’s… what is it, thirteenth-century?”

“Twelfth,” Victoria supplied, not even trying to keep the smug tone out of her voice. She had never set too much store by family history, but she wasn’t going to pass up a chance like that.

A dark look crossed Pansy’s face. Although she was by far the richest of the Slytherin girls, it was well known that both Daphne and Victoria bore older, more prestigious names. The Parkinsons didn’t enter the history books until the civil war, when a young Perseus Parkinson had served as one of Brandon Swann’s chief lieutenants.

“That’s neither here nor there,” Pansy said quickly, “anyway, it was Muggleborns that Salazar Slytherin really wanted to keep out. So he built a secret chamber within the castle, and put a monster inside of it, one that could wait for his heir to arrive and purge the school of anyone unworthy of magic.”

Victoria grimaced. “And by *purge*, you mean…”

“Kill,” Daphne said, suddenly serious.

An uncomfortable silence stretched out, each of them realising the grave implications of the attack on Justin. Was Hogwarts even safe for Muggleborns anymore? Surely more attacks would follow. And what about half-bloods? Regardless of what Pansy had said, what if Slytherin’s heir had even higher standards than his ancestor?

The silence was eventually broken by Tracey.

“Wait… are you saying the vampire is *Salazar Slytherin*?”

By the time Victoria had changed into her flying robes and made her way to the duelling grounds, the story had spread to the whole student body. Her fellow duellists were already chatting excitedly in their groups when she arrived, but a hush fell when they saw her, many of them sending meaningful looks at their companions.

Victoria could feel the weight of their attention as she crossed the clearing to where Susan was waiting for her. “What’s going on?” she asked, huddling close so they wouldn’t be overheard, “is there something wrong with my hair?” She raised a hand to pat at the braid holding her bun in place, but everything felt right. “Do you have a mirror?”

Susan rolled her eyes. “Your hair’s perfectly fine, and no, obviously I didn’t bring a *mirror* to duelling practice. Honestly. They think you’re the Heir of Slytherin is all.”

“Oh, is that all?” Victoria said sarcastically, and she met the eyes of Ernie Macmillan, who rapidly looked away. “They only think I’m a *homicidal maniac*?”

“It’s just a silly rumour,” Susan said with a shrug. “They’ll move on to another one by the end of the day. After all, you’re standing in the sun, aren’t you? Clearly you’re not a vampire.”

Silly or not, the rumour was having a powerful effect. After they had warmed up, one by one the second years refused to pair with Victoria.

“Well, what’s gotten into you all?” Flitwick said. He was frowning with disapproval. “Miss
Potter makes a perfectly good partner.”

The group remained silent. Red in the face with humiliation, she sent a desperate look at Susan, but Flitwick had already paired her up with Ernie.

Zach stepped forward. “I’ll duel her.”

Victoria’s heart sank, but conjurers couldn’t be choosers. She collected her wand from Joseph Deverill and found some free space at the edge of the clearing, watching as Zach used some chalk to mark out a duelling distance of twenty paces.

“Don’t worry,” he said when he passed her the chalk, “I know you’re not the Heir of Slytherin.”

“Thanks,” Victoria said. Perhaps she had judged him too quickly?

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” he continued, “we’ve all seen how you duel. There’s no way the Heir of Slytherin would be so useless.”

Or perhaps not. Her smile became fixed as she tried to hide her annoyance, focusing on the duel ahead, running her wand through the well-practised motion of the general block. There was just something uniquely infuriating about Zach, but she always duelled even worse when he managed to get under her skin.

“Okay,” Victoria said, adopting a duelling stance, “hit me.”

He did exactly that. In a now-familiar routine, he struck her again and again with the Trip Jinx, sending her repeatedly to the ground while blocking all of her spells in return. The autumn rains had at least softened the soil, but the wet mud rapidly splattered her robes and face. Her bun loosened with each fall, and she had to consciously suppress her instinct to subtly metamorph her hair back to perfection.

Zach sighed. “Come on, Potter,” he said as she landed once more in the mud, “as fun as this is, I’m going to go rusty if all I do is knock you over.”

If anything, his pity was even worse than his victorious gloating. But for all her practice in the common room, there was a lot more to duelling that simply knowing how to block... what she needed was more time.

An idea came to her—all she would have to do was swallow her pride.

She looked up at Zach with wide eyes. “You’re just so fast,” she said, a tone of admiration in her voice, hoping she wasn’t laying it on too thick, “I don’t think I could ever beat you to the draw. I know the block, but I can’t finish it quick enough.”

Zach preened. “Father did always say I have excellent reflexes… you know I’ve been learning to duel since I was eight?” He paused, thinking. “Okay, Potter, how about this: I’ll count down to the spell; that way you can start the block before I cast. Maybe then you’ll have a chance against me.”

Victoria had to look away to hide her smile. Sometimes, boys could be awfully predictable. “Okay,” she said quietly, getting back to her feet. “Let’s give that a try.”

Zach readied his wand. “Here it comes, then. Three, two, one… Cadere!”

She sprang into motion the moment he began counting, her wand swinging in a low crescent as silver light swirled around Zach’s outstretched wand. She felt a resistance, as if her arm was
moving through water, but it gave way before her, and she completed the block just as he uttered the incantation. The silver light spluttered and died.

A successful block.

“I did it!” Victoria cried, a mad grin on her face, “I blocked it!”

Zach snorted. “Don’t get cocky now,” he said, “after all, in a real duel you wouldn’t know what was coming.”

But nothing he said could rid her of the deep feeling of satisfaction which accompanied her first ever block. It may have been a qualified victory, but it was the first progress she had made in a month of duelling, and now that she knew how it felt she was sure she could improve further.

“Let’s do it again,” she said, eagerly raising her wand, and though he sighed, Zach did not refuse her.

They continued in that way for some time, abandoning all pretence of taking turns to cast. She would defend and he would attack, each time counting down to his spell, and each time she was able to block it faster than the last.

It was an addictive feeling. The brief moment of resistance, when she would push through Zach’s magic to break his spell, was unlike anything she had ever experienced. The more she did it, the more she realised that it was not a physical sensation at all—she wasn’t using the strength of her arm to break the spell, but something else—something exhilarating. In that moment, she felt closer to her magic than any other time, save perhaps for when performing transfiguration by technique.

Professor Flitwick passed them just as she completed another block. “Excellent progress, Miss Potter! Five points to Slytherin. Now, let’s see you do it again.”

They demonstrated for the Professor.

“A curious methodology,” he said, “and clearly effective. But you mustn’t become dependent on your opponent announcing his spells in advance… now that you’re getting the hang of it, you should try shortening the count.”

They did as he recommended, and before long they were back to practising with no count at all. Of course, with Zach’s handicap removed, Victoria soon became reacquainted with the mud. This time, however, she felt none of the powerless frustration of past attempts. This time she knew that she could win. It was just a matter of time.

Sure enough, her moment came.

Zach stood side-face, his wand raised over his head. Victoria mirrored his stance, her own wand held to her left shoulder. The world stood still as he waited to pounce, his face blank, his eyes calculating. He was trying to make the moment of his casting as unpredictable as possible, a strategy that had worked well for him in the past.

But as he lingered with wand aloft, Victoria felt something new: some primal instinct called out to her, a thrill rushing through her veins just before he moved.

“Cadere!” he cried, bringing his arm down—

But she was already in motion. Her wand swept in an arc, and his spell died before it formed.
“Yes!” she cried, her arms shooting upwards in celebration.

Zach lowered his wand, surprise clear on his face. But he mastered his expression quickly, his cocky smirk returning. “Perhaps there’s hope for you after all, Potter,” he said. “Time to start using more than just the Trip Jinx, don’t you think?”

Victoria’s smile froze.

“Crap.”

It was back to square one. Faced with the additional difficulty of first having to identify his spells, her strange ability to anticipate his casting abandoned her completely. More often than not she hadn’t even started the correct block by the time his attack hit her.

A strange, miserable dance followed as she hopped around the duelling grounds, yelping each time Zach struck her with the Birching Jinx. It was considerably more painful than the Trip Jinx, landing with a stinging slap akin to the whipping motion of a stick. Thin red lines were left in its wake, marking the skin until they faded a few minutes later.

Victoria found herself missing the innocent days of falling in the mud.

Their practice was mercifully interrupted by the sounds of apparition. Multiple loud cracks echoed from the direction of the school gates, not too far from the duelling grounds, and training came to an abrupt halt. Excited conversation picked up, and several groups of students drifted towards the tree line where they could get a good look at the path leading up to the castle.

“Back to practice, everyone!” Flitwick cried, but he was largely ignored. A party of adult wizards was making its way up the path, led by none other than Lucius Malfoy, who moved with characteristic poise, his fine cape fluttering in the wind. Next to him loped a taller, bearded figure with a grim expression. He had a mane of tawny hair flecked with grey, and wore wire-rimmed spectacles which did nothing to hide his piercing, yellow eyes. A gaggle of followers in black work robes scurried after the two men, clutching parchment, quills and all the accoutrements of administration.

Zach frowned. “That’s Rufus Scrimgeour,” he said in surprise, pointing to the tall wizard, “the head of the Auror Office.”

“You can tell, can’t you?” Victoria said, eyeing the Auror curiously. Though he walked with a limp, he moved like a predator.

“They must have come about Justin,” Ernie said, joining them at the edge of the trees. “Strange for the Ministry to interfere at Hogwarts, though.”

“Whoever attacked Justin, my Aunt Amelia will get to the bottom of it,” Susan said proudly. “She’s the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, you know.”

Victoria was too preoccupied to laugh. If an Auror had come to Hogwarts, did that mean he would want to speak to her? She didn’t much fancy having to explain herself again, and definitely not to Rufus Scrimgeour.

“Look!” someone called, “Dumbledore’s coming!”

The headmaster was strolling down the path towards the Ministry wizards, his grand, purple robes a stark contrast to their plain attire. To Victoria’s eyes, only Lucius seemed his equal, an image of dignified nobility in all his finery.
The two groups met within earshot of the duelling grounds.

“Welcome to Hogwarts, gentlemen,” Dumbledore said, his arms gathered in his sleeves before him. “I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage, however. Perhaps I missed your owl? The Ministry will not have forgotten that advance notice is required of any visitor to the school.”

“You can drop the bureaucratic nonsense, Dumbledore,” Scrimgeour said gruffly. “We’re here by invitation.”

Lucius smiled tightly. “Quite. I’m afraid the governors are rather concerned by this attack, headmaster. The troll last year, and now this? There are some who say you’re losing your touch.”

Dumbledore bowed his head. “I defer, as always, to the wisdom of the governors. Shall we retire to my office? No doubt you have further such wisdom to share.”

Victoria frowned at their retreating figures, sharing a worried glance with Susan. “Why are they blaming Dumbledore?” she said, “there’s nothing he could have done, is there?”

“Madness,” Ernie said, shaking his head. “Dumbledore’s the greatest wizard of the age. If he can’t find the Heir, you can be sure the Ministry can’t.”

* * *

The Ministry wizards remained at the school for several tense days. They scuttled across the castle in groups, prodding walls with their wands, interviewing portraits and searching for trap doors under rugs. Their favourite activity was scattering some kind of golden powder around the entrance hall, which they did on a number of occasions, always under the supervision of Rufus Scrimgeour. The powder would float in the air, glowing where it caught the light, and swirled around to form various shapes: a student walking into the Great Hall, a ghost floating through a wall, Filch mopping the floor.

This process always attracted a great deal of curiosity from the students, who watched from an unusually respectful distance. Like Professor Snape, there was something innately authoritative about Scrimgeour’s bearing, and even Peeves the poltergeist gave him a wide berth.

Of course, the intimidating presence of the investigators did not stop the students from gossiping. In spite of Susan’s prediction that everything would blow over, Victoria remained the centre of many rumours—as the only student present at the scene, and a Slytherin to boot, she was competing with Professor Snape for top contender as the Heir of Slytherin.

Salazar Slytherin the thousand-year-old vampire was running a close third.

Whatever the Ministry wizards were looking for, they didn’t find it. To Victoria’s relief, they never summoned her for interrogation, and they departed the castle on Friday afternoon, just before she reported to the Gamekeeper’s hut for detention.

After spontaneously exploding the year before, Hagrid’s hut had been rebuilt in a rather ramshackle manner, with many gaps in the stone walls boarded up with planks of wood. The land still bore the scars of the fire, a sizeable patch of scorched earth surrounding the hut, and Hagrid’s annual crop of oversized pumpkins was looking decidedly the worse for wear.
The explosion itself remained a mystery, although Draco insisted that Hagrid had simply got drunk and tried to cast some magic—the giant of a man had famously been expelled from the school in his youth, his wand snapped and education left incomplete. For her part, Victoria had tried to reserve judgement. In her brief interactions with Hagrid, he had never seemed like a bad man, but, as Draco pointed out, there had to have been some reason for his expulsion.

Hagrid was waiting for her outside of his hut, a large bloodhound by his side. With the huge pumpkins distorting her sense of proportion, from a distance he appeared almost normal-sized, but as she got closer his true scale was revealed: he was three times her width, and well over twice her height, such that she had to crane her neck to look up at his heavily bearded face.

“All righ’ there?” he said cheerfully as she approached. His dark eyes crinkled when he smiled, and he was looking down at her with almost fatherly affection.

“Good afternoon, Mister Hagrid,” Victoria said politely. She wasn’t quite sure what authority he held within the school, but she thought it best to treat him like one of the Assistant Professors. “I’m here for my detention.”

“Ah, call me Hagrid, ev’ryone else does,” he said. “Surprised t’see yer in detention, though... always figured yer the type ter follo’ the rules.”

Victoria smiled weakly. “Well, they say rules are meant to be broken.”

“Yer ol’ dad always did like a bi’ o’ trouble,” Hagrid said with a chuckle, “so maybe it ain’t so surprisin’ after all.”

“Mister Lupin mentioned something like that,” she said, “but I’ve actually never had a detention before... what exactly do you do?”

Hagrid rubbed his hands together. “Got a proper treat for yer today,” he said, leading her to wonder if he actually understood the purpose of a detention, “gonna be headin’ inter the forest.”

Victoria’s eyes widened. “The forest? You mean... the forbidden forest? Is that... um, allowed?”

“No need ter worry ‘bout tha’,” Hagrid said, “we ain’t goin’ deep, yer won’t see no centaurs or anythin’ int’restin’. But Professor Sprout wants some plants collectin’, so we’re gonna see wha’ we can find. Knows ‘er plants, Professor Sprout does.”

Looking up at Hagrid dubiously, Victoria couldn’t help but wish that Professor Sprout was coming with them. Sure, Hagrid was big, but he wasn’t a properly qualified wizard. What would happen if they did come across some monster? As far as she was concerned, her encounter with the troll had been more than enough adventure for one lifetime.

“I don’t even have my wand,” she said, “perhaps I should go get it?”

“No wand?” Hagrid asked, his bushy eyebrows rising. “Why not?”

She blushed. “It was... confiscated.”

“Well, too late t’go back an’ get it now,” he said. “But don’t yer worry, we ain’t goin’ in alone. Look, ‘ere ‘e comes now.”

She turned around to see Professor Lockhart strolling down the path. He was dressed in periwinkle flying robes, knee-high leather boots, and a warm sable cloak—the very image of a prepared adventurer. Victoria, still wearing her school robes, couldn’t help but feel rather shabby in
“What a beautiful afternoon!” Lockhart declared as he arrived, “just the season for Ravenclaw colours, don’t you think?”

He wasn’t wrong. The sun was low in the sky, with just a couple of hours to go before sunset, and it cast long shadows across the grounds.

“If ye’ say so,” Hagrid said with a shrug. As always, he was wearing the same oversized fur coat, its numerous pockets bulging with mysterious items. She doubted he had read a fashion magazine in his entire life.

Lockhart turned to face Victoria. “And here we have our young miscreant!” he said, “out of bounds in the middle of the night, caught at the scene of a ghastly crime… why, it sounds like a scene from one of my plays! Next time you’re looking for a starring role, my girl, come to me… I dare say we can find some kind of cameo role for you. After all, I understand you have a bit of a following already—all that business with He Who Must Not Be Named!”

For a second, Victoria was lost for words. “That’s not… I mean, I didn’t… I just found Justin, I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Of course you didn’t!” he said, before winking at her in an exaggerated fashion.

Hagrid coughed. “Righ’, we best be headin’ off, ‘fore the sun goes down.”

“A splendid idea,” Lockhard said, extending his arm towards the forest. “Lead the way, my dear man!”

They set off down a rocky track towards the eaves of the forest, Hagrid’s dog Fang running off ahead, occasionally pausing to look back at them as if exasperated by their slow pace. Hagrid was next in line, his long legs gifting him with an enormous stride, leaving Victoria alone with Lockhart.

“Victoria, Victoria,” he said as they walked, placing a hand on her shoulder, “I blame myself of course… it was natural, really, for you to become jealous and act out. Before I came along, I’m sure you were the centre of attention here. But my dear girl, you can’t just go around attacking other students!”

Irritated, Victoria shrugged his hand off her shoulder. “I told you, sir,” she said, “I didn’t—”

“I know, I know,” Lockhart said with a sigh, “you have to maintain your story. I understand. But a word of warning, from one celebrity to another… there’s a fine line between fame and infamy, and you don’t want to end up on the wrong side. After all, no dark wizard has ever won Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award!” He paused, thinking. “It must do awful things to the teeth, dark magic. Just look at Professor Snape…”

Victoria shook her head in disbelief, forcing herself to swallow her reply. She knew better than to get into an argument with a teacher, especially when she was already in detention. “Thank you for the advice, sir. I’ll consider it carefully.”

“Make sure you do!”

They entered the forest, the russet evidence of autumn all around them. Although the trees were not yet bare, the ground was covered with a bed of fallen leaves which crunched underfoot, and the wild hedges were overflowing with berries. As she stepped on a horse chestnut seed, Victoria
couldn’t help but think back fondly to the long hours spent wandering the castle, conker in hand, trying to find the Ravenclaw common room.

It wasn’t long before they came across the first item on Professor Sprout’s shopping list.

“‘Ere we go,” Hagrid said, going down on one knee to examine a patch of seven-leaf clover, his club-like fingers surprisingly deft as he felt the leaves. “Looks ‘ealthy enough. Come on, Victoria, yer can give me an ‘and.”

He pulled a trowel from one of his many pockets and started to dig, making sure to go deep to get the roots. Victoria took a more direct route: just as Madam Bloom had taught her, she pinched one of the white, spiky flowers which topped the clover and gave it a firm but gentle pull. The plant wiggled and shuddered in protest, but it dutifully slid out of the ground, reminding her of a young child led by the ear.

“There, there,” she said, comforting the plant, tying its dangling roots into a figure of eight. The knot would keep it alive until it could be repotted.

“That’s one way ter do it,” Hagrid said with a smile, “got a way with plants, do yer?”

“I guess,” she said with a shrug. Secretly she was quite pleased with the compliment, but no one liked a braggart.

Once extracted, the clover disappeared into another one of Hagrid’s apparently never-ending pockets. Thrice more they repeated this routine, collecting singing crocuses, purple-headed mushrooms, and, from a small pool beside the path, a diving waterlily.

“Think that’s enough fo’ now,” Hagrid said, looking Victoria up and down as she tried to wring water out of her robes. The lily had not come easily. “Best get yer back t’ the castle t’ dry out.”

“Not quite yet, Hagrid,” Lockhart said, finally piping up. He hadn’t helped them with a single plant. “Just a small detour first, if we may.”

Victoria groaned, wishing she had her wand to cast a Drying Charm. “Come on, then,” she said, marching off further down the path, “the sooner we get it, the sooner we can go back.”

The “small detour” turned out to be rather longer than expected, and rather miserable besides. Victoria’s shoes were making squelching sounds with her every step, and her wet robes clung to her body in a way that made her feel rather self-conscious. Finally, as the forest began to grow dark around them, they found what Lockhart was looking for: a bush full of red berries which gave off the scent of honey.

“Aha!” Lockhart said, descending on the bush to pick a handful of berries. He paused, giving Victoria and Hagrid a sideways look. “This is just between us, you understand. We can’t let anyone know the secret ingredient to Lockhart’s Liquid for Luscious Locks, can we?”

Victoria snorted. After Professor Snape had taken her Founder’s Oak, the concept of a teacher using school property for personal gain didn’t even surprise her.

It was as he was collecting a second handful that she heard it: a twig cracking in the bushes, not far from where they stood, followed by an ominous clicking sound.

She froze. “Hagrid,” she hissed, “did you hear that?”

“What?” Lockhart said, his voice alarmed, “hear what?”
“Shh!” Hagrid said, and they fell silent.

The clicking came again, so quick that it was almost a rattle. Fang growled.

“It don’t make no sense,” Hagrid muttered, “they ain’t supposed to come this close ter the path.”

The bushes rustled. It was getting closer.

“I don’t like this...” Victoria said, backing away. It was like the troll all over again.

“Right then, back to the school!” Lockhart called, and he didn’t even wait for them before fleeing back down the path.

Victoria didn’t need telling twice: she ran after him, her hair blowing in the wind, the growing chill of her sodden robes barely an afterthought as her mind conjured up monstrous images of werewolves and hags looming in the bushes. They had stayed in the forest too long, and darkness was now well and truly upon them—it became difficult to see the path properly, and in her haste she failed to spot a root in time; she stumbled and fell, her hands landing in a rather prickly patch of dark orange thorns.

“Ouch!” she hissed, withdrawing her hands quickly, but it was too late—her palms were all cut up, each scratch burning as if caused by Zach’s Birching Jinx.

Hagrid was there a moment later, helping her up as if she weighed no more than a cat.

“‘Ere now, let’s take a look at yer,” he said, lifting her hands to examine them in the moonlight. Angry red lines criss-crossed her palms, and her skin was beginning to puff up around them.

“It stings,” she whined.

Hagrid shrugged. “Yer’ll live. Jus’ make sure ter wash ‘em out proper, back at the castle. Can get a nasty pox from some o’ the things in the forest, if yer not careful. Come on now, no need to rush... there ain’t nothin’ followin’ us.”

It wasn’t long before they caught up with Professor Lockhart, who was waiting for them by the patch of clover. He had finally lit his wand, but the silvery glow barely penetrated the dense foliage around them.

“Ah good, there you are,” he said, running a hand through his still-perfect hair. He looked rather relieved to see them. “Nasty business, that. Of course, I could have handled whatever beast lurked in the shadows... it would’ve been only too easy. My concern was purely for young Victoria.”

“Was that why you ran off without me, sir?” she said, the remark escaping before she could stop herself. Her burning hands were rather wearing at her patience. Her burning hands were rather wearing at her patience.

Lockhart’s cheeks tinged pink. “Hagrid had matters well in hand! I... ah, took it upon myself to scout ahead. The way appears safe. Follow me, now!”

By the time they returned to the castle, Victoria was wet, exhausted, and thoroughly fed up with the forbidden forest. Worse, a bone-deep chill had taken her, one that she couldn’t shake off despite a warm shower and a large dinner. The next morning she woke up with a terrible headache and aching limbs, at which point Daphne insisted on taking her to the hospital wing.

“I feel terrible,” Victoria said as they climbed the stairs to the second floor, her head pounding with every step. “What’s wrong with me?”
“Maybe it’s just a cold,” Daphne said.

She frowned. She’d never had a cold in her life—as far as she knew, wizards couldn’t get them.

Sure enough, all it took was one look at her hands for Madam Pomfrey to declare the cuts infected. “What do I keep telling them?” she said as she prepared a bed for Victoria, “the forest is no place for students to go galavanting around. But do they listen to me? Of course not.”

“Do I really have to stay here?” Victoria asked, “what about my classes? Can’t you just give me a potion, or something?”

Madam Pomfrey clucked her tongue. “And have half the school come down with Fossilisation Fever? I think not. No, we’ll have to keep you here until you’re better.” She eyed Daphne warily. “Best to dose up your whole dorm, just in case. And you’ll need to Scourgify anything she’s touched. One of the Prefects can help you, if you don’t know the spell.”

In the end, it was a good thing that Victoria hadn’t tried to attend her classes. Her symptoms only got worse, and Madam Pomfrey was forced to maintain a roaring fire in the hospital wing just to keep her warm. She was on a strict regimen of potions to help manage her symptoms, but as Pomfrey explained, she would have to get better all on her own.

“Our magic will fight it off, with a bit of rest,” she said, “the body of a witch or wizard doesn’t much like being transfigured, you see. The disease is trying to turn your bones to stone, but your magic will turn them back faster. When no stone remains, you’ll be free to go.”

The days wore on, and Victoria began to worry about all the classes she was missing. She wasn’t allowed any visitors, nor would Madam Pomfrey permit homework to be delivered to her. Her wand, finally released by Joseph Deverill, sat unused on her bedside table. She wasn’t even allowed to read, except for three all-too-short hours each afternoon.

Her every moment was spent surrounded by white beds, white ceilings and white walls. Contemplating the nature of her illness was the only thing that kept her occupied: she wondered whether being a metamorphmagus would hasten her recovery, or if she could somehow use her powers to transfigure the disease away.

One morning, as Madam Pomfrey watched her drink a green potion which tasted like old socks, her curiosity got the better of her.

“I’ve been thinking,” Victoria said between reluctant sips, “if all it takes to get better is to transfigure away the stone, why can’t someone just do it for me?”

“Oh, a healer could do exactly that,” Madam Pomfrey said, “but then your body wouldn’t have learnt how to do it, and you could get infected again. No, best to do it properly and never have to worry about it again.”

Victoria took another sip, grimacing at the taste. “But it would work? You said that transfigurations on a witch don’t last…”

Madam Pomfrey smiled, crows feet appearing around her eyes. She was middle aged, in wizarding terms, which meant she was probably around eighty-years-old. “You’re a sharp one, aren’t you?” she said. “I misspoke. It’s more that your magic will always try to return the body to its proper state. A healer can use transfiguration to help that along, and the magic won’t resist it. But if you try to use transfiguration to take a witch out of her proper state…”

“Your magic will reverse it,” Victoria said. It made sense. “So that’s why beauty spells don’t last?”
“Just so,” Pomfrey said, “not that you need them, my dear. I must say, I’ve never had a patient look quite so healthy. You’re practically glowing!”

No matter how good she looked, her symptoms improved painfully slowly. When her second week of convalescence began, she was at least permitted to look at her homework, which rapidly piled up on her bedside table. She took to this work eagerly, glad for the distraction, and before she knew it Halloween had arrived. She begged and begged to be allowed to attend the feast, desperate to see her friends again, and after taking her temperature one last time, Madam Pomfrey relented.

“Do try to avoid overexerting yourself,” she warned, “and no ice cream!”

Just as the year before, the staff had gone above and beyond in decorating the castle. In one alcove, Victoria saw a group of skeletons playing poker; in another, the Fat Friar was cheerfully re-enacting his own death. And everywhere she looked there were giant pumpkins, their gruesome faces glowing with an inner blue fire. The largest pumpkin of them all was hanging in the central staircase like a chandelier, and the fire shining from its slit-like eyes was a deep crimson.

She arrived at the Great Hall to find the feast in full swing. Each table was groaning under the weight of a glistening whole roast hog, surrounded by rings of baked apples, trays of stuffing, and platters of potatoes, with pumpkin pie and apple strudel for dessert.

“Victoria!” Tracey cried, catching her eye from across the room, “you’re alive!”

She laughed, making her way over to the Slytherin table and greeting everyone with a hug. “I’m alive,” she confirmed, “and not contagious.”

“Well, that’s good, seeing as you already hugged us,” Pansy said, before waving a chipolata at Hestia. “Make space for Vicky.”

Hestia obediently shifted down the table, a chorus of groans following as everyone bunched up like an accordion. It was one of the curious things about Pansy: no matter how antagonistic she might become towards Victoria, she never failed to include her.

“Thanks,” she said, taking her place and piling her plate high. “I’ve been eating hospital food for weeks. You cannot believe how much I’ve been looking forward to this.”

“It’s all right, I suppose,” Draco said loftily, “but a bit… Muggle, don’t you think?”

Pansy sent him a sharp look. “We don’t speak of such things, Draco.”

He shrugged. “It’s only Victoria.”

She wasn’t quite sure what that meant. “Well, I’ve seen Halloween in the Muggle world, and I can tell you it’s nothing like this,” she said, “everything there is made of plastic, and so flimsy and fake.”

Daphne frowned. “What’s plastic? It sounds horrible.”

“It is,” Victoria said, “it’s like… coloured glass, only bendy.”

“You’ve definitely seen plastic,” Tracey said. “You know that camera Creevey used to carry everywhere? That’s plastic.”

“Well, if Creepy Creevey had it, then that’s reason enough to dislike it,” Daphne said.
“Wait, used to?” Victoria asked, “what happened to his camera?”

Tracey shrugged. “It broke, I guess. I don’t think Hogwarts much likes Muggle things. Though actually, watches work just fine, don’t they?”

Somewhat inevitably, this remark spawned a lengthy argument as to whether Muggles or wizards could take credit for the invention of watches. For once, Victoria didn’t participate. She was simply glad to be amongst friends once more, surrounded by the clamour of conversation and the hungry sounds of cutlery on plates.

Having wolfed down her mains, she reached for some apple strudel.

“Pumpkin juice, Vicky?” Hestia said, leaning over to pour her a glass of virulently orange juice.

“Thanks.” She sighed. “I’m never gonna escape that nickname, am I? This is entirely Daphne’s fault.”

“It’s a good name,” Daphne said. “You should just embrace it.”

“Whatsoever you say, Daph ,” Victoria said with a grin.

Daphne blanched. “No! Anything but that!”

“To nicknames!” Pansy called, raising her glass with a cackle.

“To Daph!” Victoria said, and everyone joined the toast with a cheer. She took several long gulps of her juice, enjoying its cloyingly sweet flavour, before tucking into her strudel. “Anyway, what’s everyone been up do while I was ill?”

She never got to hear the answer. Her bite of strudel caught in her throat, which had tightened suddenly—a thrill of panic went through her, and she tried to cough, but she couldn’t get enough air behind it. She tried to breathe in through her nose, but nothing came, her chest straining painfully against the blockage.

Help! she thought, but she couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe, and she stood up suddenly, desperate for someone to see her, to realise what was happening—her heart was racing, and she pointed frantically at her throat.

“Oh my god,” Tracey said with a gasp, “she’s choking! Somebody help, she’s choking!”

Goyle got there first, jumping up from his seat and slapping her hard on her back. She stumbled from the force of the blow, and the piece of strudel shot from her mouth, but she still couldn’t breathe — she shook her head frantically, and Goyle tried again, but there was nothing left to dislodge. Her throat itself had closed up.

Her head span; she stumbled to the floor, landing on her knees. Where were the teachers?

“Make way!”

Professor Lockhart was striding towards her, his wand brandished before him. “Never fear!” he declared, “I know just the spell!”

Not him! she thought as her vision darkened, anyone but him!

And then a tall, dark figure was barrelling past Lockhart, knocking him to one side with casual ease.
The last thing Victoria saw before everything went black was the looming face of Professor Severus Snape.
Awareness came to Victoria slowly, sounds penetrating through the haze of semi-consciousness to mix with half-formed thoughts. The squeaking wheels of an old trolley. The clink of glass on glass, followed by running water. The *whoosh-snap* of linen being thrown over a bed. All were punctuated by the periodic sniffs of a girl who had recently stopped crying.

Confused, she opened her eyes to the familiar white walls of the hospital wing. Susan was sitting next to the bed, her cheeks splotchy, her vibrant, copper-red hair almost surreal in the sterile environment. She hadn’t yet noticed that Victoria was awake. Nor had Madam Pomfrey, who was busy with her evening routine, washing empty beakers, decanting colourful liquids, and collecting laundry.

The lumos-harsh light of the infirmary brought Victoria’s groggy mind into sharp focus, and she sat up with a gasp, her hand shooting to her throat—but cool air filled her lungs, and the panic passed. She was fine.

Susan looked up with startled eyes. “Madam Pomfrey! She’s awake!”

The matron bustled over and immediately set to the task of measuring her vitals. “Welcome back, Miss Potter,” she said, holding her palm to Victoria’s forehead, “I must say, you gave us quite the fright.”

“What happened?” Victoria asked, still confused.

“You were poisoned,” Susan said. “At first everyone thought you were choking, but then Snape gave you some kind of potion...”

“Mithridate,” Madam Pomfrey said. “A powerful antidote. You’re extremely lucky that he’d recently brewed some for Justin.” She held a glass dish up to Victoria’s mouth. “Spit, please.”

She spat into the dish, her mind elsewhere. “Poison? But why would someone want to poison me? Were they caught?” Her thoughts went straight to Death Eaters, but then she remembered Hestia Carrow filling up her pumpkin juice. “Hestia—”

“—has been questioned extensively, the poor girl,” Madam Pomfrey said, lifting the dish up to the light and examining it closely. “Professor Dumbledore is satisfied that she had nothing to do with it.”

Victoria wasn’t so sure. Professor Dumbledore didn’t know Hestia like she did—the girl was a follower by nature, waiting on Pansy like a house-elf. It was all too easy to imagine her being sucked into the orbit of an older student—someone like Joseph Deverill, who spoke with such authority and could back it up with a dangerous wand. If he had told Hestia to slip something into
Victoria’s drink, would she have even asked questions?

“It was the Heir,” Susan said confidently, “it had to be. You’re the Girl Who Lived, of course a dark wizard’s gonna try to get you out the way.”

“Now, dear, don’t go spreading rumours,” Madam Pomfrey said, “we’ll find out the facts soon enough, there’s going to be a full investigation.”

Victoria snorted. “Like there was with Justin?”

Madam Pomfrey made a non-committal humming sound, vanishing her spit before moving to prod at her toes.

“Professor Lockhart said it was the Heir,” Susan insisted, “right when Snape was giving you the Mithri-whatsit, he was all like, ‘the Heir of Slytherin strikes again!’”

“That definitely sounds like Professor Lockhart,” Victoria said, not voicing the fact that she was inclined to trust his conclusions even less than Professor Dumbledore’s. His heart was in the right place, she supposed—she distinctly remembered him trying to help her, while she was choking—but really, there was no way for him to know whether it was the Heir or not.

“Well, look on the bright side,” Susan said with a weak smile, “at least no one will think you’re the Heir anymore. Though… I suppose if you were the Heir, attacking yourself would definitely throw people off the trail…”

Victoria glared at her. “Don’t give people ideas.”

“Sorry,” Susan said. “Anyway, it’s got to be someone in Slytherin, right? No way the Heir would be sorted anywhere else…”

“Maybe they’re a Hufflepuff,” Victoria said with a smirk, “where better for the Heir of Slytherin to hide?”

Susan looked scandalised. “Never!”

Having confirmed that her toes were all accounted for, Madam Pomfrey declared Victoria fit and healthy. “We’ll keep you in here overnight, just in case, but I don’t anticipate any trouble. Professor Snape knows his antidotes.”

“That’s it?” she asked, surprised. She’d expected… more. “But what if it happens again? What am I supposed to do until they catch the Heir—eat nothing?”

Madam Pomfrey frowned. “I’m sure this was a one-off, my dear. But if you’re that concerned, I can discuss your meal arrangements with Professor Dumbledore.”

“Could you?”

“Very well,” Madam Pomfrey said, and she returned to her evening clean-up.

Susan sighed. “The teachers really don’t have any idea how to stop this, do they?”

“It could be anyone,” Victoria said glumly, feeling very sorry for herself. No one was any closer to finding the Heir than they had been in September—not the Ministry, not Professor Lockhart, not even the great Albus Dumbledore. And for some reason, she kept being the one to suffer.

“There must be some kind of magic to find the Heir, a spell or artefact or whatever,” Susan said,
“otherwise Azkaban would be empty, wouldn’t it? I wonder how Aurors normally catch dark wizards...”

“Maybe your Aunt could tell us,” Victoria said, “she is the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, after all.”

Susan’s eyes lit up. “I’ll write her.”

The next morning, Victoria returned to the Slytherin common room in the midst of its usual Sunday routine. The wireless was on, with the quidditch pundits on Radio Minus Five droning on about the upcoming match between rivals Caerphilly and Holyhead. A large group were gathered around it, chatting excitedly, making bets and taunting the opposition. Meanwhile, the first years were running about like primary school kids, clambering over couches in a manner distinctly unbefitting the dignity of Slytherin house.

Normally the upper years would have cracked down on such raucous behaviour, but most of them were still in bed, with only the truly quidditch-mad willing to sacrifice their Sunday lie-in. Their absence left the fifth years in charge, who were too busy studying for their OWLs to concern themselves with the years below, and so it was the fourth years who attempted—and failed—to enforce discipline.

The second years were tucked away in their corner, given a wide berth thanks to a combination of Pansy’s sharp tongue and Daphne’s fluttering eyelashes. As Victoria approached, a typical scene presented itself: Daphne was drawing hippogriffs, Pansy was practising the Scent-Erasing Charm, and Draco and Gregory were engaged in a staring contest, a recent fad among the boys that she struggled to understand.

She flopped onto the couch. “Has everyone had breakfast?” she asked casually, as if it were any other Sunday. “I’m starving.”

Daphne jumped, startled by her abrupt return. “Oh, Vicky!” She practically engulfed her in a tight hug. “We were so worried!”

“Some of us were worried,” Pansy clarified. “But it was obvious that Professor Snape had everything under control. A lot of fuss about nothing, if you ask me.”

“Funny, I don’t think anyone did ask you,” Victoria said, not having the patience for Pansy that morning.

Daphne laid a calming hand on her shoulder. “Ignore her—she’s just jealous you made front page of the Prophet.”

Pansy sniffed. “That’s got nothing to do with it.”

But sure enough, a copy of the Prophet on Sunday sat on the low table between the couches, and Victoria’s face occupied much of the front page, peeking out from behind a curtain of glossy, dark hair. The headline read:

**GIRL WHO LIVED AGAIN**

*Victoria Potter survives poisoning attempt*

To her horror, the photo-Victoria batted her eyelashes coquettishly at the camera.

“Stop that!” she hissed, mortified, desperately hoping that her two-dimensional self wasn’t flirting with newspaper readers up and down the country. “Behave yourself!”
“It’s no use,” Daphne said, mirth in her eyes, “she’s been like that all morning.”

“Well, at least it’s just a photo,” Victoria said with forced nonchalance, “it’s not like it means anything.”

Draco leaned forward. “Actually, they say that your photo reflects—” Daphne shook her head frantically “—never mind.”

Victoria slapped the paper face-down onto the table. “Moving on … I feel like I’ve missed so much. Catch me up?”

“Hufflepuff destroyed us at Halloween,” Draco said, “Diggory kept stopping Higgs from getting anywhere near the snitch, and they just—”

“Draco, dear, she doesn’t want to hear about quidditch,” Pansy said. For all that she had professed disinterest in Victoria’s return, she had yet to resume her Charms practice. “Obviously she wants to know about the Heir.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Daphne said, “this is Vicky—she’s probably more interested in Transfiguration.”

They all laughed.

“You know me well,” Victoria said with a grin, “but I’ve actually been getting my homework in the hospital wing. So… tell me about the Heir.”

Draco shrugged. “Not much to tell, really. Finch-Fletchley woke up a few days before Halloween, but he says he didn’t see anything.”

“Just a big shadow on his way back from debating club,” said Daphne.

“Debating club?” Pansy asked. “I didn’t hear that part before. Don’t tell me he wants to be a politician?”

“I think he does, “ Victoria said, “he’s always reading the paper—the Herald, I mean, not the Prophet.” The Herald was a rather more serious paper than the Prophet, with far fewer pictures and almost no stories about celebrities. “He’s got all sorts of ideas about how to improve the world.”

“Don’t they all,” Pansy said, her lip curling. “No wonder the Heir wanted him gone.”

Victoria wasn’t quite clear on who they were—Muggleborns, perhaps, or politicians, or more likely just anyone Pansy considered to be the wrong sort. Perhaps in Pansy’s mind they all merged into one.

“I never understand what’s supposed to be wrong with the world in the first place,” Daphne said. “Aren’t things pretty good already? Why does everything need changing all the time?”

“Because otherwise they’d be out of a job,” Draco said. “Father always says the Ministry could disappear tomorrow and no one would notice the difference, except a bit more gold in their pocket.”

“Doesn’t the Ministry enforce the Statute of Secrecy, though?” Victoria said, “you’re not secretly one of Grindelwald’s Oathbreakers, are you?”
Draco’s cheeks tinged pink. “The Malfoys were among Grindelwald’s fiercest opponents! I suppose you’re right… fine, the Ministry does one useful thing.”

“And there’s the Aurors,” Victoria added, “you’d have dark wizards all over the place without them.”

“Plus, they keep things like dragons under control,” Daphne said. Suddenly everyone was joining in:

“They keep the Floo running.”
“Catch vampires.”
“And werewolves.”
“Quidditch!”
“Oh, and they—”

“All right!” Draco said, raising his hands, “I get it. The Ministry’s not completely useless. But still… a lot of that stuff, wizards could do for themselves anyway.”

Victoria sighed. “When it comes to the Heir, we might have to. Obviously the Ministry’s not getting anywhere with it.”

“Are we even sure it’s the Heir?” Daphne said, thinking aloud. “Like, I can see why Justin was attacked. But what I don’t understand is why Vicky was next… she’s from an old family, and she’s in Slytherin. If it is the Heir, he’s behaving very strangely.”

“We discussed this before,” Pansy said impatiently. “Lily Potter was a Muggleborn. That makes Vicky a half-blood. Maybe she was attacked because she’s in Slytherin… you know, cleaning house and all that.” She glanced quickly at Victoria. “Not that I’m saying that’s right, of course.”

But Daphne shook her head. “That’s not how it works, though. One marriage doesn’t just get rid of all your family history. She’s still a Potter.”

It was an old argument.

Having spent over a year in Slytherin, Victoria was no stranger to discussions about blood. It was just something that wizards tended to mention when they first met someone, like where they came from or what their parents did. It had always seemed perfectly harmless, and even though her mother was a Muggleborn, no one had ever treated her differently for it.

Something had changed since the attack on Justin, however. Blood was no longer simply a matter of bragging rights—it was the difference between whether or not you were a target. Yet as she listened to Pansy and Daphne bicker, Victoria was reminded that even among pure-bloods, no one could really agree on who counted as part of the club. For some, like Daphne, it was all about your family name: the Potters were an old wizarding family, so anyone who bore their name was a pure-blood. For others, like Pansy, even a small amount of Muggle blood could ruin an otherwise impeccable lineage.

Draco was conspicuously silent.

“What do you think, Draco?” Victoria said, interrupting Pansy’s increasingly complex hypothetical in which she had married a Muggle and all her children were squibs. “Am I half or pure?”
He took his time to answer, glancing cautiously between Victoria and Pansy. “I think sometimes it’s obvious, like Tracey. Her parents are both magical, but there’s no such thing as the *Davis family*. So she’s a half-blood, no question about it. But sometimes it’s not so obvious.” He lowered his voice. “We don’t advertise it much, but the Malfoy family used to marry Muggles.”

Pansy gasped.

“It was a long time ago now,” he explained, “before the Statute of Secrecy. But still, I look at the family tree and they’re all there… Lady Jane of Suffolk, Countess Matilda of Anjou… and even since then, there’s a few names on there that—well, let’s just say they’re not from any family I’ve ever heard of.”

“Are you saying… the Malfoys are half-bloods?” Pansy asked, her voice weak.

Draco gave her a withering glare. “I’m saying families are complicated, and the longer you’ve been around, the more… complications you might have. But it’d be ridiculous to say that a family like that wasn’t a proper wizarding family—not when they’ve been around for so long. When it comes to the old families, I think what really matters is whether you choose to act like wizards or not.”

The name “Weasley” wasn’t spoken, but it hung in the air. As a family, the Weasleys were as old as they came, but Victoria had often heard them referred to as *blood-traitors* for the way they fraternised with Muggles.

“So basically, if I choose to call myself a pure-blood, then I am?” she said. “That doesn’t seem right. Surely you’re one or the other.”

“It’s up to you,” Draco said, looking at her expectantly. “But as far as I’m concerned, you’re as pure as I am.”

She didn’t like that look. If he was hoping that she would stand up and claim her pure-blood heritage there and then, he was going to be disappointed. She couldn’t deny that she was sorely tempted… if she were a pure-blood, she’d be Pansy’s equal, not to mention the possibility that it might grant her protection from the Heir. But some instinctive caution held her back. How would the others react, if she suddenly declared herself a pure-blood? Wouldn’t they think it was awfully convenient timing?

She recognised that Draco was offering her something rare and valuable. It was a chance to truly fit in with girls like Pansy and Daphne, a chance to rid herself of the feeling that no matter how great her magical talent, they would always possess something that she lacked. But her Muggle upbringing still hung over her, and she was forced to admit that there was more to Pansy than a name and a pile of gold. It wasn’t just the way she moved, or how she spoke. It was in her ability to greet anyone important by their first name. It was in the fact that she had attended the Winchester Hippogriff Races every summer since birth. And it was in the air of entitlement she carried permanently around her, ordering people around with casual ease. Everything about her just screamed *class*.

Perhaps it was better, for the time being, to be considered an accomplished half-blood rather than a pure-blooded fraud.

Fortunately, the arrival of a fifth year prefect rescued Victoria from the decision.

“Potter!” he called, striding over to their corner. He was holding a scroll sealed with the Hogwarts crest. “This is for you.”
She took the scroll and broke the seal. The message read:

Dear Miss Potter,

I would be honoured if you would share dinner with me this evening. Please present yourself outside my office at six o’clock sharp.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Dumbledore

* * *

It was surprisingly difficult to prepare for dinner with Albus Dumbledore. Her first inclination had been simply to wear her school robes, but this idea had been speedily quashed by Daphne.

“He’s barmy, but he’s still Dumbledore.”

So they had flung open Victoria’s wardrobe to find the perfect outfit. Discarded dress robes quickly littered the dorm, covering her bed, her trunk, and much of the floor. When her relatively small wardrobe was exhausted, they started on Daphne’s, and the pile on the bed grew taller still.

Five o’clock came and went.

“I can’t believe this is taking so long,” Victoria said, taking off a little black dress robe which Daphne had declared too formal. “It’s just dinner.”

Daphne snorted. “Dinner with the most powerful wizard in the world. Most students never even speak to him, never mind get invited to his office for social occasions. You’ve got to make an impression.”

Eventually they settled upon a yellow summer robe with a flowery print.

“I look like a tablecloth,” Victoria said despairingly, turning one way and the other in front of the mirror.

“You look great,” Daphne said, and she guided her firmly towards the door. “Trust me, this is the one.”

With just ten minutes to go, Victoria was forced to walk very quickly to Dumbledore’s office, tidying up her hair as she went. She arrived just in time. The gargoyle stepped aside at her approach, revealing the spiral staircase up to the office, and at the top she knocked thrice upon the sturdy oak door.

It opened to reveal Professor Dumbledore as she had never seen him before. Gone were the bright colours and flamboyant patterns; this Dumbledore wore stately robes of black, with a blood red trim. She was suddenly rather glad that she had dressed up.

“Good evening, Miss Potter,” he said, gesturing for her to come inside. The large, circular office looked much as it had for his birthday party, but for the addition of a small table in the middle of the room. It was covered with a white cloth and had been set for dinner: an armoury of cutlery was laid out on either side, and a vase of pink chrysanthemums sat at its centre. “Please, take a seat.”

There were no seats at the table. Before she could say anything, however, Dumbledore flicked his wand, and two cushioned wooden chairs materialised out of nowhere. One of them nudged at the
back of her knees, and she sat, allowing it to wiggle her into place. Dumbledore took the chair opposite.

“Now, Victoria—may I call you Victoria? Or is it Vicky?”

From the twinkle in his eye, she suspected that he knew exactly which name she preferred.

“Victoria, sir.”

He nodded. “Victoria it is. As I was saying... you may be wondering why I have summoned you here, pulling you away from a merry evening with your friends and classmates. But in light of recent misfortunes, I think they will forgive your absence.”

“The poison,” Victoria said. It didn’t take a genius to connect the dots.

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “Just so. A most concerning turn of events, and one which I confess I had not anticipated. You will no doubt be aware that certain unusual steps have been taken to guarantee your safety, yet it now appears that your protections have a hole in them greater than the one in my left sock.”

Victoria blinked—Daphne was right, he was barmy.

“And so, here we are,” Dumbledore continued, “until a more permanent solution may be found, I’m afraid that you will be forced to dine with me.”

“What, every day?” she said, so surprised that she spoke without thinking. What was she going to wear? She only had so many dress robes.

“Every day,” he confirmed. “On occasion, if I am not available, Madam Pomfrey may take my place. Your breakfast and lunch will be delivered to you by one of the house-elves, and you should accept food from no one else.”

“Oh,” Victoria said quietly. She hadn’t realised the teachers were taking her poisoning so seriously.

“But let us think of this as an opportunity rather than a burden,” Dumbledore said, “as headmaster, it has been many years since I was at the coalface, as the Muggles say. It will do me good, I judge, to get to know a student.”

He clapped his hands and their starters appeared. The portion was tiny: three circular towers in a row, each consisting of a green paste topped with a fleshy white disc.

“Oh, excellent!” said Dumbledore, and Victoria gave him a questioning look. She wasn’t quite sure how to ask “what is it?” without sounding rude. “Scallops, with a mint pea purée,” he explained, interpreting her look correctly, and he picked up the outermost knife and fork.

Victoria copied him. She had no idea what scallops were, but they were delicious. Some kind of fish, sweeter and saltier than any fish she was used to. She just wished there were more than three of them: she had to eat very slowly just to stop them from disappearing too fast.

“I would be most interested to hear how your studies are progressing,” Dumbledore said as he ate. “I must say, your exam results last year were quite impressive. You’re not finding your classes too easy, I hope?”

Victoria blushed at his compliment. “Oh, not at all! McGonagall—”
“Professor McGonagall.”

“Sorry—Professor McGonagall usually gives me extra work to keep me busy, and Professor Flitwick too. And there’s always more books to read... I’ve just finished A Treatise on Lunar Powers in Illusion Charms, have you read it?”

“Many years ago,” Dumbledore said with a wistful smile. “And how do you like Professor Lockhart’s classes?”

She paused, imagining that it would be inappropriate to mention her suspicion that Lockhart’s magical ability had been somewhat exaggerated. “They’re… fine,” she said cautiously. “Very, um, practical.”

“Oh?” Dumbledore said, “do I detect a hint of dissatisfaction?”

“Well, don’t get me wrong, the stuff he teaches us is useful… and the Confundus was definitely interesting, learning how to get all the parts of a thyrsus into the spell… but it doesn’t seem like it fits together in the same way that the other classes do. It’s just, like, a collection of spells.”

“Such is the nature of Defence Against the Dark Arts,” Dumbledore said. “It is not a true branch of magic, but a class defined by reference to a particular function.”

“The stuff we did last year was different, though,” Victoria said, “when we learnt about jinxes, that made a lot more sense.”

Dumbledore peered at her over the top of his half-moon spectacles, an inscrutable look on his face. “Indeed... I have learnt that Professor Quirrell’s classes on the Dark Arts went into rather greater depth than Hogwarts usually teaches. As you may know, the Dark Arts form their own branch of magic, albeit one not normally studied at this school.”

She filed that nugget of information away for later distribution. Professor Quirrell’s sudden disappearance had never been explained... had he been fired, perhaps, for teaching the Dark Arts?

Their plates vanished the moment they finished the scallops. Dumbledore clapped to summon the main course, which was just as delicately presented: there was some kind of tiny chicken sitting on a bed of creamy mashed potato, its skin a crispy golden-brown, with gravy and vegetables arranged in a circle around it. The whole plate smelled amazing.

She waited for Dumbledore to start so she could copy his cutlery selection. It was a good thing she did, as he seemed to pick them entirely at random—just another one of those things that Pansy would have known. Daphne would have known it too, of course, but she would have deliberately chosen the wrong fork, and before dinner had finished half the table would have copied her. Either way, as proper pure-blood girls, neither of them would have needed to wait on Dumbledore.

“Can I ask you something?” Victoria said.

“By all means.”

She told Dumbledore all about the conversation with Pansy, Daphne and Draco regarding the purity of her blood; about her fears that the other pure-bloods would laugh at her, if she claimed to be one of them; and her concern that sooner or later she would have to provide Draco with an answer. Dumbledore listened to her story attentively, his eyes only leaving her own to glance down at his plate between bites.

“So what do you think, Professor? Am I a half-blood, or a pure-blood?”
If he thought her question was a silly one, he didn’t show it. “Before I answer—and I will answer—it is educational, I think, to consider what purpose these distinctions serve. As I have understood it, you are not suggesting that your magical talent would be greater if you were a so-called pure-blood.”

“No,” Victoria said, not having even considered that idea.

Dumbledore steepled his fingers. “Nor are you suggesting that your moral character depends on your blood.”

She shook her head.

“And so, if it does not tell us anything about your magic or your character, what is it that your blood is supposed to indicate?”

Victoria frowned, searching for the right words, but Dumbledore answered the question for her.

“It is your social status,” he said. “In truth, the concept of purity of blood is inextricably linked to the idea of social class. With that in mind, I would invite you to consider which is more important: a person’s character and deeds, or the family they are born to.”

He paused to take a bite of chicken.

“When you put it like that, it seems kinda obvious,” Victoria said. In fact, it was so easy to follow the logic of his words that it took her a moment to realise that none of what he had said actually solved her problem.

Dumbledore smiled. “It is not my place to tell you what to believe, only to equip you with the knowledge to form your own views. But so much for the principle of the matter—I promised you a straight answer to your question.”

She leaned forward eagerly.

“Regretfully, we must learn to navigate a society where supposed purity of blood matters to many people,” Dumbledore said. “If you will forgive me, this requires something of a history lesson. You see, soon after the Statute of Secrecy was passed, separation from Muggles came to be regarded as a point of wizarding pride, a concept which has only increased in popularity since Grindelwald’s defeat. The division of worlds has affected all areas of life, but familial connections to Muggles have long been viewed as especially suspect—indeed, in many wizarding nations, it is still illegal for a wizard to marry a Muggle.”

“Because they might tell the Muggles about wizards?” Victoria asked.

“That was the original reasoning,” Dumbledore said. “However, the culture of separation quickly took on a life of its own, and wizarding pride has come to be valued in its own right. It is by this circuitous route that we come to the concept of purity. As you know, the British Ministry has never made intermarriage illegal—”

“France too, right?”

“—nor has France, nor several other European nations. But not everyone believed in such a liberal approach. In the early eighteenth century, a new elite rose to power, largely replacing the old wizarding nobility whose authority had derived from the Muggle king. The families composing that elite are now considered traditionalists, but in those days they were quite radical.”
"You’re talking about Brandon Swann, aren’t you?” Victoria said, “the founder of the Ministry? We learnt about him in History.”

“He was their leader, but he did not act alone. Indeed, your own ancestor, one Ralston Potter, was a key supporter of the Swanns,” Dumbledore said. “In their zeal for wizarding independence, the traditionalists swore a pact never to marry a Muggle, holding themselves to a stricter standard than the law required. And thus the pure-blood ideology was born, an idea which had previously existed as no more than a small movement on the fringe of wizarding society. In the years following the Statute of Secrecy, to remain pure-blooded was to advertise your family’s commitment to wizarding pride, and thereby gain the favour of those in power.”

“So... I’m a half-blood, then?” Victoria said, surprised at the depth of her disappointment. It would have been nice to fit in with the other girls. “My dad married a Muggleborn, and that’s a connection to the Muggle world, isn’t it?”

Dumbledore raised a bushy eyebrow. “It is not quite so simple. Think about what I have said… who was it that first promoted the idea of blood purity?”

“The traditionalists,” she said, the wheels turning in her head, connecting what he had said to Daphne’s views. “You’re saying that for the traditionalists, your family comes first. Like, maybe a family breaks the pact now and then… but they’re still part of the group who made the pact in the first place.”

“Precisely. Over the years, the traditionalist families have stuck together, even as they lost their monopoly on power. In many ways they resemble the old aristocracy which they replaced, though they never adopted the Muggle titles of nobility which their enemies had borne. It is this aristocratic aspect which is the cause of the disagreement between Miss Parkinson and Miss Greengrass.”

“Pansy’s just thinking about blood,” Victoria said, “but Daphne’s right, isn’t she? If the Potters were one of the families who made the pact, then we’re older than the idea of purity.”

“That is the traditionalist view,” Dumbledore said. He paused to pour himself a glass of white wine, taking several sips before he continued. “There is, however, a more modern viewpoint, one which attained popularity among the traditionalist youth in the years following Grindelwald’s fall. It was an uncompromising ideology, in some ways more liberal, in others more conservative. That view espoused a greater separation from the Muggle world than even the traditionalists had envisaged… no one would be able to cross the divide, not even Muggleborns. Under this radical view, those of wizarding blood who embraced the new ways would be welcomed with open arms, the equal of any pure-blood, no matter their family name; but those who associated with Muggles, even indirectly, would be considered tainted by association.”

“That sounds more like Draco,” Victoria said.

“In part,” Dumbledore said, his expression pensive. “I suspect that Master Malfoy has been exposed to a number of ideologies, and has attempted to piece them together in a way that makes sense in his particular familial context.”

It didn’t escape Victoria that he still hadn’t answered her question. “So… the answer is… Daphne and Draco are both right? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Forgive an old man’s ramblings,” Dumbledore said with a chuckle. “My answer is this: were you to choose to participate in so-called pure-blood society, you would likely be welcomed by traditionalists and radicals alike. However, as you have already intimated, your treatment thereafter
would largely depend on your ability to conform to their understanding of how witches and wizards should behave.”

She sighed. Once again it came back to her Muggle upbringing. “It would’ve been easier if you’d just told me what to do.”

“If but I could,” Dumbledore said, “I would choose to let you enjoy the innocence of childhood, free from such weighty troubles. Would it be so terrible to simply be happy, without concern for social position or status?”

Victoria’s mind went back to the summer. It was the happiest time she could remember, spending her days exploring the woods around Susan’s home, playing in the river and growing strawberries in the garden. And yet... while she had been playing in rivers, Pansy had been going to fashion shows and attending balls. When people looked at her, they didn’t see a girl, they saw a young woman. Victoria wanted that too. Didn’t everyone?

“But don’t you care about social status?” she asked, hoping that she wasn’t overstepping the boundaries of their relationship. “You’re the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, aren’t you? That’s an important position.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Alas! My hypocrisy is laid bare,” he said, but there was a twinkle in his eye again. He seemed pleased that she’d argued back. “Let me tell you a secret: when I was young, not much older than you are now, I dreamed of little more than travelling the world and learning new magic. A political career could not have been further from my plans. Yet politics found me nonetheless—my inaction was deemed just as political as any deliberate act. So you see, the private life was never an option.”

Their plates disappeared, replaced a moment later with a slice of raspberry tart with Chantilly cream.

“There is one other matter I wished to discuss with you,” Dumbledore said as she used her fork to slice off a large chunk of tart. “I understand from Professor Snape that you intend to spend the Christmas holiday with the Malfoy family.”

Victoria grinned. “I just ordered my dress robe for the ball,” she said, “it’s made of tumblewool—I’ve never worn it before, but Daphne convinced me it’s worth it.”

“I’ve no doubt that it’s a lovely dress,” Dumbledore said, but there was a sombre note to his voice. “Before you go, however, you must be in full possession of the facts.”

“Facts?”

“I will not beat around the bush. Lucius Malfoy was accused of being a Death Eater.”

Victoria froze.

“He was never convicted, and the records of the trial were sealed,” Dumbledore said, “but nonetheless, the accusation stands.”

“Well, if he was found innocent…”

“Found not guilty,” Dumbledore corrected, “not innocent.”

She thought it over. Though she had only met him briefly, Lucius Malfoy had always been nice to her. Narcissa, too, had been kind, writing to her over the summer and offering to teach her
wizarding ways. She needed that now more than ever. And what about Draco? She was visiting him, not his parents.

“Are you saying I can’t go?” she asked. She didn’t know how she would possibly break it to Draco. Pansy would have a field day.

“That is not my decision,” Dumbledore said, raising her hopes, “I am simply providing you with information. Understand that I cannot protect you within Malfoy Manor, Victoria. Once inside, you are on your own.”

He made it sound like a death sentence. “But everyone knows I’m going,” she said. Surely she could make him see that she’d be fine? “Even if he was a Death Eater, he couldn’t hurt me while I was his guest. Everyone would know it was him.”

She took another bite of the pie, this time with a generous forkful of the honey-sweet cream.

“It is hard to predict Lucius Malfoy’s intentions, much less those of the company he keeps,” Dumbledore said. “And there are subtler ways to hurt someone than curses.”

Victoria felt an all-too-familiar tightening in her throat.

“Oh no!” she gasped, her heart suddenly racing. “It’s happening again!”

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. “Indeed,” he said, looking utterly calm. “That would be the poison I put in your cream.”

It was a sign of her rising panic that at first she only nodded in agreement. But then his words caught up with her.

“What?”

_Dumbledore_ had poisoned her? It didn’t make any sense!

She tried to stand up. The room span; her knees gave way; and she fell back into the chair. Tears streamed down her face, but she couldn’t even sob. Helpless despair filled her. There was no Professor Snape to save her this time.

Far too quickly, spots of light began to spread across her vision.

“Oh dear,” said Dumbledore, and everything went black.

The world returned with vivid clarity. She gasped—air filled her lungs; her throat was fine.

“I do, of course, have the antidote,” said Dumbledore, his kindly face peering down at her. She was still sitting in the chair, a cool sweat across her skin. Her body was shivering with adrenaline.

“What…? Why?”

Dumbledore picked up her fork and used it to scoop up a pile of cream. “Here,” he said, “try it.”

Victoria gaped at him.

“But—”

“—it is laced with poison, yes. Yet we have established that I have the antidote. Now, try the cream.”
She looked between Dumbledore and the fork. He was even barmier than Daphne had thought, but she’d come this far. She took the fork and licked at the tiniest bit of cream.

“How does it taste?” said Dumbledore.

Victoria shrugged, trying to stay calm as she felt the faintest beginnings of itching around her throat. “Like sweet cream.”

“Anything else?”

She took another lick. “Lavender?” The tightness in her throat grew. “Antidote, please!”

Dumbledore produced a thin vial from his sleeve. “Stick out your tongue,” he said. He allowed a single drop to fall—she felt instantly better.

He returned to his side of the table. “Today you imbibed Charlotte’s Revenge. Should you ever feel these symptoms again following a sweet food tasting of lavender, you will have less than two minutes to take the antidote.”

“I would prefer not to eat it in the first place,” she said. She sat up properly and stared at her half-eaten dessert. Unsurprisingly, her appetite had completely vanished. “Anyway, aren’t there loads of poisons? How’s knowing just one going to help?”

There was something almost predatory about Dumbledore’s smile. “I had a remarkably similar thought,” he said. “And that is why I shall be concealing a different poison within your food each day that you join me for dinner. Using your senses and instinct alone, you must endeavor to avoid the poison, or at the very least identify it. If you work hard, you should be able to gain some level of proficiency by the time you depart for Malfoy Manor.”

“But… I don’t know anything about poisons,” she said, unable to keep the whine out of her voice. How was she supposed to eat dinner every day, knowing that each plate would half-kill her in some horrific manner?

“It is fortunate, then, that you are a quick study,” Dumbledore said, and with a gesture a thin book sailed off one of his shelves, gliding over to land softly next to her. The green leather cover bore no title, nor author. She flipped it open and was surprised to find that it was handwritten. It only took a quick flick through the pages to realise that it would normally have lived deep within the Restricted Section.

“You will read this book as quickly as possible,” he instructed, “but you must not share its contents with any of your peers, nor even let them know of its existence. Do I have your word?”

“I promise,” she said, her eyes still glued to the first page. *On Delivering Poisons*, the sub-heading read. Her heart sang with the thrill of forbidden knowledge.

Dumbledore clapped his hands. “Excellent! Now, off you pop—I imagine Slytherin’s Holyhead fans will be celebrating.”

* * *

After several weeks in the hospital wing, not even the threat of the Heir of Slytherin could dampen Victoria’s enthusiasm for her return to classes. At first she was anxious over all the time she had missed, fearing that she had fallen behind her peers, but she need not have worried. Even the small amount of additional reading she had managed during her convalescence was still more than any of her classmates bar Hermione, and with a solid theoretical foundation, it would not take long to
catch up in wandwork.

Her Monday passed in a whirlwind of magic and scholarship, each moment of it a thrilling reminder of everything she loved about Hogwarts.

In History of Magic they were learning about the Norman invasion of England, which Victoria remembered rather differently from her Muggle primary school. Certainly the Muggles had never mentioned the role of Armand Malfoy, whose duplicitous actions had kept the Northumbrian army out of the Battle of Hastings. The class disapproved greatly of his perfidy, but this did not stop Draco from puffing up with pride each time the Malfoy name was mentioned.

Following History was Transfiguration, the class which caused Victoria the most concern—she had entirely missed the topic of vapour-shaping, a somewhat trickier technique than shaping liquids, and a key skill to progressing to the next level of transfiguration. Fortunately, her liquid-shaping was sufficiently advanced that vapours came to her quite easily, and she quickly demonstrated her competence to Professor McGonagall’s satisfaction.

“IT will do for now,” McGonagall said, watching carefully as Victoria guided a cloud of smoke into the shape of an arrow. “But I expect you to practise the skill in your spare time, until it’s up to your customary standard.”

The class then commenced their study of the Fumification Spell, which would turn any object into vapour. They all made appropriate sounds of appreciation as McGonagall demonstrated the vaporous forms of a number of substances, filling the room with puffs of smoke, steam, dust, and ash. Unfortunately, the remainder of the lesson was solidly theoretical.

Charms was rather more practical. Having completed their study of the Colour-Changing and Scent-Erasing Charms, they were leaving visual and olfactory illusions behind to begin the more difficult subject of auditory charms.

“Books away!” Professor Flitwick announced when he arrived. “Today’s magic is a smidge disruptive, so we’ll be heading out into the grounds.” The class murmured with anticipation; Victoria shared an excited look with Tracey. “Please take a pair of earmuffs on your way out.”

A rush for the best earmuffs followed—Victoria managed to snag herself some fluffy pink ones—and then they were trooping down to the quidditch pitch, where Professor Flitwick introduced them to the Thunderclap Charm.

“The trick is to deliver a sharp, whip-like flick,” he explained. “Observe, please. Percussio!”

His wand lashed out like a coiled snake, striking the air with a deep, reverberating rumble that Victoria could feel in her chest. The sound echoed out across the grounds, indistinguishable from real thunder.

Tracey grinned. “Awesome.”

They spent the rest of the class practising the charm in a cacophony of bangs, pops and cracks. None of them were able to produce anything near to Professor Flitwick’s authentic thunder, but surprisingly it was Gregory Goyle who came closest, a development which had Flitwick almost jumping with excitement.

“That’s it, Gregory!” he cried, cheering as Greg’s meaty fist once again snapped forward. His spell created a deep boom akin to that of a firework. “My boy, you clearly have an affinity for auditory illusions!”
Victoria rather suspected that his true affinity was for loud noises. However, though she was annoyed that her own charm would only bang like a loud drum, not even she could begrudge Greg his success. It was the first time he had ever taken to any magic naturally, and his look of joy at each spell would have melted even a Flame-Frozen heart.

The day concluded with another visit to Professor Dumbledore’s office for dinner, an occasion which she approached with a strange mixture of hunger and dread. The meal followed much the same pattern as the last: three courses, all of them rich and delicate, with Dumbledore asking about her classes before expounding upon a topic of choice. After Victoria mentioned her need to practise vapour-shaping, the topic of the day became the Four Winds, a subject in which Dumbledore was clearly an expert. His explanation was so fascinating that she bit into some bread without thinking, and a moment later her skin was shriveling as her body dried out like an Egyptian mummy.

“The butter contains Liar’s Salt,” Dumbledore explained after he had administered the antidote. “If you look carefully, you will see the pink crystals.”

She examined the butter and, sure enough, the salt had a slight pinkish tinge to it. “How was I supposed to see that?” she asked grumpily. “Especially at the same time as talking to you about transfiguration! If you’d just let me look at the food properly…”

But Dumbledore shook his head. “You won’t be able to sniff at everything at the Malfoys’ ball, nor even in the Great Hall,” he said. “You must learn to detect these things more subtly. Take your time while eating. Savour each mouthful, engage in conversation. And all the time, pay attention to your senses.”

When she returned to the common room, it was not to chat idly or to read for pleasure. She retrieved Dumbledore’s book on poisons, holed herself up behind her bed’s curtains and read late into the night, falling asleep with the book resting on her face.

Her dinners with Professor Dumbledore quickly became routine. Inevitably, the other Slytherins were incredibly jealous.

“It’s blatant favouritism,” Pansy said one evening, “the headmaster can’t just have a private dinner every day with the same student—it’s not fair! We should all get a turn.”

The others muttered in agreement. Victoria grimaced—Pansy was always the most unbearable when she had a good point. If only she had known that Dumbledore was poisoning her every night, she wouldn’t have been quite so eager to join in. But of course, while their dinners were public knowledge, Victoria’s education in avoiding poisons remained top secret.

“It’s not a private dinner,” she said, coming up with an alternative riposte, one which she hoped was sufficiently diplomatic to satisfy everyone. “Any student who’s been poisoned recently can come. By coincidence, that’s currently just me.”

Though she looked like she wanted to respond, Pansy knew better than to contest the point in front of an audience. Victoria was still the recipient of significant sympathy regarding her poisoning, and belittling it could easily have been perceived as rude.

Victoria smirked. *Ten points for the half-blood.*

It was strange to think that last November, she had concerned herself with little more than attending classes, completing homework, and solving Snape’s challenge. She missed those days keenly, but being poisoned every night engendered a certain focus on getting through dinner without dying. Though she remained diligent in all her classes, and made sure to keep up her wand
work, for a time she put aside her normal reading in favour of the steady stream of books on poisons provided by Professor Dumbledore.

Such singular focus on one area of magic was not sustainable, however, and in the second week of November she was forced to diversify her interests when Professor Snape introduced them to a new project.

It was a Tuesday morning, and the late autumn chill was beginning to settle permanently in the dungeons. Victoria had taken to wearing her charm bracelet once more, and the other students had wrapped themselves in full cloaks, sacrificing precious mobility for warmth.

As usual, Snape entered the laboratory abruptly. Silence fell immediately.

“Today we come to the so-called Essential Potions,” he announced, striding to the front of the classroom. “Those few of you who have opened their textbooks will know that these four potions are so highly valued that all students of the Thirteen Schools must take them. The first of the four, which you shall be brewing over the coming months, is known as the Draught of Sparta.” He spun to face the Slytherin side of the classroom. “Malfoy! What is the effect of the Draught of Sparta?”

“Increased physical resilience, sir,” Draco said, straight-backed under Snape’s gaze.

“Correct, but incomplete,” Snape said. “There are many potions which increase resilience. Why, then, is the Draught of Sparta considered essential?”

Hermione’s hand shot into the air. Professor Snape ignored her.

“Potter!”

Victoria looked up from her notes. “The effect is permanent, sir. All the Essential Potions are.”

“And why would that be?”

She hid her smile. Snape did this sometimes, trying to catch her out with advanced questions—whether to test her or embarrass her, she didn’t know. But this time, thanks to her reading on alchemy, she thought she knew the answer. “Because they build on a wizard’s natural magic, sir. It’s already harder to injure wizards, the potion just increases it.”

Professor Snape’s dark eyes bored into her own. “Five points to Slytherin,” he said at last, before turning back to address the class. “Indeed, while all wizards possess a certain hardiness compared to Muggles, the Draught of Sparta amplifies this trait significantly. It is a prerequisite for entry to a number of professions, as well as participation in many wizarding sports such as professional quidditch. And as previously mentioned, Hogwarts requires that each student brew it successfully.”

Daphne raised her hand. She was the only person other than Draco who dared to ask questions in Potions—it was her best class by far, and Snape seemed to tolerate her occasional enquiries. It didn’t hurt that she was gazing up at him with big blue eyes, a look of deep admiration on her face.

Snape let out a long-suffering sigh. “Yes, Miss Greengrass?”

“If it’s so useful, why don’t people just buy it?” she asked. “Not that I’m saying we shouldn’t learn how to do it…”

“You will not find any of the Essential Potions in a shop, no matter how deep your pockets,” Snape explained. “They are all examples of bonded potions—that is, potions which may only be taken by the potioneer. The key ingredient to the Draught of Sparta must be obtained from the last drop of
an autumnal rain shower, which the brewer crystalises while under the influence of a catalyst. From that moment on, the potion becomes bonded to its brewer.”

He waved a hand and the door to the store cupboard swung open. Victoria raised an eyebrow, thinking back to his clumsy wandless levitation the year before—clearly, his practice was paying off.

“Today you will brew the catalyst,” he said, and detailed instructions began writing themselves on the blackboard. “Due to the bonded nature of the potion, you will work individually. There will be no need to talk.”

The catalyst in question was Liquid Ice, which turned out to be one of the most difficult potions they had brewed to date. There were frequent and drastic changes in temperature, a multitude of ingredients, and, worst of all, the potion had to be kept in motion for the entire brewing period, else it would turn to ice.

The class worked in concentrated silence, broken only by the sounds of muttered curses as they tried to prepare ingredients single-handedly while stirring the potion at a steady, even pace. Occasionally, a student who had forgotten an ingredient would have to rush into the store room before hurrying back to their cauldron in the hope that their potion hadn’t solidified.

_Idiots_, Victoria thought. All the sensible students had gathered their ingredients and checked them against the instructions before starting—which was why she was rather surprised to see Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley make a dash for the stores. Ron she could understand, but *Hermione?* She was methodical to a fault… there was simply no way she had forgotten an ingredient.

Victoria shook her head and concentrated on her own potion. Hermione Granger’s performance was not her concern, especially not when her own work was so important. You could only take the Draught of Sparta once, and like most potions the strength of its effect would depend not only on its ingredients, but also on the potioneer’s skill. She was determined for hers to be absolutely perfect.

By the time the bell rang for lunch, only half of the class had managed to brew the catalyst correctly, their success easily identifiable by the electric-blue glow coming from their cauldrons.

“Unacceptable,” Snape said, looking up from Lavender Brown’s watery, transparent attempt. “Every student who failed today’s brewing will return here after dinner to try again… and again the next night if necessary, and the night after that, until you get it right. In the meantime… for those of you who are in possession of the catalyst, your homework is to obtain the key ingredient—the heart of a rain cloud.”

Snape’s assignment quickly took over their lives, interrupting classes, meals and leisure time alike. The second years lived and breathed by the weather: each time it rained, they would rush outside *en masse*, running around courtyards and gardens with glass beakers as they competed to catch the final raindrop. The victorious student would then drink the catalyst before casting the Solidification Spell on the beaker of captured rain, transforming it not into ice, but into a small, glittering sapphire.

Victoria did not participate. The rains of mid-November were weak, and she was waiting for a proper storm with a powerful heart. She watched with incredulity as her classmates made compromise after compromise, sometimes even capturing drizzle which barely even counted as rain. Such behaviour utterly mystified her—didn’t they realise that they would be stuck with this potion for the rest of their lives?
She was not the only student to hang back. Susan and Daphne joined her, after she had explained to them why she was waiting, and Hermione Granger seemed to have figured it out on her own. But the majority of their peers just wanted to get the job done, regardless of result.

Her classmates’ lack of diligence reached a new low when word spread that the Draught of Sparta did not, in fact, require the literal last drop of rain—it was sufficient to use water which had fallen towards the end of a rain shower. From that moment on, the quality of the gemstones dramatically decreased. Victoria even witnessed Ernie Macmillan waiting within the library cloisters with his beaker held out under the rain, not a single drop of it landing on him. His sapphire was the worst of the lot, with rough edges and a murky interior.

While she was waiting for a proper storm, her dinners with Dumbledore continued. He made sure to use a different poison each night, and for weeks Victoria would blunder into one near-death experience after another. Her task seemed impossible. How could she possibly monitor so many different scents, textures, and changes in colour? And do it all while appearing to eat normally? Yet to her great surprise, what had initially seemed like a bewildering mass of information slowly became something more instinctive.

She successfully detected her first poison in the third week of November.

The house-elves had served up a delicious-looking portion of humble pie. The pastry was perfectly flakey, and the filling a deep, gooey red. It was the layer of wrinkled cherries on top which gave it away—as her fork sank into the pie, something stirred at the back of her mind.

Wrinkling was a classic sign of Hag’s Spit, a substance which could paralyse children.

“Would you like my cherries, sir?” she asked. She tried to keep a straight face, but she was so pleased with herself that a cheeky smile escaped her. “To be honest, I’m not a huge fan of them.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Thank you, my girl, but I believe I have enough of my own.”

She was so proud that she entirely missed the Mongolian Lemon in her ice cream.

“No fair!” she cried, once Dumbledore had revived her. “If you poison everything, there’ll be nothing left for me to eat!”

As usual, Dumbledore was unmoved by her complaints. “You are making good progress,” he said. “Once you are proficient, you may eat as many puddings as you wish.”

Later that week, Susan finally received a response from her Aunt Amelia. The letter arrived after classes had finished for the day, during their supervised homework period (more commonly known simply as prep). For the second years, prep occurred in the fourth floor aquarium, a long gallery of tanks containing exotic fish and colourful plants. The room overlooked the greenhouses, its southerly wall lined with sash windows, and it was through one of these windows that Amelia Bones’ owl entered, barely earning a raised eyebrow from Percy Weasley, their supervising prefect. Such things were normal at Hogwarts.

The owl quickly hopped across the room to locate Susan, who was huddled with Victoria at their favourite desk, situated behind a tank in which a group of water-fairies were racing seahorses. Not only were the fairies entertaining, they also provided a measure of privacy, with passers-by much more interested in the small gambling industry developing on the other side of the tank. It was there that scraps of parchment made their way to Seamus Finnegan, who was taking bets on the races.
Susan broke the seal on the envelope and nudged Victoria, who was so absorbed by her Herbology homework that she hadn’t noticed the owl’s arrival. The letter read:

DEPARTMENT OF MAGICAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

OFFICE OF THE MINISTER FOR MAGICAL LAW

Dear Susan,

Please accept my sincere apologies for the delay in responding to your letter. As you might imagine, the department is rather hectic at present, and it took some time for your letter to reach my desk.

It was ever so good to hear from you, even in less-than-ideal circumstances. I confess, your words have been weighing on my mind. No Ministry official is a stranger to criticism, but it rather hits home when one’s own niece expresses concerns about her safety and that of her friends! I wish I could tell you not to worry, that Hogwarts is completely safe and that the Ministry will handle everything. However, I would not wish to diminish your vigilance in these troubled times. It cannot be denied that a dark force is at work within Hogwarts’ walls, one which is evading capture for the time being.

Your curiosity regarding dark detectors is natural and to be commended, but never forget: a witch’s best defence is always her own wand. There are, however, certain enchanted objects which our department commonly makes use of. Of course, you may find many items like Sneakoscopes for sale in Diagon Alley, but these are so vague as to be almost useless for investigation purposes. Some of the rarer and more powerful items we use are Sympathetic Slippers, which allow you to follow an individual’s steps from their footprint, Foe Glasses, which can provide a vision of one’s enemies, and Fugacious Sand (imported from Arabia at no small cost). I believe you have already seen the last in action, during the recent Ministry investigation at the school.

If you have an interest in such objects, I can recommend “Travers On Tracking and Tracing”. However, you will not find these objects for sale in large quantities, and they are considered valuable items. Regretfully, your interest will therefore have to remain academic at this stage.

I do hope you are well, and please pass along my best wishes to Victoria.

Love,

Amelia

“But this is perfect!” Susan whispered when she finished reading. “Look! Foe Glasses, which can provide a vision of one’s enemies … that’s exactly what we need, isn’t it? After the Heir poisoned you, surely they’d count as your enemy… if you looked into a Foe Glass, it could tell us who the Heir is!”

Victoria nodded slowly, re-reading the letter carefully. “Maybe… but she says they’re rare, too. I doubt we’re gonna find one just lying around Hogwarts.”

“Well then, we’ll just have to make one,” Susan said, her tone matter-of-fact. She made it sound the simplest thing in the world.

“I don’t even know where we’d start,” Victoria replied. “We don’t study artefacts ‘til fourth year, do we?”

“We’d start here,” Susan said, jabbing her finger at the book Amelia had recommended. “Maybe
it’d tell us how to make one.”

In spite of herself, and in spite of her already-overflowing schedule, Victoria couldn’t help but feel the lure of such an interesting magical project. There was, however, an immediate problem. “A book like that’s in the Restricted Section for sure, and it’s Draco’s turn with the pass right now. We’ll have to wait until—”

“Come on,” Susan said, standing up. “We’ll just ask to borrow it. Draco’s not using it now, is he?”

“Bones!” called Percy, striding over towards them with an officious look, “where do you think you’re going?”

Victoria stood and fixed Percy with her most Pansy-like glare. “We’re out of ink. It’s not against the rules to borrow some, is it?”

Percy’s cheeks tinged pink. “Be quick about it, then.”

They hurried over to where Draco was sitting with Theodore, all the way at the far end of the room. He eyed them with clear curiosity as they approached, his quill hovering over a half-finished History essay.

“Evening,” Victoria said, taking the empty seat opposite. Susan remained standing behind her, suddenly shy. “I need to borrow the Restricted Section pass, if you’ve got it.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “It’s still my turn, isn’t it? Why do you need it?”

“That doesn’t matter.” It wouldn’t do to broadcast their attempts to catch the Heir, after all. “You’re still reading your mystery book, aren’t you? So it’s not like you need it.”

“But that wasn’t our agreement,” Draco said. “You have it half the month, I have it the other half. You never said anything about having to give it up whenever you wanted it.”

Victoria sighed. It was typical of Draco to force her to negotiate for it. But surely there was a way to persuade him to give it up...

“We’re gonna make a Foe Glass,” Susan blurted out, spilling their secrets for all to hear. “D’you want to help?”

“Susan!” Victoria hissed, but Draco’s eyes were already gleaming with interest.

“A Foe Glass? That’s advanced stuff.”

“We’re thinking about making one,” Victoria clarified, lowering her voice to a whisper. “We won’t know if we can until we get the book. So can we have the pass?”

“No,” Draco said abruptly, and Susan looked like she was about to argue, “but I’ll get the book for you. That way, we can make it together.”

Later that evening, after Victoria had failed to detect the dose of *Aqua Igneus* in her white wine sauce, she made her way to the library to meet with the others.

Susan was waiting for her outside the west entrance. “Are you okay?” she asked as soon as she saw her, “you’re looking a bit, um, pale.”

“Dumbledore,” Victoria said, waving her hand dismissively, and Susan frowned with disapproval.
“I swear, if the parents found out what he was doing…”

“Well, they won’t,” Victoria said firmly, “because you’re the only person I told.”

They picked out a desk in a remote alcove and awaited Draco’s arrival. It was less than twenty minutes before he approached, a smug expression on his face and a book in his hand. The thick, leather-bound book hit the table with a thud and a cloud of dust.

“Easy,” Draco said. “But then, after all the time I’ve spent in there, I know the Restricted Section like the grip of my wand.”

“Yes, yes, very impressive,” Victoria said, ignoring the way Susan was gazing at Draco with Amortentia-eyes. She flicked to the book’s contents and found the section on Foe Glasses. “Here we go, chapter five…”

They gathered around the book and began to read. Unfortunately, Travers wasn’t like their normal textbooks: this was a practitioner’s text for professionals, written in a concise but thoroughly dense style, and it assumed a certain level of basic knowledge on the part of the reader. It therefore took a surprising amount of time for Victoria to finish even the introductory paragraphs.

She moved to turn the page.

“Not yet!”

She sighed and waited for the others to catch up. It was a painfully slow way to read, but it did at least provide plenty of time for her to reflect on the content. By the time they finally finished the chapter, twenty-five pages later, she already had a fully-formed plan in mind.

“Interesting,” Draco said, flicking back to an earlier page to re-read a section. “I think we can do it.”

“But where are we gonna find a boggart?” Susan said, running a hand through her hair. “Never mind catch one!”

“First things first,” Victoria said, drawing her wand. “Do either of you have some parchment?”

Susan rummaged in her bag and withdrew a scroll, which she unravelled and laid out on the table, holding down the end with a glass weight.

“Diffindo,” Victoria said, making a circular motion, and a large, perfectly round section of parchment cut itself out of the scroll. She then gave her wand a twist, speaking no incantation, and the circle of parchment transformed into a pane of perfectly transparent glass, before its surface sank to form a shallow, concave depression. The finished product resembled a giant contact lens.

“Show off,” Susan muttered. She glanced nervously at Draco, who was looking distinctly impressed.

Victoria just grinned. Using magic never ceased to thrill her, and it was awfully satisfying to actually use it for a practical purpose rather than for the sake of completing homework. “This should get us started, I think. Susan, you do the crossrune in the Quibbler, don’t you? Reckon you can manage the engraving?”

Susan bit her lip. “I can give it a go.”

“Right,” Victoria said, “and I can look into the charm. It’s pretty advanced, but with some reference
books I might be able to get it.”

“And me?” Draco asked.

“You’re on boggart duty,” she said. “We need to figure out how to catch one, plus how to find it in
the first place…”

“They can’t be too rare,” Draco said. “I remember Becca Hale screaming about one last year.”

“We can all keep an eye out,” Susan said. “Hogwarts has so many dark corners, there must be loads
of them lurking around.”

And that was how the creation of a Foe Glass added itself to the long list of Victoria’s many
projects. Her presence in the Slytherin common room decreased dramatically as she tried to keep
up with everything, with reading on poisons for Dumbledore, work on the Draught of Sparta for
Snape, her own interest in Alchemy, not to mention the books which McGonagall and Flitwick
continued to recommend… very soon, it all began to feel rather overwhelming, and she found
herself longing for the Christmas holidays.

The one upside was that she got to spend more time with Susan. While she researched the
fiendishly complex Anamorphosis Charm, Susan would work on the glass itself, slowly and
carefully engraving a circle of runes around its rim. Her work reminded Victoria of the pensieves
used at the theatre, and from what she understood from Travers, the runes on the Foe Glass served
a similar function—that of creating an image.

When December arrived, it brought a fierce thunderstorm with it. It hit the school suddenly on a
Wednesday, and Susan and Victoria poked their heads out of the library to watch the downpour.

“This is perfect!” Susan cried, and she removed a glass beaker from her bag. “Come on, we can get
our gems!”

“You go ahead,” Victoria said, “I’m still waiting.”

Susan looked at her incredulously. “Waiting for what? You’re not gonna get a bigger storm than
this!”

“It’s not the solstice yet,” she explained. “There’s still time.”

“Only you,” Susan said with a snort. “Well, even if you’re not getting yours, you can help me get
mine.”

“What do you mean, help?” Victoria asked. “How can I—”

Susan grabbed her by the arm and started dragging her out into the courtyard.

“No!” she cried, laughing as she tried to resist, but Susan was stronger than she was. “My hair!”

The rain hit them like a wall, soaking them instantly. Susan raised her beaker to the sky, quickly
filling it with water.

“Wait!” Victoria called, having to shout over the roar of the rain, “now we’re wet, you might as
well do it properly! The longer you wait, the better the heart!”

So they stood in the pouring rain for almost fifteen minutes. Finally the storm began to pass, the
sheets of water thinning out to a gentle pitter patter, and Susan filled her beaker once more.
“Cheers!” she said, downing her vial of Liquid Ice in a single swallow. She then set her beaker down on the ground and drew her wand. “Congelo!”

The water shimmered and shrank, turning a deep blue as it hardened into the shape of a large, beautifully cut sapphire.

“Wow,” Susan said, picking the gem up and marvelling at the way it caught the light. It was significantly larger than any of the others they had seen, and of a much higher quality besides, with a crystal clear interior. “I’m glad I waited.”

Victoria gave her a very wet hug. “Congratulations! Now can we please go inside and get dry?”

Christmas approached. Victoria’s ability to detect poisons was finally achieving some form of reliability, and as they entered the final week of term she had managed to go three days in a row without consuming anything deadly.

“You have exceeded my expectations,” Dumbledore said one evening, raising his wine glass in a one-sided toast. “It is time, I think, for you to rejoin your peers for meals.”

“Really?” she said, a smile blossoming on her face even as she noticed that the parsley on her chicken was in fact hemlock. She scraped it off and nudged it to the side of her plate. “Are you sure? You do still get me sometimes, after all…”

“We will continue to meet once a week, to refine and practice your skills,” Dumbledore said. “But it does not do for a young lady to spend her every evening with an old man.”

“Thank you,” she said, and she met his gaze. “For everything, I mean. You didn’t have to do this for me. I know you’re a busy man.”

Dumbledore’s eyes softened. “Never so busy, I hope, that I cannot aid a student in need. Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who require it, Victoria.”

She almost skipped to breakfast the next day, so excited to share a meal with her friends that not even Pansy could dent her mood.

“You know, Vicky, I think you’re in competition with Longbottom to be the last person to get their gem,” Pansy said as she poured herself some juice. “You better get around to it soon, or it’ll be too late.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” Victoria said airily, spreading some strawberry jam liberally across a crumpet. “I’ve been keeping an eye on things in Astronomy. Saturn’s in the fourth house and Neptune’s ascendant.”

Daphne frowned. “Which means…?”

“It’s going to rain on Monday.”

“If you’re sure,” Pansy said. “It’s just—I hear Longbottom might have to do his again next year, if he can’t get a hang of the Solidification Spell in time. Wouldn’t that be terrible?”

She sounded delighted.

“Oh, be nice,” Daphne said. “Longbottom’s not a bad sort, after all. And I’m sure Vicky knows what’s she’s doing.”
She did. Monday was the last day of autumn, the winter solstice itself, and by tradition also the last day of term. Just as she had predicted, the dawn broke to a sky pregnant with dark clouds. It wasn’t until the afternoon, however, that those clouds began to discharge their precious cargo, while Victoria was in Charms.

“Professor?” she asked, raising her hand to interrupt a demonstration of the Sunlight Charm. “May I be excused?”

Professor Flitwick followed her gaze out of the window. “Very well, Miss Potter. Good luck.”

She raced through the empty corridors to the North Gate, where she wrapped herself in her cloak before heading out into the waterlogged grounds. The rain was not as heavy as the storm which had provided Susan with her sapphire, but it was relentless, turning grass to mud, gathering in pools and running through rocky gullies down to the lake.

Victoria followed the water downhill. Even though she was wearing her sturdiest pair of shoes, they became drenched almost instantly, her socks squelching unpleasantly as she descended towards the lake. When the path forked, she turned to the right, veering away from Hagrid’s hut and towards the privacy offered by the forest.

She didn’t need to go in far. There were many small inlets on the edge of the lake, their stony shores shielded from view by the encroaching forest, and any one of them would have suited her purposes. She stopped at one such inlet, and there began to disrobe.

Her cloak came first. Lowering the hood, she was immediately buffeted by the frozen Scottish wind, its bite so fierce that it struck her face with an almost physical blow. With her hair flying everywhere, she reluctantly shrugged the cloak off her shoulders, a gasp escaping her as the force of the gale sliced through her thin robes.

Then she took off her black outer robe, rolling it up and wrapping it inside her cloak. Bereft of its meagre protection, her flimsy inner robe was left flapping in the wind, its white fabric becoming heavy and sodden as it was battered by the rain. Steeling her nerves, she quickly took that off too, sweeping it over her head in one smooth movement. It joined her outer robe inside the cloak, and suddenly she was standing there in little more than her underwear.

Her shoes and socks were next, already so wet that there was no point trying to keep them dry. After an ungraceful hopping dance to remove her right shoe, her bare feet touched the cool, sandy soil, her toes making impressions on the malleable ground.

Finally, with several furtive looks around to ensure she was still alone, she stripped off her bra and knickers, doing it quickly, as if that would somehow ease her discomfort. They too joined her robes inside her cloak.

She was left exposed, shivering and wet.

Battered by the wind.

Naked, alone, and fearful of discovery.

Just as the Spartans intended.

For hours she stood there, almost in a daze, her arms wrapped around herself as she sought some form of protection from the elements. Her hair was a tangled mess which stuck to her face and shoulders. Her nose was running and her cheeks were red raw. Her toes and fingers were numb, and her ears ached. Yet still she waited, enduring it all. This was what she had been seeking, ever
since Snape had introduced them to the Draught of Sparta. This, she knew, was how she would achieve perfection.

She would collect the last drop of the last rain on the last day of autumn. She would do it as the Spartans had, earning it, fully embracing the power of the season, coming to understand it in a way that no book could teach.

At last the rain began to diminish. The downpour became a drizzle, which turned to a wet mist. Though her lungs ached from the cold, she breathed in deeply, focusing on the fresh, clean smell of clarified air. Some primal instinct called out to her, and she held out her hand.

A single drop fell on her palm.

Carefully, making sure to keep her hand level, she reached with her free hand into her bundle of robes and removed her vial of Liquid Ice. She drank it with a single swig, already so cold that she barely noticed its bitter touch rushing through her veins.

And then, without even retrieving her wand, she cast the spell.

“Congelo.”

Just like that, the water on her palm solidified into a gem. It was small—much smaller than Susan’s—and in the shape of a teardrop. Its colour was a pale blue, so light that it was almost transparent, and it seemed to glow with an inner light. She looked closer and gasped.

There, deep within the core of her gem, clouds swirled and lighting flashed. The hair on the back of her neck prickled, and she immediately knew that she had never before held an object of such power.

This was not just the heart of any old rain cloud. She had done it. She had captured the heart of autumn itself.
Malfoy Manor

Victoria Potter

By Taure

Chapter Nineteen: Malfoy Manor

The holidays arrived with typical Hogwartian chaos. A flurry of activity overtook the castle as everyone rushed to pack their trunks, leaving the dorms littered with discarded robes and other non-essential items. Those students who had remembered to owl-order Christmas gifts distributed them, and some even found the time to visit the Great Hall for breakfast, but the majority made their way to the entrance hall with empty stomachs, wet hair, and sleep in their eyes.

The Hogwarts Express would be departing at ten o’clock sharp and, determined to avoid delay, the teachers were sending the students out from the castle in a continuous stream. Like a line of marching ants, the horseless carriages wobbled through Hogwarts’ gates and down the cobbled road towards Hogsmeade station, where they would deposit their occupants before returning to the school for the next wave.

Victoria took a late carriage with the other Slytherin girls. They, at least, were mostly well turned-out: Pansy, wearing neat winter robes of royal blue, her dark hair having grown almost as long as Victoria’s; Daphne, looking like she was about to go hippogriff riding, with knee-high boots and a quilted outer-robe; and Tracey, the odd one out, with a smudge of toothpaste on her ear and inside-out robes showing off their seams.

Keenly aware that Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy would be collecting her from King’s Cross, Victoria had also dressed to impress. She’d picked out a crimson inner robe with fine embroidery, and the heart of autumn was glittering on her chest, securely encased within the pendant of a transfigured copper necklace.

Daphne leaned across from the other side of the carriage. “Can I see it again?” she asked, reaching for the pendant.

“Be careful,” Victoria said, but she let her take hold of the jewel and lift it up to the light. “I still need it for the potion, remember.”

“It’s such a pity.” Daphne sighed. “If only you could keep it, you could get it set in a proper necklace.”

“Or she could just buy some real jewellery,” Pansy said, “instead of wearing a potion ingredient like it’s a diamond.”

Needless to say, Pansy had not been happy when Victoria had returned to the dorm the previous night, bedraggled but carrying a brilliant gemstone. She’d been even less impressed when the others had demanded that Victoria tell the story of its acquisition three times.

“It is a pity,” Victoria said, ignoring Pansy entirely, “but it’ll be worth it. A proper Draught of Sparta’s worth a hundred necklaces.”

“I’m just impressed you actually got naked in the forest,” Tracey said. “Like, what if someone had
seen you?”

Victoria shrugged, feeling rather cavalier about it now that she was safe and warm. “Then they’d have got a proper eyefull, wouldn’t they?”

Daphne giggled. “Ohh, imagine if Creepy Creevy saw her... he’d be selling the photos on the train!”

“I bet Draco would buy one,” Tracey said, causing Victoria to blush. “He’s been going on about your visit for weeks now.”

“He’d do no such thing!” Pansy said. “Draco’s a gentleman. And besides, he doesn’t like Vicky that way.”

“If you say so,” Daphne said with practised diplomacy, well-used to diffusing arguments before they started. But when Pansy wasn’t looking, she turned and wiggled her eyebrows suggestively at Victoria, causing her blush to deepen. Suddenly she felt rather awkward about her upcoming visit to Malfoy Manor. Draco didn’t really fancy her, did he?

If he did, she dearly hoped that Susan never found out.

They arrived at the station and boarded the train, finding an empty compartment just as the conductor blew his whistle. Brakes squeaked, steam billowed, and the Hogwarts Express began its journey south.

For Victoria, it felt rather strange to be leaving Hogwarts in the middle of the year, and stranger still to be on her way to Malfoy Manor rather than Little Whinging. She was unusually nervous about the whole thing, as if she were heading into a difficult exam, and she became increasingly self-conscious as the train made its way through valleys and across mountains, aware of everything from her tendency to slouch to the way she dropped her ‘t’s.

Hopefully Mrs Malfoy wouldn’t just declare her a lost cause.

As always, it was a long and exhausting journey. Seven hours was a lot of time to spend in anyone’s company, especially when confined to a small compartment, and Victoria excused herself to find Susan as they passed through Peterborough. She stayed with the Hufflepuffs for the rest of the trip, eating sweets and watching Hannah, Justin and Ernie play exploding snap.

“Won’t you join in?” Hannah asked when they dealt a new hand. “It can’t be very fun, just watching us play.”

“She won’t,” Susan said with a knowing look. “She painted her nails last night.”

She was quite right. Victoria’s nails were a lovely red, matching her robes perfectly. “Thanks for the offer,” she said, smiling at Hannah, “but I’d rather not chip the polish... not just before seeing Mrs Malfoy.”

By the time the train pulled into London, she wanted nothing more than to curl up with a book in front of a fire. She still had a long way to travel, however, so she quickly visited the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. She didn’t want to be falling asleep during the onward journey—what a first impression that would be!

After saying goodbye three times to Susan, she retrieved her trunk and stepped out onto the platform.
“Victoria!”

Draco pushed through the crowd, his parents behind him. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy would stand out anywhere, the pair of them tall and imperious, with the same platinum blond hair as their son. While many parents tried to blend in at King’s Cross by wearing Muggle clothing, the Malfoys had arrived in full wizarding wear: Lucius was looking dashing in his three-piece lounge robes, and Narcissa was the image of elegance in an understated dress robe in a pale pink.

“Mr Malfoy,” Victoria said, bobbing in a quick curtsey, “Mrs Malfoy. Thank you for having me over.”

For all that she regretted her Muggle upbringing, one thing Petunia had successfully hammered into her head was good manners.

“It’s our pleasure,” Lucius said smoothly. “Any friend of Draco’s will always find a welcome at Malfoy Manor.”

“Quite right,” Narcissa said. “And you must call me Narcissa, dear. It’ll be a long three weeks otherwise!”

Victoria doubted she would ever feel comfortable calling an adult by their first name. “I’ll try, Mrs Malfoy.”

Lucius snorted, before gesturing with his cane towards her luggage. “You have just the one trunk, I assume?”

“You mean we’re allowed to bring more?” Victoria asked. She glanced at Draco. “Wait ‘til Pansy finds out.”

Narcissa laughed, a delightful yet controlled tinkle which did little to betray true mirth. “I’m sure that Pansy is well aware. It will be Patroclus who forbids it.” She turned to her side. “Will you, Bertie?”

A man appeared out of nowhere, stepping forward as if from Victoria’s peripheral vision—only he was right in front of her. It was just like the Leaky Cauldron. A moment ago, she could have sworn that the space was empty, but now it was as if he had always been there. He was an elderly gentleman, but there was a sharpness to his blue eyes, and he clearly took pride in his appearance. His thinning white hair was neatly combed, and his shoes and buttons gleamed with polish.

“This is Bertrand,” Lucius said, “our Keeper of the Keys.”

“A pleasure, ma’am,” he said, moving to take her trunk by the side handle. Despite his age, he lifted it with casual ease, and even managed to take hold of Draco’s with his other hand.

Narcissa clapped. “Marvelous. Shall we?”

They made their way through the barrier into the Muggle world. Still in their robes, Victoria had expected to feel the weight of a hundred Muggle eyes as they walked through the station, but they barely merited a second glance. The Muggles’ preoccupation with their own business clearly outweighed any curiosity they may have felt towards wizards.

A hippogriff-drawn stagecoach awaited them outside. The coach was tall, black, and sleek-looking, with little in the way of decoration other than silver door handles. It had pulled up right next to the entrance, where the Muggles were forced to divert themselves around it with looks of irritated confusion.
Victoria wondered what they saw. Would they look at the carriage and see a large van? Did the stamping hooves of six hippogriffs sound like the rumble of an engine? Or did they see nothing at all, driven to change direction by base instinct alone?

Bertrand secured their trunks on the roof of the stagecoach before leaning down from the front seat to open the carriage door. It was spacious inside, evidently the result of magical expansion, but fundamentally it was still a carriage: two wooden benches faced each other, their surfaces lined with cushions, and in the centre was a low table with a porcelain tea set atop it.

“Shall I be mother?” Narcissa asked. Not waiting for an answer, she tapped the teapot with her wand, and steam began to pour from the spout.

Lucius rapped his knuckles on the roof. Outside, Bertrand cracked a whip.

“Yah!”

The hippogriffs burst into motion with avian squarks. Their hooves thundered on the tarmac, a noise far louder than six animals had any right to make, and the stagecoach careered out of the station, tipping onto two wheels as it turned onto the main road.

Inside, Narcissa was calmly pouring tea into cups. Though the carriage was rocking violently, none of that movement seemed to translate into the interior, which was as stable as any house.

“Sugar, Victoria?”

“Yes, please.”

In truth, Victoria did not much like the bitter taste of tea, but she found that it could be rendered tolerable by the addition of large quantities of both milk and sugar. She took her cup from Narcissa, holding it by the saucer, and blew on the hot liquid.

“Now,” Narcissa said, once everyone had received their cup, “tell me all about your term.”

Draco launched into a long and somewhat rambling account of the last few months. Victoria was quite happy to let him take the lead—this was his family, after all—while she gazed out of the window, listening with half an ear as they weaved through Muggle traffic and onto the motorway.

Quidditch featured prominently in Draco’s version of the autumn term, which contained a mind-numbing level of detail regarding the various drills that he had been practising in Flying. Narcissa listened to her son with a small smile and soft eyes, and it was clear to Victoria that she would have found any subject interesting, so long as Draco was the one speaking.

Lucius was not quite so accepting. “I do hope you found the time to attend some classes, amid all this flying.”

Draco blushed. “Of course, Father. In fact, Professor Snape even gave me an Outstanding for one of my potions.”

“That’s very good,” Narcissa said, speaking as much to Lucius as Draco. “Severus doesn’t award top grades lightly.”

“As you say,” Lucius said, and he waved for his son to continue.

It was when he came to describe the Heir’s various attacks that Victoria was pulled back into the conversation.
“Oh, you poor dear,” Narcissa said, after Draco had finished the story of her poisoning. “To think that such things are happening at Hogwarts, under Dumbledore’s very nose... well, Lucius is one of the governors, as I’m sure you know, and he’s been very busy with keeping an eye on matters.”

“Indeed,” Lucius said, his eyes glinting. “The governors are quite concerned, let me assure you. Unless Dumbledore can put a stop to matters soon, changes will have to be made.”

Victoria shifted in her seat, somewhat uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. She liked Dumbledore, for all his barminess, and he had put a lot of time and effort into teaching her about poisons. But he had also made clear his disapproval of the Malfoys… she supposed it was only fair that the Malfoys dislike him back.

She just hoped she could stay out of it all.

They turned off the M4 where it met the North Wessex Downs, rapidly passing from smooth, straight tarmac onto winding country lanes. Here their journey became much more erratic, and Victoria’s heart was in her mouth as they rocketed between tall hedgerows, almost certain that they would collide with a Muggle car approaching from the opposite direction.

Draco had picked up his story from where he had left off, moving on to talk about the Draught of Sparta. He proudly showed his parents his sapphire, which was similar in size and quality to Susan’s.

“Impressive,” Lucius said, holding the gem up to the light. “My own was not nearly as large.”

Draco puffed up.

“But what’s this?” Narcissa said, her eyes on Victoria’s pendant. She reached out hesitantly, her long, delicate fingers probing the air around the gem. “That is no ordinary stormheart.”

Victoria sat up a little straighter. “I might have, um, modified the process. Just a bit.”

“Oh?”

“Well, nothing too different,” she explained, “once you know why the potion works the way it does, you can kinda see how to make it… more.”

Narcissa raised an eyebrow. “An impressive achievement, to modify a potion at your age. Especially such a significant one. But perhaps it was to be... expected.”

She looked at Lucius, and there was a challenge in her gaze. It reminded Victoria of the way Pansy would look at someone who was sitting in her favourite armchair.

Lucius just rolled his eyes.

“Aparecium!”

The spell had been cast by Bertrand, just as the hippogriffs looked like they would gallop straight into a thick hedge. The greenery parted before them, forming itself into a tall arch, and they passed through onto a long dirt track. Fields stretched out on either side, as far as the eye could see, each one divided from its neighbour by a low stone wall. To their left, tall strands of golden winter wheat swayed in the wind; to their right, the field was dotted with burrows, out of which poked small reptilian heads.

“They’re mokes,” Draco explained, seeing Victoria’s curious look. “Their skin’s used for shrinking
things… bags, shoes, stuff like that.”

“One of our most valuable livestock,” Lucius said. “Sometimes I think Crabbe spends more time fending off poachers than actually looking after the mokes.”


“Indeed,” Lucius said, “they’ve been among our leading tenants for several centuries.”

“The Goyles, too,” Draco added. Suddenly the way Vincent and Gregory followed him around made a lot more sense.

They continued for several miles down the track. Wheat gave way to peas and broad beans; the moke field was followed by herds of hippogriffs and cattle. Here and there the track would branch, the side paths meandering across the rolling landscape to barns, stables, and rustic cottages with smoke rising from their chimneys.

Finally, the fields ended. A stream cut across the road, which they crossed via a stone bridge, and then they were passing uphill through a small wood populated by strutting peacocks.

It was near the top of the hill that Victoria had her first sight of Malfoy Manor. The track curved in a horseshoe shape, cut into the hill just below its ridgeline, and occasionally a gap in the trees would allow her a view across the valley. There, on a plateau right at the heart of the horseshoe, a sprawling, elegant building loomed.

They had arrived.

* * *

Malfoy Manor, Victoria was to learn, had been constructed in three stages.

The original structure dated back to the eleventh century, when William the Conqueror had granted Armand Malfoy a swathe of land as a reward for his role in the Norman conquest. More castle than manor, it had been built in the blocky, military style of that era, a stone keep with thick walls, narrow windows and low ceilings. Its striking position on the hill had been chosen for ease of defence rather than any aesthetic value, though it did at least face southwards.

Despite its functional construction, even in Norman times the Malfoys had liked their luxuries. The castle was heated throughout by a system of pipes, and the floor of the entrance hall was dominated by an exquisite mosaic in the Roman style, depicting William’s victory at the Battle of Hastings. Armand Malfoy was featured prominently at William’s side, even though he had in fact been in Northumbria at the time of the battle.

The manor’s first major expansion had occurred in the sixteenth century, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, when the Malfoys were growing in prominence and found themselves in need of a more impressive residence. They had therefore extended the building substantially to the rear. The new structure was centred around an enclosed courtyard, as was the fashion of that era, and had large bay windows, intricate stonework, and a multitude of chimneys. At night, a warm glow would shine out of those windows, visible for miles around.

The final phase of construction followed in the early eighteenth century. Before the Statute of Secrecy, it had been common for the wizarding elite to observe the Muggle practice of dividing their time between town and country, descending upon London during the summer months to engage in politics and high society. But the introduction of wizarding secrecy saw a permanent migration of wizards to the countryside, with magical families abandoning their London mansions
en masse. From that point on, wizarding high society would take place in the country homes of prominent families, and the Malfoys once again found themselves in need of more space.

Two new wings were added, east and west, branching off from the original castle so that they formed a single, long facade. The front of the Norman keep was updated to match the new, Georgian style—simple white stone, with neat rows of large, evenly spaced windows—and all trace of the original architecture was eliminated.

It was at this point that the Malfoys took the opportunity to remodel the interior. Walls were smashed through, ceilings raised, murals painted and chandeliers installed. No expense was spared, and the manor took on a palatial aspect, full of large, airy rooms, expensive artwork and luxurious furniture.

A few clues remained as to the building’s ancient origin. The mosaic was still there, the centrepiece of an expanded entrance hall, now with wide hardwood staircases leading away into the manor proper. The dungeons had also survived, though they had been converted into extensive cellars full of barrels of wine and wheels of cheese. And many of the original timber beams were still to be found criss-crossing rooms above head height, serving little purpose beyond the aesthetic now that the floors they used to support had been removed.

The more functional aspects, however, had all been relocated. The granaries had been moved to a series of outhouses, and the owlery now stood separate from the manor itself, situated out of sight just behind the tree line. The Malfoys owned at least thirty owls and used all of them. They were coming and going at all hours of the day, and every morning at breakfast Lucius would find a stack of correspondence waiting for him.

Life at the Malfoys was not like it had been at Susan’s house. There was no stumbling out of bed in your nightclothes here, no muddy boots resting by the kitchen door. Everything the Malfoys did was elegant, precise, and steeped in formality. They wore different robes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and each morning Narcissa would pass through the manor, incense in hand, filling the airy halls with the scent of pine.

Victoria wasn’t sure how to feel about it. She couldn’t just relax like she had at Susan’s, but at the same time there was so much beauty in everything the Malfoys did, as if their entire lives were a piece of art. At any time of day, if you were to take a photograph of the Malfoys about their daily business, the picture could easily have made its way into any glossy magazine.

On her first morning at the manor, Victoria woke in her gargantuan bed to find a morning robe hanging by her dresser. It was a gown of silk, open at the front, with a belt to hold it closed. Uncertain of what to wear underneath, she changed out of her nightdress into a simple white inner robe, before freshening up and heading downstairs to the dining room. She found the Malfoy family waiting around a long wooden table laden with fresh bread and croissants, platters of cheese and cold meats, and an array of jams and honey.

As they dug into the spread, Victoria watched Lucius make his way through his letters.

“Another writ from the Congo,” he said with a sigh, his eyes skimming a sheaf of complex documentation. “It seems that one of our hunters was gored by a tebo.”

Narcissa took a sip of strong, dark coffee. “You’d think they’d be more careful… that’s the second this month, isn’t it?”

“Quite,” Lucius said, and he took up a colourful peacock-feather quill, using it to quickly scratch a note onto the front of the documents.
Draco frowned. “You always pay them, father. But if they can’t do their job properly, surely we shouldn’t have to give them gold?”

Lucius just passed the note to Bertrand, who tucked it under his arm. “I haven’t the energy to fight someone over four hundred galleons,” he explained. “It would only take a few days for the barrister’s fees to exceed that amount. Better to just make it go away.”

“If we had a reputation for always defending them, maybe they’d stop trying,” Draco said. “It might cost a lot to defend the first few, but after that you’d stop having to pay anything.”

Lucius smiled. “That is certainly one strategy, and one my father favoured. I believe he made our lawyers quite rich. But I prefer the pragmatic approach… you must learn to focus your energies in fighting the battles that matter.”

“And for now, that battle is tomorrow’s ball,” Narcissa said, setting down her coffee. She hadn’t eaten anything. “Draco, have you tried your robes on?”

“Yes, mother.”

“And tidied your room?”

“Yes, mother.”

“And you’ve memorised the guest list?”

Draco paused. “Most of it…”

“That’s your task for the morning, then,” Narcissa said. “After you’ve danced with Victoria, you’ll be expected to invite the other young ladies to dance, and I don’t want you getting their names wrong.”

Victoria almost choked on her juice. “Dancing? I have to dance?”

All eyes turned on her.

“Yes,” Narcissa said, “it is, after all, a ball. The high table opens the first dance.”

“That… could be a problem,” Victoria said, shrinking into her seat. Her Muggle upbringing was showing again. “I don’t really know how.”

Narcissa and Lucius shared a look.

“Well then,” Narcissa said, “we shall simply have to teach you.”

The rest of the day was spent under Narcissa’s intensive tuition, learning the galliard, brantle, and minuet. They were not at all what Victoria had expected. She had been imagining dances like the waltz or the tango, where the partners would hold each other and move around the room together. But these dances were rather more choreographed affairs, the dancers standing in lines or as a circle, performing a complex series of steps which only brought them into brief contact with each other.

That was not to say that they were easy. Victoria quickly discovered that she was not a natural dancer, and had she been learning of her own volition she may have given up quickly. Narcissa, however, was a hard taskmaster.
“Again!” she would call each time the music stopped, her voice firm and unwavering. Where necessary, she filled in for the role of the man, hopping, twirling and promenading opposite Victoria, occasionally coming together to spin her around or lift her into the air. Most of the time, however, she stood back to observe and offer critique.

“Chin up!”

“Feet pointing out!”

“Shoulders down!”

By dinner, Victoria had the basic steps memorised. She did not move with the grace of a practised dancer, but at least she would not make a fool of herself.

“Good,” Narcissa said, watching Victoria’s feet closely as she completed another minuet. “We’ll make a dancer of you yet.”

Victoria smiled in exhaustion, her robe sticking to her skin with sweat. “So long as I don’t have to do a galliard. I still can’t get the hop right.”

The galliard was the most complex of the three dances, with a light-footed step that reminded her of a tap dance.

“I will ensure the first dance takes another form,” Narcissa said. “You’ll not be alone in wishing to avoid it. Now, you’ve just enough time to wash before dinner—off you pop!”

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The next evening found Victoria standing in front of her bedroom mirror, turning this way and that as she evaluated her appearance. Her hands constantly drifted to stroke the fabric of her tumblewool dress robe, marveling at its softness. Daphne had been right: it was as light as a breeze, yet it clung to her like cotton. The navy gown had a slightly deeper neckline than she would normally wear—she kept looking down, to check that she wasn’t revealing too much—and it was decorated with elaborate patterns, the knitting so fine that it could have been embroidery. The flared skirt was also extremely swishable.

A knock came on her door, and Narcissa entered without waiting for a response. Her hair was up, showing off sparking diamond earrings, and she was wearing an absolutely stunning dress robe. The daring bodice was made of black lace, with a nude underlay to maintain her modesty, and the black satin skirt was ruffled with translucent netting.

“Well now,” she said, walking over to stand behind Victoria, “you look almost a woman.”

Victoria blushed and turned back to the mirror. She didn’t feel like a woman, not when she was standing next to Narcissa. But still… she was pleased. She had glitter across her rosy cheeks, and was wearing her hair down, a braided circlet resting atop her head like a crown. The heart of autumn sat on her chest, still held within the copper necklace. She looked like some kind of fairy princess.

“Sometimes I do wish I’d had a daughter,” Narcissa said with a sigh, briefly toying with Victoria’s hair. “Shall we?”

They made their way towards the ballroom, the sound of their heels echoing through the empty corridors. Outside, Victoria could hear the steady clip-clop of hooves as guests arrived, and when they passed the windows she was able to glimpse carriages approaching through the darkness,
illuminated by a string of lanterns stretching down the long drive. The skydoor was also in full use, and periodic dull thumps sounded from the roof as guests landed.

“How many are coming?” Victoria asked.

“Not more than two hundred,” Narcissa said, speaking as if that were a small number. “They’ll be staying in the east wing, so they shouldn’t disturb you.”

Victoria blinked. “They’re all staying here?”

“Of course,” Narcissa said. “We could hardly eject them in the middle of the night! I dare say they’d never visit again.”

They entered the west wing and descended a spiral staircase. The ballroom was on the ground floor, and the majority of the guests would be coming through the manor’s entrance hall. The high table, however, would enter through a side door once everyone else was seated.

They emerged from the staircase into a small passageway, where most of the high table had already gathered. She immediately recognised Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic, whose picture frequently appeared in the papers. He was a middle-aged man with long sideburns, wearing many-layered robes and holding a lime green top hat.

Next to him stood a tall, imposing wizard with short grey hair and a stern face, who carried the most curious accessory: a long, thin box, hanging from his left wrist by a metal chain. The two wizards were huddled together, conversing in whispers, but they looked up as Victoria approached.

Minister Fudge stepped forward with a wide, grandfatherly smile. “Miss Potter! A pleasure to meet you at last.” He clasped her by the shoulders and they kissed cheeks. “It’s so good to see you out and about, where you belong.”

“Mrs Malfoy was very kind to invite me,” Victoria said, figuring that it was always a good idea to compliment the host. “I just hope I don’t mess up the dance.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine, my dear,” Minister Fudge said. “But where is your partner?”

Narcissa beckoned, and Draco emerged from a huddle further down the passageway. Victoria hadn’t recognised him before: he was dressed in full evening robes, top hat and all, with breeches and white tights like men from old paintings. Others might have felt self-conscious in such an outfit, but Draco was clearly at ease, moving with confidence.

“Ah, young Master Malfoy,” Fudge said, and he shook Draco’s hand before glancing at Narcissa. “A curious partnership. Dumbledore…?”


Fudge nodded slowly. “Yes. He’s been at this game a long time. He knows that if you take too firm a hold of something, you may simply break it.”

“Or else watch it slip from your grasp,” Narcissa said.

Victoria glanced between them, frowning. Clearly they were talking about Dumbledore, but it was like they were speaking in code.

She didn’t have time to interpret it. The door at the end of the passageway opened and Lucius
stepped through, dressed in the same way as Draco. The sound of two hundred guests accompanied him: the low murmur of conversation, the clink of raised glasses, the clicking of cameras.

“We are ready.”

They formed up into a line, two abreast, men on the left and women on the right. Lucius and Narcissa came first, then the Minister and his wife, with Victoria and Draco in third place. The stern-faced man had no partner. He stood to one side, lingering just behind the Minister and his wife.

Bertrand announced them as they entered.

“Mr Lucius Malfoy and Mrs Narcissa Malfoy.”

“Mr Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, and Mrs Faustina Fudge.”

“Mr Septimus Swann, First Lord of the Wand.”

And then…

“Miss Victoria Potter, the Girl Who Lived, and Master Draco Malfoy.”

They swept out of the side passage and Victoria got her first look at the enormous ballroom. It occupied almost the entire ground floor of the west wing, with classical columns of white stone lining either side of the room. Beyond the columns, French windows led out to the gardens on either side of the building. The elaborately painted ceiling stood at a double height, and a first floor balcony overlooked the wooden dance floor below. That dance floor was dotted with circular tables set with white tablecloths, the guests clapping as the high table entered.

Looks of undisguised interest followed Victoria as she and Draco made their way around the tables. From the excited chatter, it was clear that the majority of the guests had not known that she would be attending. As she passed the fourth table, she gave a small wave: Daphne was beaming at them, while Pansy sat with a tight smile, her arms crossed. She was surprised to see the Patil twins at the same table, dressed in matching pink dress robes.

The high table took their places at a long, rectangular table on the far side of the room. Lucius and Narcissa sat at the centre, and to Narcissa’s side was Minister Fudge. Next came Victoria, and Draco sat to her left. Off to one side, a camera flashed.

“I think that went very nicely,” Fudge said, laying a napkin across his lap. “Their faces! We’ll be the talk of Hogsmeade, mark my words.”

“We were only too happy to assist,” Narcissa said. “The photographer is from Witch Weekly, did you know?”

Fudge chuckled. “My dear, you outdo yourself.” He turned to Victoria. “How about that, Miss Potter? In the society section of Witch Weekly before you’re even thirteen!”

Victoria smiled, suddenly very glad she’d put so much effort into dressing up. “It’ll be nice to have a memory of the ball.” She would have to take a cutting from the magazine and pin it up where Pansy could see it.

Dinner began. Their starters arrived promptly, delivered on gleaming white plates by waiters who appeared from nowhere. Victoria froze when she looked at her plate. She had been served with three scallops resting on towers of pea purée, exactly the same starter as the one Dumbledore had
given her in her first lesson on poisons.

How had he known?

She reached for her cutlery, selecting the fish knife without thinking, holding it delicately as Dumbledore had shown her—and from the corner of her eye, she saw Narcissa nod with approval.

Realisation dawned. Yes, the Headmaster disliked the Malfoys. Yes, he disapproved of Victoria’s attendance at their ball. But even as he had sought to persuade her to stay away, he had been preparing her, teaching her the basics so she didn’t embarrass herself. He’d known that she would reject his advice and come anyway.

The Malfoys didn’t give him nearly enough credit.

Fudge picked up his knife and fork. “Bon appetit!”

She tucked into her starter, eating slowly, paying close attention to the scents and textures. So far as she could tell, nothing was poisoned.

As they ate, Narcissa engaged Cornelius Fudge in political conversation. “Tell me, Minister, how goes your Muggle protection initiative?”

Fudge grimaced. “Ever-expanding in remit, I’m afraid. I don’t think anyone realised the scope of what Vance was suggesting, when she put that bill forward… well, perhaps Burke did—a mind for legal loopholes, that man—but given his reputation, I’m afraid we didn’t pay much attention to him.”

“Oh, but Tankie is such a dear,” Narcissa said with a fond smile. “Has he ever voted aye to anything?”

“Once, I believe,” Fudge said. “He approved an increase in the dining expenses of Wizengamot members.” He sighed. “In any case, the Wizengamot has spoken, and the Ministry will see its will done.”

Narcissa shook her head. “Your hands are tied, then? I know you don’t completely support the policy.”

“It’s not ideal. We had a new werewolf taskforce planned, you know… very popular with the public. But no one has the energy for it anymore,” Fudge said. “The Act does give the Ministry considerable leeway in implementation, but Weasley has put me in a bit of a pickle… he’s issued so many Decrees already, a lot of that discretion is out of the window.”

Victoria frowned. She only had a vague understanding of the matters they discussed—she didn’t read the papers in detail, as Draco did—but Professor Flamel had taught them that the Minister had complete control over the Ministry. Or at least, that was how Brandon Swann, the first Minister, had acted. Perhaps things had changed since then.

“But you’re the Minister, aren’t you?” she asked, daring to speak. Petunia would not have approved. “Can’t you do what you like?”

Fudge gave her an indulgent smile. “If only it were that simple, my dear. Yes, I have the legal power… the Minister for Magic has final say over all Decrees. But by convention, he delegates that power to the Heads of Department, who are nominated by the Minister and approved by the Wizengamot. There’s always a lot of negotiation over who gets which role, and that gives them a certain independence. It would be highly irregular for the Minister to interfere with the decisions of
his cabinet.”

“But not unprecedented,” Narcissa said. “I remember Minister Jenkins revoking the Decree Protecting Pure-Blood Gatherings, back during the protests in the Sixties.”

“Oh, there’s always some kind of precedent for whatever you want to do,” Fudge said. “It’s all about what you can get away with. For me to interfere now… well, some kind of scandal would be required to justify it.”

Narcissa’s eyes glinted. “Quite.”

A fleeting look of alarm crossed Fudge’s face, and his eyes wandered down the table to where Lucius was telling an entertaining story to Faustina. “If some justification arose, perhaps I could do something,” he said slowly, pausing to finish off his starter, “but I would not wish to rush into things. I value your counsel, you know that, but you are not my only advisors… in this matter, I could only act if there was a consensus.”

“Of course, Minister,” Narcissa said, bowing her head. “It’s entirely right for you to consult widely on such important matters. I did not mean to imply otherwise.”

They were briefly interrupted by the arrival of the main course. Their starters were whipped away, replaced with a larger plate containing a tiny chicken-like bird, roasted until it had crispy golden skin. It was surrounded by elegant whirls of creamy mashed potato and delicate turned vegetables, all of it drizzled with a meaty gravy.

So far, Dumbledore was two for two.

“Ah, quail!” Fudge said, rubbing his hands together with appreciation. “Have you ever had quail, Miss Potter? It’s the finest of the game birds, in my opinion.”

“One,” Victoria said, deciding not to mention that she had thought it was chicken. “It smells delicious.”

Narcissa poured Fudge some white wine. “We have a sizeable population of common quail in the forest. I hadn’t realised you were such a fan, Minister. Perhaps, one afternoon, you might accompany Lucius on a hunt and take a few home with you.”

“A most generous offer,” Fudge said, before taking his first bite of the quail. He closed his eyes for a moment, savouring the taste. “One that I’m inclined to accept.”

Narcissa smiled. “I’ll let Lucius know. Of course, you must bring some friends with you, to make a proper day of it. Mr Whitehorn, perhaps?”

Even Victoria knew that name. Devlin Whitehorn was the owner of the Nimbus Racing Broom Company, one of the few wizards whose wealth was discussed in the same terms as that of the Malfoy family. He had also been one of the Muggle Protection Act’s most vocal supporters, no doubt figuring that without enchanted cars, wizards would be forced to buy more brooms.

Fudge shook his head and chuckled. “Take note, Miss Potter. I have just been manoeuvred quite masterfully.” He turned to Narcissa, who did not seem perturbed by the Minister calling out her scheme. “I’ll ask Devlin if he wants to come, but I can’t guarantee anything. Now, enough of that for one night. Tell me, where do you think Tina and I should vacation this spring? We do so value your recommendations…”

Narcissa appeared quite content for Fudge to change the topic, and began to regale him with tales
of the Pink and White Terraces of New Zealand, beautiful tiered waterfalls which were hidden away from Muggle view.

Victoria shared a look with Draco. “So that’s how it’s done, is it?” she asked quietly, pushing some potato onto her fork. “When people said your family was influential, I guess I imagined more—” she blushed “—well, giving people money in envelopes, or… I dunno, meeting people at the docks at night.”

Draco snorted. “I’ve been watching Mother and Father play politics for years. It really just involves making friends with people and then… well, talking to them about stuff.”

“It’s not nearly as dramatic as everyone makes out,” Victoria said. “Or as sinister. From the way everyone speaks about the Malfoys, you’d think you were bribing politicians left, right and centre.” She paused, realising that she may have been a bit too honest. “Er, no offence.”

“None taken,” Draco said. “I’ve heard what people say about us. But you know, poor people always think money’s more important than it is. Sure, it means you can take people hunting, or to watch a quidditch game from the top box, or whatever. But do you really think the Minister couldn’t just buy some quail if he wanted it?”

Victoria frowned. “Well, no. You can probably get it at the butcher’s… but then, why the hunt?”

“It’s something to do, isn’t it?” Draco said. “A chance to meet new people and have fun. At the end of the day, people don’t listen to Father because he gives them some quail. They listen to him because they like him, and they think he says things that make sense. The quail hunt’s just—” he waved a hand lazily “—a venue.”

“A venue that poor people don’t have,” Victoria said.

Draco shrugged. “There’s a lot of things poor people don’t have.”

Dessert came and went—raspberry tart, as Victoria had expected—and all too quickly it was time to dance. The tables sprouted wooden paws and walked themselves to the sides of the room, clearing space on the dance floor, and a small band set up with violins, flutes, drums and an accordion.

Draco stood and extended a hand to Victoria. “Come on, then,” he said. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Charming, Draco,” Narcissa said, taking Lucius’ hand in her own. “With that attitude, I’m afraid you won’t get many girls to dance with you.”

Lucius smirked. “I rather suspect that’s his purpose.”

“It’s fine,” Victoria said, and she allowed Draco to lead her over to the dance floor, where the high table formed two parallel lines of dancers, men on one side, women on the other. Butterflies grew in her stomach—everyone was watching them, and if she made a mistake there would be no hiding it. She looked across at Draco, who was standing opposite her. He didn’t seem nervous at all.

The music began—classical, flowing violins with a hint of flute—and they started to dance. The men took several steps towards the women, their arms out wide, strutting like the peacocks in the forest, and the women curtsied. Victoria’s curtsey was an awkward, stiff-backed thing compared to Narcissa’s elegant movement, but at least she timed it right, because next she and Draco were locking hands to process to the right.

Victoria was extremely conscious of how clammy her hand was. There was no way Draco could
have missed it.

“And... turn,” he whispered, and they parted, the women gliding with twirling skirts in a wide loop around the men before returning to the same spot. Draco glanced at her feet. “Left foot forward,” he muttered.

Blushing heavily, she quickly corrected her error.

The dance continued in the much the same manner, a complex sequence of partners coming together then separating once more. Victoria’s nerves settled a little, and she even began to enjoy herself. Though the dance involved very little physical contact between partners, there was something a little bit thrilling to the times when they came together, their eyes meeting and hands clasping. She was acutely aware that this was the first time she had ever held a boy’s hand.

When the moment came for Draco to grip her waist and guide her through a small jump, she thought she might die of embarrassment. Her dress barely felt like it was there! But strangely, through the embarrassment her heart raced in a curiously pleasant way.

By the end of the dance, Victoria’s opinion of the minuet had been completely transformed. She curtseyed one last time, the watching guests applauding politely, and then the dancers broke apart. A brief moment of chaos followed as the waiting crowd took to the floor, forming up for the next dance, and Draco used the confusion to make his escape. He nodded to Victoria and retreated to the far corner of the ballroom, where Vincent and Gregory were raiding a cheese board.

Victoria found Daphne and Pansy loitering hopefully at the edge of the dance floor. The pair of them were stunning, of course. Daphne looked like a Greek goddess, her loose, golden hair practically glowing in the candlelight, and she was wearing a very grown-up off-the-shoulder dress robe of pure white. Pansy was dressed more conservatively in a deep red robe with a high collar, her dark hair up in an elaborate twisted bun.

Next to them was a blonde girl a couple years their junior, who had to be Daphne’s younger sister. They had the same delicate, upturned nose, the same high cheekbones and wide blue eyes… if anything, the young girl was even prettier than Daphne.

“Vicky!” Daphne cried, hugging her enthusiastically, “you did so well! Didn’t she do well, Pansy?”

Pansy frowned at Daphne, who sent her a meaningful look.

“Oh, wonderfully,” Pansy said. “I particularly liked the parts where she pretended she didn’t have a clue what she was doing. Quite the display of humility.”

Victoria blushed. Had it really been that bad? “Well, it was my first time.”

“Exactly!” Daphne said. “Her first time, Pansy. Don’t you remember your first ball?”

“No.” Pansy glanced around. “Where’d Draco go?”

Victoria pointed to the corner of the room. “Over there, with Greg.”

“He’s such a boy,” Pansy said with a sigh. “He’s not going to ask me to dance, is he?”

“I don’t think he much likes dancing,” Victoria said. “But Mrs Malfoy said he was supposed to dance, so I guess she’ll drag him back at some point.”

“None of the boys like dancing,” said Daphne’s sister. “Look at them, all huddled together.”
She was right. Most of the boys—even some of the older ones, who had to be approaching their majority—had positioned themselves as far from the dance floor as possible, looming in a sullen group around one of the columns.

“This is Astoria, by the way,” Daphne said. “Astoria, this is Victoria, but she prefers to go by Vicky.”

Victoria glared at Daphne, who just grinned in response.

“A pleasure,” Astoria said. She cocked her head. “Is it true you were raised by Muggles?”

“Astoria!” Daphne said, “we don’t say such things!” She glanced at Victoria. “I’m so sorry, she’s always been like this…”

“This is unacceptable,” Pansy said, crossing her arms.

Victoria looked at her in shock. Was Pansy coming to her defence? But no, her gaze was still firmly directed towards Draco.

“I’m going to ask him to dance,” Pansy said, her uncertain tone contradicting her words. She made no move to leave.

“That’s not how it works,” Astoria said. “The boys ask the girls, Mrs Malfoy says so. It’s tradition.”

But if anything, Astoria’s intervention seemed to harden Pansy’s resolve. She wavered for just a moment, and then—

“Screw tradition.”

She marched off towards the boys.

The three of them were left watching in amusement as Pansy accosted Draco, gesturing insistently to the dance floor. He was shaking his head.

“This isn’t going to end well,” Daphne said. “She’s going to be insufferable for weeks.”

“More insufferable, you mean?” Victoria said, and she thought she saw Daphne’s lips twitch.

To their amazement, however, Pansy seemed to win the argument. Draco relented, taking her outstretched hand, and the two of them took to the dance floor.

It became immediately clear that Pansy was an excellent dancer. Though she was neither as tall nor as lithe as Daphne, she moved with practiced grace, her head held high, her every movement poised yet flowing with natural ease. She was smiling widely, her eyes alight with simple joy, and when she and Draco came together he would frequently make some comment which would cause her to laugh freely.

Victoria had never seen this part of Pansy before. She was normally so uptight, so perfectly careful in everything from the coordination of her robes to their seating order at lunch. Others had noticed, too, and interested eyes followed Draco and Pansy as they spun and skipped, a small crowd gathering at the edge of the dance floor to watch. Victoria feared that they would be comparing her own dance with Draco to his much more impressive dance with Pansy. Why was that Muggle-raised Potter girl at the high table? they would ask, and not this elegant pure-blood?
“Well, *this* is depressing,” Daphne said, throwing a glance towards the boys, who had retreated even further from the dance floor. “Pansy getting a dance and not me? The world’s gone mad.” She paused, and then, with a cheeky grin, she held out her hand to Victoria. “Miss Potter, would you do me the honour of a dance?”

Victoria raised her eyebrows. None of the other girls were dancing together. Was it even *allowed*? But despite Daphne’s smile, Victoria could tell she wasn’t joking. She shrugged and took Daphne’s hand. “Okay.”

“That’s not traditional either,” Astoria said grumpily, crossing her arms. “I’ll tell Mummy.”

Daphne smirked. “Don’t worry, Tori. I’m sure if you wait long enough, some old man will take pity on you.”

Astoria scowled.

Dancing with Daphne was very different to Draco. Her hands were softer, her grip lighter, and when they spun, their skirts would swish against each other, causing them to giggle. The dance hadn’t been intended for two girls. Daphne took the role of the man, being both taller and more experienced than Victoria, but she was gentler than Draco had been, merely suggesting their next movement with the lightest of touches, whereas Draco had practically tugged her around the dance floor.

When they reached the far end of the ballroom, Victoria glimpsed their reflection in the enormous window and almost stumbled mid-turn. It was like a beautiful painting on a canvas of shimmering glass, a study in light and dark, their black and blonde hair fanning out with their dresses as they whirled around. It took all her willpower to look away and continue the dance.

Eventually the music slowed, and they locked arms to promenade around the edge of the dance floor.

“You’re really good at this,” Victoria said. “How come you didn’t choose dance at school?”

“I like riding better,” Daphne said. “When you ride, you *go places*. If you dance, you’re stuck in a studio. And besides, Pansy’s better than me at dancing.”

Victoria snorted. “I guess that’s reason enough.”

When the music stopped, the stern-faced man stepped forward. “May I cut in?” he asked, holding his right hand out to Victoria. The long, thin box was still hanging from his left wrist by its chain.

Daphne curtsied. “Of course, Mr Swann.”

“Swann?” Victoria asked, taking his hand reluctantly. She had been too focused on her own entrance to notice the man’s name earlier. “As in *Brandon Swann*?”

“Indeed,” he said. “My family has a proud history of service.” He moved to stand opposite her in the parallel lines of dancers. There was something almost military about him, a wiry strength that belied his age, and his grey eyes were piercing.

The music struck up once more, and Swann bowed. It was a precise movement, technically proficient but lacking in grace. They began to circle each other, stepping with great deliberation, and Victoria was careful to keep her toes pointing downwards as Narcissa had instructed.

“Tell me, Miss Potter,” Swann said quietly, “have you put any thought to a career with the
Ministry?”

Victoria blinked. “A career?” she said. “I’m just a second year. Surely it’s far too early for that?”

“To the contrary, it’s the perfect time to plan your future,” Swann said. “Why, at that age, I was shadowing Torquil Travers, the Minister for Magical Law.”

That sounded frightfully dull. Really, the only part of the Ministry which interested Victoria was the Department of Mysteries… but she didn’t have to tell that to Mr Swann. She remembered her manners, and smiled nicely.

“My friend Susan—her aunt’s the Minister for Magical Law now,” she said, making conversation. “Maybe I could shadow her.”

“A fine start,” Swann said. He held out his arm, intending for them to lock elbows, but he was too tall for her to do it properly. She ended up hanging off his arm like the box he carried everywhere.

“That can’t be comfortable,” she said, nodding to the box. “Do you ever take it off?”

Swann chuckled. “Of course… there are others, also charged with its custody. The box may never leave the Minister’s side, but I certainly do.”

Victoria nodded, before skipping three steps to the left. “That’s right… they called you the First Lord of the Wand, didn’t they? Which means there are others. And I guess that means there’s a wand in there.”

“Awfully curious, aren’t you?”

“I’m just trying to figure it out,” Victoria said. She performed a short spin, this time successfully finishing with her left foot forward. “You must be important, else you wouldn’t be here. But why would the descendent of Brandon Swann be carrying someone’s wand around for them?”

Swann raised his eyebrow. “I promise you, every other person in this room knows exactly who the Lords of the Wand are. You reveal your ignorance too easily, girl. I’d wager you don’t even know what you’ve done, coming here tonight.”

“I’m visiting a friend,” Victoria said firmly. “If people read more into it, that’s their business.”

“You are making an announcement.” Swann said, raising his arm to let her pass underneath. “Before tonight, everyone had assumed you to be Dumbledore’s creature. And yet here you are, at the very least unaligned. If you will forgive the expression, you’ve practically declared yourself fair game.”

Victoria frowned. Was that why Dumbledore hadn’t wanted her to come? Because it might reflect badly on him?

It was so tiresome having to second guess everything. “I’m honestly not interested in politics,” she said. “I much prefer magic.”

“Then you do not understand politics,” Swann said. “For magic and politics are one and the same. What do you think the Ministry is?”

“It enforces the Statute of Secrecy,” she said, trotting out the line from her History class. “And protects people from dark wizards. Stuff like that.”
“That’s what the Ministry does. Its activity. But it is not the reason the Ministry exists. It exists because of wizards like Dumbledore.”

They separated, peeling off from the line of dancers to walk towards its other end. When they reunited, Swann continued. “Magic bestows its gifts unequally, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. It is only by banding together that we regular wizards can contain the Dumbledores of the world, Miss Potter. That is why the Ministry exists. And that is why you should not ignore politics—because politics is not ignoring you.”

The music stopped, and their conversation was interrupted by the applause of the crowd.

“Think on it,” Swann said, and then he was walking away, returning to the Minister’s side. Victoria was left alone, her mind whirling. How had everything become so complicated so fast?

She needed space.

She left the ballroom through a glass door, exiting into the gardens. The cool night’s air hit her immediately, invigorating her, sweat quickly evaporating through the breathable fabric of her robe. She didn’t shiver, however. Even as thin as it was, the tumblewool dress kept her plenty warm.

The gardens were labyrinthine. She had expected, when she arrived at the manor, to find the orderly, unnaturally symmetrical type of garden associated with French palaces. But this was a proper English garden, half-wild, with crumbling, overgrown walls and winding paths connecting secret glades, hidden ponds and gurgling streams.

She made her way deeper into the gardens, the way lit by fairy lanterns. If she was being honest, the Malfoys’ ball had not quite lived up to her expectations. Oh, it was as glamorous as she had anticipated, but not quite as fun. She felt out of her depth, distinctly aware that she stood out for all the wrong reasons. An outsider.

The gulf between her and the other pure-blood girls had never seemed wider. They were so at ease here, so familiar with all the people. And yet… it was Victoria at the heart of everything. For all that she seemed to stumble from error to error, people still sought her out.

She arrived at a dark pond and examined her reflection. It appeared that Septimus Swann was an important man, no mere bodyguard or assistant. And he had wanted to dance with her. Not with Daphne, nor with Pansy. Fudge had been the same… there was a reason why it was Victoria at the high table and not Pansy. They all wanted to meet the Girl Who Lived.

It was easy, at Hogwarts, to forget that she was the Girl Who Lived. Sure, people would stare at her, and every so often she’d feature prominently in the gossip. But for the most part, the other students treated her as one of their own. They’d got used to her, and she in turn had got used to being… well, normal.

It was different out here. In the real world, the Girl Who Lived mattered. Pansy might have been able to name drop every important person in the country… but Victoria was the one whose name was dropped. Tomorrow, none of the guests were going to go and tell their families that they’d met Pansy Parkinson. But Victoria… yes, some of them would go back to their homes and whisper excitedly that they had seen the Girl Who Lived.

She smiled. In a way, it didn’t matter that she couldn’t dance, or that she hadn’t known who Septimus Swann was. She had something they wanted. She could work with that.

Footsteps approached from the path behind her. Victoria turned to see a tall, thin man in black.
robes entering the glade, his face covered entirely by an ivory mask. Only his only neat, sandy blond hair revealed anything about his identity.

“Er, hello,” Victoria said hesitantly. Was this man a guest? Why was he wearing a mask? There was something about it that unnerved her… and suddenly, she knew that she did not want to be alone with him. “I was just about to head back to the house, actually. I’ll let you enjoy the gardens in peace.”

She stepped forward as if to leave, but the man didn’t make way for her. He loomed beneath the archway of ivy, a dark mass blocking her only exit. Some instinct told her that it wouldn’t be a good idea to try and squeeze past him.

“The Girl Who Lived,” he said at last, speaking softly. His voice was surprisingly youthful, and the mask moved with his lips. “Such an… honour to meet you.”

Something really wasn’t right. The masked man had a quiet intensity to him, and the shadows cast by the fairy lanterns seemed to grow longer in his presence, twisting into unnatural shapes.

“Are you a friend of the Malfoys?” Victoria said, clinging to small talk. Surely she was just letting her imagination run away from her. Surely he didn’t actually have two shadows…

“Friends?” the man said. “No, not friends… associates, perhaps. Answer me, girl, how much have the Malfoys told you? Have they shared with you the secrets of deep magic?”

“Never heard of it,” Victoria said quickly. “I really should be going…”

The man ignored her. “You are not yet under their protection, then. That is good.” He drew his wand. “Though… less fortunate for you, little girl.”

Victoria stepped back, her heart leaping to her mouth. “Who are you?” she asked, though a part of her didn’t want to know the answer.

“I am a knight,” the man said. “A knight with the opportunity to perform a great service to his Lord.”

His Lord?

Oh, no. That could only mean one thing: she was alone with a Death Eater, one of Voldemort’s followers—just as Dumbledore had predicted. Why oh why had she ignored his advice? It was like the troll all over again…

Yet when she had faced the troll, she’d barely known the right way to hold her wand. This time, she was trained. This time, she could fight back.

Her hands shaking, she withdrew her wand from her robe sleave.

“Stay back,” she said, pointing it at him, trying to sound strong. “I’m warning you, I know some good jinxes.”

The man laughed. “Jinxes aren’t going to stop me, girl. You shouldn’t have come here tonight. Not into our domain.”

He was right. She could barely duel Zacharias, never mind a Death Eater. What could she do?

“I’ll scream,” she said. “Mr Malfoy will come.”
“He’ll come too late, if he comes at all,” the man replied. “There’s no one here to save you.”

He raised his wand. The world grew still, time slowing down, and Victoria’s very being was filled with an unnatural sense of impending doom.

“Dumbledore!” she cried suddenly, the panic driving her to say the first thing which came to mind, “Dumbledore will save me!”

The man paused to look around. Though he was masked, she could tell there was a mocking exaggeration to his movements, like an actor in a pantomime. He snorted. “Where is he, then? Is Dumbledore hiding behind one of the bushes?”

He turned back to her. Green motes of light gathered around his wand. The sense of doom intensified, gripping Victoria’s racing heart, and she knew with certainty that she was about to die.

No!

She refused to cower without even offering a fight—not again. Acting on instinct, she grasped the heart of autumn and brandished it in the air, holding it up towards the man. Its light burst forth, shining brilliantly in the darkness, and the man threw up his arm to shield himself from its silvery glow. The air grew chill, the wind picked up, and his second shadow dissolved, blown away like sand.

“No!” he cried, staring at his shadow with shock. Slowly, he looked back to Victoria. “So they have taught you deep magic.” He lowered his wand. “I… apologise, my lady.”

And then he bowed, turned, and departed into the night.

Victoria’s body sagged, the tension draining out of her all at once. Her wand was shaking in her hand, her legs wobbling. That had been entirely too close. She didn’t even know why he had decided to leave.

She stumbled back towards the manor, keeping her wand out, peering cautiously around each corner before revealing herself. Not that her wand would do her much good, if the Death Eater reappeared. For all her dueling practice, she would have been quick work for an adult wizard. It had been pure luck that the heart of autumn had reacted as it had.

That raised all sorts of questions. What on earth was deep magic? And why did the Death Eater think she knew it?

She still couldn’t believe that she’d just met a Death Eater. It seemed that Dumbledore been right about the Malfoys… even though they probably weren’t Death Eaters themselves, it was likely that they’d invited one to their party.

She should have accepted Susan’s invitation to go to the Workshop for Christmas. They would have had nogtail, whatever that was, and Mr Bones would have told them stories in front of the fire. But no, Victoria had wanted glamour. She’d wanted prestige. She’d wanted to be seen as someone elegant and beautiful and important.

But it turned out it wasn’t just the Fudges and the Swanns of the world who were interested in her. There was a danger to this world she’d entered. She couldn’t ignore that… because they weren’t ignoring her.

She approached the manor. Did she really want to go back in?
“Vicky! There you are!”

It was Daphne, standing in the doorway back into the ballroom. The music was picking up, louder and faster than before, and the drums and accordion were playing.

“Are you okay?” Daphne said. “What’s with the wand?”

“I’m fine,” Victoria said. For some reason, she couldn’t bring herself to confess what had just happened. Not when she didn’t understand it herself. “What’s going on?”

Daphne grinned. “The real party’s finally getting started! Come on, you’re going to love it!”

And to Victoria’s great surprise, she did.

The slow, formal dancing was over, replaced with a much more energetic form set to fast-paced, folksy music. Everyone got involved, even the boys, and they danced in lines and in circles, clapping, stomping, and skipping around, even switching partners mid-dance. Victoria didn’t know the moves but no one seemed to care, and she was swung in quick succession between Draco, Daphne and Minister Fudge himself, who was red faced but grinning from ear to ear.

“That’s it, my dear!” he called, and then he seized her in a ballroom grip, leading her in a frantic charge down a tunnel of dancers. The crowd cheered as they passed, and when they reached the end they split up and took their places on either side of the tunnel, cheering in turn for Gregory and Parvati as they came next.

In the warmth and bright light of the ballroom, her encounter in the garden quickly passed into dreamlike irreality. It was like it had happened to someone else. Had a Death Eater really just tried to kill her? It seemed so… implausible.

The music carried her worries away, immersing her in the moment. She was safe and surrounded by friends. Her heart beat not with fear, but with the simple pleasure of honest exertion.

Perhaps this world wasn’t so bad after all.
After the ball, Malfoy Manor changed. The vastness of the house pressed in on Victoria, its emptiness more obvious than ever, and she began to imagine Death Eaters lurking in every corner. The shadows lengthened in the airy halls, where looming portraits monitored all activity with suspicious eyes, and the previous tranquility of the gardens now felt like a stifling, oppressive silence.

A part of her knew that she was imagining things, that it was she who had changed, not the house. The portraits were just portraits; the gardens were perfectly safe; and the Death Eater was long gone.

And yet… it wasn’t just her. Lucius and Narcissa were behaving differently as well.

Before the ball, Lucius had barely acknowledged her existence. He’d been polite but distant, involving her in conversation only as much as was necessary to avoid being rude. Now, however, he was constantly asking her questions.

“You must have met some interesting people at the ball?”

“Did you have a chance to see the gardens?”

“Have you ever celebrated Deep Winter?”

It was clear that Lucius Malfoy knew something of her encounter with the Death Eater. Strangely, he did not seem guilty over having played host to a criminal; but nor was he upset that she had escaped harm. More than anything, he came across as curious.

His curiosity did not bring her comfort. Victoria had started locking her bedroom door at night, though she knew it would do little to hold back a determined wizard. She went to bed late and rose early, always the first to arrive for breakfast, enjoying the hustle and bustle of morning activity. She’d even taken to volunteering to help Narcissa with various chores—much to Draco’s dismay. He didn’t understand.

She didn’t want to be left alone.

Narcissa had welcomed her interest, mothering her in the same way she did Draco. It was as if Victoria had stopped being a guest and had become a distant relative. And so she began to accompany Narcissa about her daily routine, undertaking a crash course in high society.

Every morning, Narcissa would spend several hours writing letters in the drawing room. She had Victoria sit next to her (straight back, knees together) and do the same, drafting letters to her peers. Once she had exhausted her usual supply of friends, Narcissa had her write to Astoria, Padma and Parvati as well.
“You’ll find that even a short note will be well-received,” Narcissa explained. “There’s a unique pleasure in welcoming your morning owl to find a personal letter amidst the endless drudgery from Gringotts and the Floo Company. It’s a simple thing to write a few letters, yet it reaps enormous reward.”

Of course, Narcissa checked each letter Victoria wrote, taking a critical eye to her penmanship.

“You must write with your whole arm, my dear, not just your fingers. Here, let me show you.”

She reached over and tapped Victoria’s hand with her wand. The spell stiffened her wrist and fingers—not freezing them entirely, but making them much harder to move—and she was forced to use her shoulder and elbow a lot more. At first it was difficult to overcome the instinct to write with her wrist, but her handwriting rapidly improved under Narcissa’s tuition.

As Victoria practised, Narcissa would provide a running commentary on her own letters.

“This one is for Mr Cuffe, the Editor of the Daily Prophet. A bit of an odd man, very enthusiastic about obscure words. I’m telling him about a Welsh word I heard at the ball.”

“I make sure to send Mrs Roper a letter every week. She’s been ever so lonely since Mr Roper died, I do worry about her.”

“You might know the Farleys’ daughter, Gemma. Mrs Farley is our Warlock in the Wizengamot; I’m writing to tell her about a new road the Muggles want to build nearby. With a bit of luck, the Ministry will arrange for them to decide it’s too expensive.”

It was rather clever, what she was doing. Quite without realising it, and without having to memorise anything, Victoria was absorbing not only the names of Narcissa’s connections, but also their history and interests. Mr Eldron was attempting to grow a new type of cabbage. Miss Savage, one of the Ministry’s Aurors, had recently concluded a three-year investigation into a dark witch who’d been stealing the bodies of rich Muggles. And Mrs Nott, Theodore’s grandmother, had just given birth at the unlikely age of seventy.

She wondered if this was how Pansy had learnt, spending years absorbing names and little titbits of information. Each individual fact was little more than trivia, yet together they formed a formidable body of knowledge, an encyclopedia of wizarding Britain. Some might have considered it little more than gossip on a grand scale, but Narcissa called it maintaining relationships.

It wasn’t just letter-writing that Victoria learnt. She shadowed Narcissa in everything, from her management of the household staff to her sessions tutoring the young Eleanor Rosier and Ameera Shafiq. The latter proved to be quite educational, as between lessons on English and mathematics were sessions on dance, magical art, and etiquette. She could already see that Eleanor and Ameera would share a bond similar to Pansy and Daphne, a conspiratorial yet slightly competitive friendship which would likely endure their entire lives.

To Victoria’s surprise, in the afternoon Narcissa would frequently turn her attention to running the various farms the Malfoys owned. It seemed that while Lucius was responsible for the Malfoys’ business dealings, Narcissa took the lead when it came to managing their land. She made regular visits to the Crabbes, Goyles, Gibbons, and Greybacks, all tenants who deferred to Narcissa as their landlady. She inspected crops, listened to complaints about a knarl infestation, and discussed planting for spring. Sometimes she even got involved with the farm work, on one occasion going so far as to help Mr Gibbon accept a delivery of mooncalf dung.

Unfortunately, that had meant Victoria was required to help too.
“There should be another shovel in the shed,” Narcissa had said, eying the wagon of dung with satisfaction. She’d come prepared for the job, wearing a very practical—though still fashionable—quilted robe. “You can’t levitate it or it’ll just fall apart. We’re going to have to do it the Muggle way, I’m afraid.”

Victoria had dutifully retrieved a shovel and, very hesitantly, began to scoop up small quantities of the dung. Unlike Narcissa, she had worn a dress robe to the Gibbon farm and she was rather concerned about getting it dirty.

“Come on, girl!” Mr Gibbon called cheerfully, “put your back into it!”

Narcissa sent her a knowing smile. “Beauty is all well and good, my dear, but no one will thank you for airs and graces. Just imagine you’re in Herbology class.”

Victoria thought back to her first year, when she’d happily got her (then unpolished) fingernails dirty in Herbology. Hadn’t Pansy stood to one side, refusing to get involved and making Tracey do her work for her?

She scowled, gripped the shovel firmly and dug up a large scoop of dung. She wasn’t like Pansy.

With all the time spent in Narcissa’s company, she had little to spare for Draco. He seemed rather put out by this state of affairs, especially after she’d refused to go flying with him.

“But it’s a Nimbus 2001!” he said, waving a sleek broom in her face. He’d received it for Christmas and had barely put it down since. “It’s the most advanced broom on the market!”

“In which case, absolutely not,” Victoria said, eyeing the well-polished broom with trepidation. The Nimbus 2001 was a professional broom, the type that went so fast that it was little more than a blur. “I’d probably kill myself. Honestly, I’m surprised you haven’t got injured.”

Draco sighed. “Fine. How about the hippogriffs, then?”

Hippogriff riding had sounded little better than flying, but at Narcissa’s encouragement she’d accompanied Draco out to the stables, where he showed her how to saddle and mount the giant beasts. They actually weren’t so bad once you were mounted—so long as they didn’t go too fast. At one point Draco launched them into a canter which had Victoria holding on for her life, convinced she was about to be catapulted into the air. That had been the last time they went riding.

It wasn’t until New Year’s Eve that he got around to showing her the gardens properly. It had snowed the night before, covering the landscape with a thin layer of white, and the various ponds and fountains had frozen over. Despite the snow, the day was sunny and clear, pleasant enough for Victoria to put on a winter robe and leave her cloak back in the house. She added a tartan tumblewool scarf she’d received for Christmas and met Draco by the door to the kitchens.

He led her into the garden through a tunnel of holly. “I can’t believe we’ve only got a week of holiday left,” he said with a deep sigh. “I guess you’re going to stick with dueling, next term?”

Victoria shrugged. “Probably. It depends what Susan wants to do… I’m only just getting the hang of duelling though, so it’d be annoying to start something new.”

“I wish we didn’t have to choose. What if I want to do duelling and quidditch?”

The tunnel led out to a winding path running alongside a small stream, its borders littered with
fairy nests tucked between the rocks. Each nest was like a tiny little house made from twigs, leaves and random garden objects, and one of them even had smoke rising from its chimney.

“I can’t drop quidditch, it’s my favourite class,” Draco continued, ignoring the nests entirely, though Victoria was fascinated by them. How intelligent were fairies? She suddenly felt rather guilty about trapping them in lamps. “If I’d gone to Durmstrang I could’ve done both—even everyone has to do duelling there, it’s one of the core classes.”

“You were down for Durmstrang?” Victoria asked, though there was something familiar about it. Had he told her that before?

“Oh, didn’t you know?” Draco said. “Father thought I should go there instead of Hogwarts, but Mother wanted me closer to home. Honestly, I don’t know what the difference is… Scotland or Svalbard… either way, she’s not going to see me.”

They passed by an old greenhouse with grimy windows and shelves full of large, multi-coloured mushrooms. As Victoria peered in through the glass, one of the mushrooms shook itself out of the soil and waddled over towards her, its head tilting upwards as if it were looking back at her.

“Anyway, Father says he’ll teach me to duel over the summer,” Draco said. He kicked a rock at the stream, causing a cloud of nearby fairies to buzz angrily. “He says every proper wizard should know how to duel.”

“There can’t be many proper wizards then,” Victoria said, thinking of her own duelling attempts. She made a mental note never to duel in front of Lucius Malfoy.

“Well, he says that too,” Draco said with a small smile. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Father isn’t exactly a fan of the common wizard.”

Victoria laughed. “I got that, thanks.”

They left the stream behind and passed through a gap in a hedge to enter an open space. It was more of a field than a lawn, and the snow here had settled thicker, its smooth surface broken only by the footprints of a red-breasted robin. The snow crunched underfoot as they crossed the field, heading towards a gate in the opposite corner.

“Hang on,” Victoria said, frowning. “What do you mean, over the summer? We’re not allowed to use magic over the holidays.”

Draco snorted. “As if the Ministry knows. So long as there’s adult wizards nearby, no one’s going to notice.”

Victoria stopped, momentarily stunned. It made sense, magically. An adult’s magic was different to a child’s, and had a tendency to confuse detection spells. But still...

“That’s not very fair,” she said, thinking of the lack of adult wizards in Little Whinging. “How come some people get to use magic and others don’t?”

Draco shrugged. “It makes sense if you think about it. If you don’t live near Muggles, and you’ve got an adult around to help if something goes wrong, why shouldn’t you use magic?”

“But I live near Muggles…”

“Oh, right,” Draco said. “I always forget. Well, obviously you’ll just have to keep visiting us here—that way you can use as much magic as you like.”
The gate at the far side of the field led to an overgrown track bordered by low hedges. They followed its twisting route for a few minutes, the path curving around until they were facing the house once more, the west wing looming above the far trees.

“Here we go,” Draco said, and he pointed out a stile next to a stone outbuilding covered with ivy. They crossed the stile and found themselves in a series of walled gardens. The first was dominated by a frozen pond full of water lilies; then came a garden containing statues of women, water trickling from their eyes as if they were weeping.

“My great-grandfather brought these back from Greece,” Draco explained as Victoria looked at the statues closely. They were exquisitely detailed, all the way down to the fine lines of their faces. “They were people once, before they ran into a gorgon. Father says the souls of the women are still trapped inside.”

Victoria stepped back. “That’s horrible!” She couldn’t help but imagine what it’d be like to be stuck in stone forever. Would you still be able to think? To see out of those stone eyes, watching the world go by?

“Better than being dead,” Draco said. “Who knows what happens to the soul, after? Maybe it just vanishes. Sometimes I think that when I’m old, I’ll go find a gorgon and get myself trapped in stone too.”

“God, you’re so morbid,” Victoria said, but there was something grotesquely fascinating about the idea. She’d never really thought about the soul before, about what might happen to her own one day. It was a discomfiting thought. She looked to the archway leading to the next garden. “Come on, let’s keep going.”

They proceeded through the long chain of gardens back towards the house, following the course of an underground stream which fed the various water features. There was a half-frozen pool of Japanese Apparating Goldfish, a miniature waterfall which flowed upwards, and even a hot spring, steam curling off the water in defiance of the season.

“We call these the water gardens,” Draco explained as they used a small wooden bridge to cross over a section of exposed stream. Three statues stood on one side of the stream, and a hooded, skeletal figure loomed on the far bank. *Country Wizard* did a big piece on them a few years back; we were on the front cover and everything.”

They arrived at a circular garden with a dark pond at its centre, and Victoria’s response died in her throat. She recognised this garden. It was where she had encountered the Death Eater on Christmas’ Eve. It looked so innocent now, covered in snow and lit by the harsh winter sun, but even in the light she thought she could sense something wrong about the place, some lingering memory of the doom created by the Death Eater’s half-cast spell.

Draco hadn’t noticed. “Some even say they rival the water gardens of Beauxbatons,” he continued, “though we don’t have any river-elves like they do. Mother’s been looking for one for years, but they don’t come onto the market often. A bit like house-elves, really…”

His words washed over Victoria. Why *had* the Death Eater just walked away? And what was it that she’d done with the heart of autumn? She’d tried to replicate the effect since, with little success. The Death Eater had said something about *deep magic*...

“... and they attract all kinds of interesting fish, too. I wonder if they conjure them or—”

“Draco, have you ever heard of *deep magic*?”
He stopped short. A guarded look crossed his face, his posture stiffening, and for a moment his mouth opened and closed as he searched for an answer.

“I… er… no, I’ve never heard of it, of course,” he said. “But… who told you about it?”

It was almost comical, how bad his lie was.

“Just something I heard,” she said, not pushing the subject. She didn’t want him running to Lucius about it. “Come on, let’s go back inside. I’m getting cold.”

That night, after a sumptuous dinner, Victoria retreated to her bedroom and began her new evening routine. She locked the door, cast a Locking Charm on it for good measure, then secreted herself inside her gleaming marble bathroom. The bath inside was huge, almost big enough to count as a pool, and when she turned the taps they released a rush of hot water mixed with rose petals, the sweet, floral scent filling the room.

After a long soak, she returned to the bedroom in her night robe, picked up her copy of *The Eye of the Beholder*, and read about the Anamorphosis Charm late into the night, positioning herself in an armchair which faced the door. Dumbledore prowled around her like a guardian, as if he understood her anxiety. When her eyes finally began to droop, she went to check the door one last time.

Still locked.

She turned around—and jumped in shock, a short scream escaping her throat.

A house-elf was standing on her bed.

“Oh!” she said, clutching the book to her chest, “you surprised me!”

The elf clutched fretfully at its long, pointy ears. “Dobby was not meaning to surprise you, Miss,” he said. His voice was high pitched just like Topsy’s. “So long has Dobby wanted to meet you… such an honour it is…”

“It is?” Victoria asked, wondering what interest a house-elf could have in a witch. “Well, er, nice to meet you, I suppose. But… um, you’re kinda on my bed.”

Indeed, now that she had calmed down a little, she couldn’t help but notice how dirty the house-elf was. He was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips in it to make holes for his arms and legs, and his feet were bare, leaving grubby footprints on her pristine sheets.

Dobby looked down and noticed the dirty marks. His eyes widened, and quite suddenly he jumped off the bed and began hitting his head against the wooden floor, each impact producing a dull thump.

“Bad Dobby!” he shouted. “Bad Dobby!”

Victoria blinked, for a moment too confused to say anything. “Stop it!” she said, recovering her senses, “you’ll hurt yourself!”

The elf paused mid-strike. “Dobby must punish himself, Miss. House-elves are supposed to be cleaning mess, not making it.”

“It’s fine, really,” she said quickly, hoping he wouldn’t start hitting his head again. The thunking sound it produced made her stomach turn over. “You can just bring clean sheets, can’t you?”
Dobby practically squealed with excitement. “Oh! The great Miss Potter is giving Dobby work! How Dobby has dreamt of this day…”

He disappeared with a light pop, reappearing a moment later with an armful of pristine white sheets. His long ears were barely visible behind the stack of linen.

“I didn’t realise house-elves could apparate,” Victoria said, watching as he set to the task of making her bed with enthusiasm. “I thought you just went invisible…”

“House-elves are not apparating,” Dobby said from behind her floating duvet, “not like wizards are. Dobby is being where he is needed inside the House.”

Victoria nodded. “So you couldn’t, say, apparate to Diagon Alley?”

The duvet glided back on top of the bed. “No, Miss.”

“But if you can only go somewhere you’re needed,” Victoria said, “why did you come to my room? I was about to go to bed…”

Dobby paused, looking around furtively before gesturing for her to come closer. She leaned towards him. “Dobby heard Miss talking with the Young Master,” he said, his voice a stage whisper. “Miss was asking about… deep magic.”

Suddenly he had her attention.

“You know about deep magic?” she asked. “Can you tell me?”

He shook his head. “Dobby cannot tell… but Dobby can show.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

She put on her slippers and a dressing gown before following Dobby out into the dark halls of Malfoy Manor. The shutters were closed on the fairy lamps, and the faint noise of snoring came from the portraits. All else was quiet, the way ahead lit only by silver moonlight. Dobby led her down, taking cramped side passages and spiral staircases she’d never noticed, emerging into the cavernous kitchens on the ground floor.

Then he made for the back door to the gardens.

“We’re going out?” Victoria whispered, looking down at her thin robes. She’d freeze out there.

“Deep magic is happening outdoors, Miss.”

Victoria sighed, wishing she’d worn her charm bracelet. “Well, so long as we’re quick.”

She regretted her decision almost immediately. It was snowing again, and her feet went numb as the wet seeped into her slippers. They crept around the house’s perimeter, heading towards the far end of the west wing. It wasn’t long before her hands were going numb too.

“Please tell me it’s not much further,” Victoria said. She wiggled her fingers to get some blood flowing. “I don’t much fancy having to regrow my hands.”

“Not far now,” Dobby said, pointing a finger towards the wood where the peacocks lived. “But Miss is having to be quiet, or Masters will hear her.”

They entered the wood, the evergreen trees blocking out the moonlight above. The canopy at least
offered shelter from the snow, but there was something inherently disquieting about being in a wood at night, some primal instinct which screamed at Victoria to retreat home. She reached out and took Dobby’s small hand, relying on him to lead her through the dark.

It wasn’t long before they saw the light. There, not too much further ahead, was a ring of flickering fires. Dobby held a finger to his lips. They were close.

Victoria crouched down and they inched forward, progressing slowly now, taking care to avoid twigs which might snap loudly underfoot. As they got closer, she could see that the fires came from a circle of flaming torches, each one hanging from a tree, the symmetrical glade surely the result of wizarding intervention. At the centre of the clearing were three figures cast in shadow. Two were kneeling on the ground, their forearms clasped, and the third stood over them with wand raised.

Narcissa’s voice carried through the trees.

“...keep the secrets…” she said, her voice barely audible, “...seek the path…”

A response came—Draco’s voice, the words indistinguishable—and a bright thread of fire curled like a rope around the clasped forearms of the kneeling figures, who were surely Lucius and Draco.

Victoria held back a gasp. She’d read about this magic: the unbreakable vow, a promise so powerful that you’d die if you broke it. What on earth could be so important that Draco’s own parents would have him swear it?

She edged closer, wanting to hear more.

“And will you…” said Narcissa, still too far away to hear properly, “...true to your kind... others?”

Draco responded again, and a second flame joined the first.

She still couldn’t hear. Cursing under her breath, she shuffled even closer, taking cover behind a particularly wide tree and poking her face around the side of the trunk. She could actually see their faces now—all it would take was one look in her direction and she’d be caught.

“And will you forsake the mundane,” Narcissa asked, “never to bind yourself to the Muggle race?”

Victoria’s eyebrows rose.

Draco looked up, his face glowing in the light of the reflected fire. “I will.”

A third tongue of flame flowed from Narcissa’s wand and settled around Draco and Lucius’s clasped arms. The three cords of fire hung there for a moment, binding their arms together, but a second later the flames were gone, evaporating into the night.

Lucius stood, hauling Draco to his feet and embracing him. “Congratulations, son,” he said, a warmth in his voice which Victoria had never heard before, “tonight you have taken your first step on the path to true wizardry.”

Something tugged on Victoria’s sleeve, and she turned to see Dobby’s large eyes peering at her. He jerked his head back towards the house.

She hesitated for a moment, wanting to see if there was more, but a stiff breeze sent a shiver down her spine. She suddenly remembered her numb hands and feet. There would be fire in the house, and maybe even another bath.
She could ask Draco more about deep magic tomorrow.

* * *

Victoria never did get around to confronting Draco about what she had seen. There just didn’t seem to be a way to bring it up without admitting that she had spied on him.

So she observed. She noticed how the hippogriffs bowed to him more readily than before. She saw how the fairies in the gardens drifted towards him, like bright comets caught in his orbit, no longer buzzing angrily at his approach. And most obvious of all, she noted how his accidental magic had gone haywire, intervening in even the most casual of tasks: his shoelaces tying themselves, or the pepper grinder at dinner shuffling towards him when he wanted it.

Whatever Draco had vowed that night, it had done something profound to his magic.

As the end of the holidays approached, the more noticeable peculiarities began to settle down. His accidental magic stabilised once more, and the fairies no longer sought him out so eagerly. Yet the deeper change persisted: the hippogriffs still deferred to him, and his wand now leapt into his hand each time he cast magic, eager to be used. He was simply more... magical.

Victoria couldn’t help but feel extremely envious. She studied far harder than Draco did, and had always been much more in touch with her magic than any of her peers. And yet here he was, apparently catching up with her just by saying a few words. It felt like he’d cheated.

Inevitably, she spent a lot of time wondering whether she could do the same. It really all depended on those unbreakable vows. She’d only heard one of his three promises, and even that one confused her. What did it mean, to bind yourself to the Muggle race? Was it something that she too could promise to avoid? It seemed like such a small price to pay.

The last day of the Christmas holiday finally arrived. Victoria woke to find her trunk already packed—no doubt by Dobby—so she took the extra time to pamper herself in the bathroom, before changing into her Hogwarts robes and making her way down to breakfast.

As usual, she was the first one there. She helped herself to a croissant, poured a cup of sugary, milky tea, and picked up a copy of the Daily Prophet. She flicked quickly through the first few pages, only briefly scanning the headlines, searching for her favourite section: “STYLE”.

She was thoroughly engrossed in an article about Twilfitt and Tatting’s winter collection when Lucius arrived. He nodded to her, made up a plate of smoked kippers and toast, and took the copy of the Hogsmeade Herald. Narcissa came next, arriving with the aroma of frankincense, which had replaced pine as the incense of the month. Last of all was Draco, whose neatly combed hair was still wet. Just as he arrived, a plate of bacon and scrambled egg appeared.

It was a familiar routine by now. Victoria had stayed with the Malfoys long enough that no one felt obliged to serve her, or keep her engaged in conversation. Breakfast was a time to prepare for the day, for peace and, above all, quiet.

A bell chimed on the wall, announcing a visitor at the front door.

Narcissa frowned. “How odd.”

“Probably a new delivery boy,” Lucius said, waving his hand dismissively. “Let Bertrand handle it.”

They went back to reading. But a few minutes later, Bertrand poked his head around the dining
“Sir, there are some visitors from the Ministry at the door. I’m afraid they insist on speaking with you.”

Lucius’ lip curled. “I see. That Muggle-loving fool Weasley, no doubt?”

“Just so, sir.”

There was silence as Lucius thought, his fingers tapping on the wood of the dining table.

“Shall I eject them, sir?” Bertrand asked. “I can summon the trolls—”

“No,” Lucius said. “They’ll surely have a writ of entry. I’ll speak with them.”

He departed, leaving the dining room in a tense stillness broken only by Draco’s fork scraping on his plate. Minutes passed, and then came the sound of raised voices approaching.

“....have you finally lost your wits?” That was Lucius. “The Act lets you search for Muggle artefacts, not magical ones!”

A softer voice responded. “I’ll be the judge of what’s Muggle and what’s magical, I think. I’m a specialist in—”

“You’re a specialist in no more than cheap robes and too many children!”

“You ought to keep a civil tone, Malfoy. You wouldn’t want to obstruct a servant of the Ministry, would you?”

A pause.

“You’ll be hearing from my counsel, Weasley. Personally.”

“I look forward to it,” Mr Weasley said. “I’ll be sure to pass it on to Madam Bones along with all the others. Now, what’s in here?”

They burst into the room, the red-headed Mr Weasley in the lead, all shabby robes and ink-stained fingers. He was followed by Lucius, quite the contrast in his formal morning robes, and behind them came a gaggle of Ministry officials who were looking around with undisguised interest.

“As you can see, Weasley, we were at breakfast when you rudely interrupted us,” Lucius said. “Now, whatever you have to do, be quick about it. We must be at King’s Cross for eleven o’clock.”

“We’ll be here for as long as we need to be,” Mr Weasley said, a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. “No exceptions. Your money won’t help you today, Malfoy. I suggest you cooperate, if you want it to go quicker.”

Lucius’ lips thinned. “Such convenient timing, coming on the first day of term. It’s almost as if you had planned it.”

“I’m sure we’ll manage,” Mr Weasley said. “I’ve children of my own, as you know.” He glanced back at his Ministry lackies and brandished a scroll around the room, waving it as if it were a wand. “This will all need to be cleared away. We’ll be doing a thorough search.”

Lucius was about to object further, his mouth opening to deliver what was no doubt another insult,
but it was at that point that Narcissa intervened.

“Mr Weasley,” she said, standing up, drawing every eye towards her. “You must, of course, do whatever you consider necessary. Our house is yours. Now, would you like to inform Professor Dumbledore of Miss Potter’s absence, or shall I?”

The look on Weasley’s face was priceless. A frown of confusion, a glance around the room, the moment of realisation when his eyes landed on Victoria—and then, hesitation.

Lucius took the advantage. “You are aware, I presume, of Miss Potter’s security arrangements? I can only imagine what would happen, were she to suddenly miss the Hogwarts Express... I dare say half the Ministry would be mobilised to search for her.”

“We should notify Cornelius as well,” Narcissa added. “He’s personally acquainted with Miss Potter, you see, and takes a keen interest in her security. He’ll want to know that she’s been waylaid.”

“Waylaid?” Mr Weasley said, incredulity in his voice. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration, isn’t it? Anyway, I’m sure Miss Potter understands the importance of Ministry business…”

Victoria looked between them. She realised that the Malfoys were using her, of course, but she really didn’t want to miss the train. Perhaps, on this occasion, it would be best to let herself be used.

“Actually, I don’t,” she said, and she surprised herself at the forcefulness in her voice. “Can’t you just come back another day? I don’t know what you’re expecting to find, to be honest. I’ve been here for weeks and I’ve not seen a single Muggle artefact.”

The crowd of Ministry workers muttered. One of them stepped forward and whispered in Mr Weasley’s ear. From Weasley’s dark expression, it was clear that he was not happy with what they were saying.

“Well,” he said reluctantly. “We’ll limit our search for now, and will leave by ten o’clock. That should give you enough time to get to London. But I warn you, we’ll have to come back another time to complete the search. Is this acceptable?”

“Acceptable is the last word I would use,” Lucius said, “but it is… agreed.”

* * *

Luckily, Victoria did not miss the Hogwarts Express. Mr Weasley completed his search as promised, and then they were hurtling towards London in a stagecoach, arriving at King’s Cross just in time to rush through the barrier and catch the train.

An enthusiastic reunion with the Slytherin girls followed, as if they’d been separated for years and not mere weeks. Even Pansy greeted her with unusual warmth. It seemed there was a truce between them, their shared attendance of the Yule Ball momentarily outweighing any rivalry, and Pansy wasted no time in regaling all who would listen with the list of wizards she’d danced with.

Unsurprisingly, Victoria’s role in the opening dance went unmentioned.

The train crawled north. As the hours stretched on, Victoria found herself resistant to the lethargy of the journey, her excitement growing with each mile. Although she had enjoyed her stay with the Malfoys, she couldn’t help but feel relief at returning to the familiar routine of Hogwarts—a strange thought, given the dangers of the Heir. But at least at Hogwarts there were teachers to look
out for you. For all that she considered the Malfoys her friends, she couldn’t be certain of their protection.

She imagined Professor Dumbledore would be rather pleased about that.

It was a strange experience, returning to the school in the winter. The sun set at four o’clock, making the train ride feel even longer, and the carriages from Hogsmeade Station took them up to the school in complete darkness. There was no Sorting Ceremony, no start-of-year announcements… other than the feast, it was as if it were any other day at school.

Classes resumed the next day without further ado. Their first period was Charms with Professor Flitwick, a gentle start to the term which had the other Slytherin girls green with envy.

“We’ve got Potions with Snape,” moaned Gertrude Mayfield at breakfast, “and I haven’t done my homework. Would they notice, do you think, if I just went to Charms with you instead?”

“Flitwick probably wouldn’t care,” Daphne said, “but good luck getting that past Snape.”

Victoria snorted. He’d probably track her down and drag her all the way to the dungeons. What had Gertrude been thinking, skipping her Potions homework? Especially when they were working on the final phase of the Draught of Sparta. Victoria knew better than to lecture her friends on the importance of homework—she wasn’t Hermione Granger, after all—but they’d get little sympathy from her for their own laziness.

She was half way to Charms when she realised she’d forgotten to stock up on parchment.

“Crap,” she muttered, rummaging around her bag in the vain hope of finding an extra scroll. Nothing. “I’ll meet you guys there—have to fetch something.”

She hurried back down to the dorms, dodging students as she ran through crowded corridors and down busy staircases. She made it to the Slytherin common room in record time, rushed up to the dorm and threw open her trunk.

Her parchment was missing. She lifted books, threw her telescope on her bed, pushed glassware around… but no parchment was to be found.

There!

A leather-bound book was tucked against the wall of the trunk, and a quick flick-through revealed it to be a diary, completely blank but for the date printed at the top of each page. She didn’t remember packing a diary—or buying one, for that matter—but it’d do for now. Perhaps Dobby had added it to her trunk, when he’d seen that she didn’t have any spare parchment. He was such a helpful elf.

She returned to Charms, arriving just as Professor Flitwick was writing the word IMPULSE on the blackboard.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said, her eyes scanning the room for a spare seat.

“No matter,” Flitwick said, “you haven’t missed anything. Settle down now, and we’ll get started.”

She took an empty desk next to Lisa Turpin and quietly unpacked her things.

“Quills at the ready!” Flitwick said, addressing the whole class. “You’ll want to take notes on this one. Now, as I was saying, this term we will be studying the topic of complex motion, one of the
most useful and fascinating areas of Charms. You will know, of course, that both Charms and Transfiguration are capable of making objects move… but can anyone tell me what the difference between the two is?"

No one raised their hand to answer—unusual for a class shared with Ravenclaw, but Victoria supposed it was a rather abstract question. Inevitably, Professor Flitwick’s eyes landed on her, just as she was writing Transfiguration vs Charms on the first page of the diary.

“Miss Potter, perhaps you could venture a guess?”

She looked up. “When you animate an object with transfiguration, you’re turning it from dead matter into living matter. Basically, you’re giving it a vital force of its own. But a charm can’t change an object’s fundamental nature… if it’s dead before, it’ll be dead after. So you have to do it another way.”

“Two points to Slytherin,” Flitwick said, and she gave him a smile which showed none of her frustration. Any other student would have got at least five points for that. “Did everyone write that down?”

A rush of frantic scribbling followed. Victoria just made a few short notes, not needing to record the obvious. She’d known about vital forces ever since she first learnt to animate her origami birds with a drop of blood.

“Yes, Miss Potter is quite correct. In Charms, creating movement has nothing to do with an object’s vitality. This creates an interesting conundrum, does it not? How do you give an object movement without giving it life?”

A number of hands went up this time, but Flitwick ignored them, tapping his wand on the blackboard. “Impulse is the answer. This is the extra ingredient which turns levitation into flight. To give a spell impulse, the caster must imbue it with the essence of an animal spirit. As you might imagine, you will need the spirit of a bird to create flight. That spirit provides the spell with two things. Mr Boot, can you give us one?”

“Kraft, sir.”

Flitwick beamed. “Oh, bravo! In the original German at that! Take five points. For the rest of you, the power of kraft was first identified by the German wizard Hennig Brand, who described it as a type of strength which all living things possess. In English, we’d call it willpower. Imbuing an object with kraft grants it one of the most important features of life: the ability to move of its own accord, without being pushed into movement by another object.”

An idea struck Victoria, Professor Flitwick’s words reminding her of the chapter on phosphorous in Natural Magic. The spirit had many connections with light, and if movement charms were infused with spirit then that would mean they had a base of fire.

She lifted her quill and wrote in the diary:


She put the quill back down, satisfied with her discovery—but, to her surprise, words continued to fill the page, right beneath her own notes.

Most impressive, the words said, I didn’t make that connection until third year. You must have been studying alchemy. But you might like to consider the non-alchemical implications as well…
Victoria stared at the page, barely hearing Professor Flitwick’s voice as he lectured on instinct, the second aspect of impulse. Was this a prank? Some kind of joke book slipped into her trunk? But no… the words made sense… even as she read them, her mind was making connections, arriving at the idea the book wanted to teach her.

*The heart*, she wrote excitedly, *the charm has no real vitality, so the only source is the wizard themselves, and willpower comes from the heart. It makes so much sense! The heart is fire, too, so you don’t have conflicting powers. But that would mean we have animal spirits in our hearts!*

Even as she wrote it, she knew it wasn’t quite right.

*Have*, the book wrote, *or will have.*

“... which brings us to totems,” Professor Flitwick said. “In order to imbue your spell with impulse, each of you will need to create an avian totem. With a totem in hand, you’ll be able to start learning the basic charms of movement, and as your skill with those charms develops, so too will the totem. It is a kind of symbiosis... unfortunately, you won’t be able to keep the totem. You see, once complete, the totem must be burned.”

The rest of her classmates frowned in confusion, no doubt questioning the point of creating something only to burn it, but Victoria just nodded. She’d read all about how to create a totem, but now she understood why. First you developed a sympathetic connection with the animal spirit, and then you turned it into fire, the same element as your heart, drawing it into your magic for good.

It was so satisfyingly neat that, for the first time, Victoria wondered if she might actually prefer Charms to Transfiguration. Oh, animation in Transfiguration was more powerful, there was no doubt about that. There was something special about the ability to give objects true life, not just the semblance of it. But the way Charms managed to replicate the same effect was so clever. She could even make her totem out of white phosphorous, if she could figure out how to transfigure some… she was sure that would increase its effectiveness.

She looked down at the diary in awe. No, this wasn’t a prank. It was a gift. A book that could teach her magic? That was the kind of magical artefact legends were made of. Every first year knew that it was impossible to conjure magical knowledge, and yet this diary had just done exactly that. If the world knew about it, whole textbooks would have to be rewritten.

Then again, if the world knew about it, they’d probably take it away from her.

Perhaps she’d keep the diary to herself, just for a bit. She could show it to the Professors later, once she’d learnt all that it could teach her. After all, someone had given it to her—it would be rude to throw away a gift, wouldn’t it?

“Now, today’s class is going to focus on choosing your totem,” Professor Flitwick said, jolting Victoria from her thoughts. He flicked his wand and a large pile of books appeared on his desk. “I’d like you to look through these books and decide on an animal—don’t worry if you get stuck, I’ll circulate the room to provide guidance. A word of warning, however: not all animal spirits are equal. You must pick a bird which is not only appropriate for the task, but also one which you will be able to master. The robin is a common choice, as are the blackbird and the wren. But let’s see what you like the look of.”

Victoria took one of the books and began leafing through the pages, the columns of dense text broken up here and there by whole-page sketches of birds with fluttering wings. She automatically
dismissed the birds Professor Flitwick had mentioned, which were all rather unremarkable, and began looking for something more interesting.

Across the room, Professor Flitwick was giving advice to the Slytherins.

“I’d recommend against the blue tit,” he said to Pansy. “I’m not sure you’d be a good match, my dear. Perhaps… the magpie?”

Victoria buried her face in her book, trying desperately to disguise her sniggering. She focused on the drawings. The sparrow… the crow… the greenfinch… they were all far too tame. She put the book down and fetched another, hoping for better luck.

Professor Flitwick turned his attention to Draco. “Ah... the peacock? Yes, I think that would work nicely…”

Finally, Victoria found what she was looking for. Something nimble and precise. Something small, beautiful, and unique.

She picked up her quill and wrote in the diary:

*Hummingbird.*

As she had hoped, the diary wrote back.

*I don’t recommend it*, it wrote. *It’s true that the hummingbird is a fine totem for precision work. Control would come to you easily… the perfect match for a future craftswitch, for example. But it would limit you. You don’t want to be a craftswitch, do you?*

Victoria frowned. She didn’t know what she wanted to be, but she didn’t like the idea of being limited.

*No*, she wrote. *What’s wrong with the hummingbird? Too small?*

*Size is irrelevant. The hummingbird is prey. You would never achieve power with so feeble a spirit. No, you should pick a predator, something with both power and agility. It will be more difficult to learn, but once mastered, you will not regret it.*

An image of a bird appeared on the page, so detailed that it might have been a photograph. It was not the largest of birds, but it had a sleek lines, a sharp beak and keen eyes. A name appeared under the image: *goshawk*.

Once again, Victoria was stunned by the book. How could a diary teach her this? It wasn’t just reproducing knowledge, it was advising her. She’d talked to portraits and mirrors enough to know they couldn’t do this—they weren’t stupid exactly, but they were limited, unable to escape their particular obsessions and interests, like toddlers determined to play with a particular toy.

The diary was different. It was as if it had impulse of its own, only with a human spirit in place of an animal one. But that was impossible… wasn’t it?

She picked up her quill.

*What are you?*

The reply came quickly.

*My name is Tom Riddle. Tell me, what’s your name?*
Tom Riddle, it turned out, was not a book at all. He was a wizard—or rather, the memory of a wizard, imprinted onto a diary during his sixth year at Hogwarts. Victoria had never heard of magic like that before, but Tom’s knowledge of magic was vast. There wasn’t a question he couldn’t answer, no matter how obscure, and apparently he had invented the process of creating the diary himself.

It was very easy to become used to having Tom around. The way he explained magic reminded her of Professor Dumbledore, never repeating what she already knew from the textbook, as often occurred in class, but pushing her to think about deeper questions of why and how. Unlike Professor Dumbledore, however, Tom was always there, and she’d taken to keeping the diary next to her in the evenings as she did her homework.

The only problem was that Tom didn’t always want to answer her questions. He outright refused to tell her anything more about how he had created the diary, and often he would insist on Victoria answering some question about herself before he would help her with magic. She couldn’t really blame him—it must have been dreadfully dull, being trapped in a diary for decades—but it was quite inconvenient.

He was oddly curious about her life. She told him about how she was an orphan, how she’d grown up with Muggles, and how she had been experimenting with magic since before she had heard of Hogwarts. Tom was especially interested in that. She even ended up telling him that she was a metamorphmagus, something she had only ever confided in Susan, but she figured her secrets were safe with a book.

Tom had been particularly surprised when she happened to mention the year.

_I have very little sense of time_, he explained, _I can perceive some of the world, but only when someone is interacting with me. The last I knew, it was 1943. Tell me, who is the Minister for Magic?_

Thus began a long sequence of questions about the wider magical world, temporarily displacing his interest in Victoria.

_Was Grindelwald defeated?_

_Who is the Defence Master at Hogwarts?_

_Do the traditionalists still dominate the Wizengamot?_

_Have there been problems with dark wizards in Britain?_

Her response to the last one provoked a curious reaction.

_Not recently_, she wrote. _There used to be a dark wizard called Voldemort, but he was killed._

_How fortunate_, Tom wrote back, but then he went quiet. He didn’t respond to any of her messages for hours, and when he did, he’d stopped asking questions about the world.

On Saturday, Victoria finally had a chance to catch up with Susan. They bought some Honeydukes cocoa from the Weasley twins, retreated to the relative warmth of greenhouse five, and huddled around Susan’s cauldron as they made hot chocolate with milk from the greenhouse pump.

“I’ve got something to show you,” Victoria said as she stirred the simmering milk, the steam rising
to fog the glass walls. “You have to promise not to tell anyone, though.”

“Of course!” Susan said. She pulled a pair of mugs from her bag and set them down on the stone floor, before using a ladle to fill them with the hot milk. The moment the milk hit the cocoa, it transformed into a thick, chocolatey liquid.

“This is a big secret, though,” Victoria said, taking one of the mugs and clutching it to her chest. “Do you swear on your wand?”

Susan’s eyes lit up: such a serious oath meant serious gossip. She reached inside her robe, where her wand would be hanging from a loop at her waist. “I swear it.”

“Thanks,” Victoria said. “Here.” She withdrew the diary from her bag and passed it to Susan, who flipped through the pages with a frown.

“You’re showing me… your homework?” she asked. “What’s so special about that?”

“Look closer,” Victoria said. “Look at the writing.”

“Ohh, your handwriting’s got much better,” Susan said. “Hang on… there’s another person’s writing in here. Like… a conversation?”

Victoria nodded enthusiastically. “His name’s Tom,” she explained. “He was a student here, back in the Forties. Somehow he imprinted his personality on this diary, kinda like a portrait, only so much more… it’s like you’re talking with a real person!”

Susan slammed the diary shut. “Victoria! That’s… not right. It’s like one of those stories they tell you as a kid… King Yunan’s book or whatever. Are you sure it’s safe? Where’d you get it, anyway?”

“I found it,” Victoria said, deciding not to mention that she’d found it in her own trunk. She’d expected Susan to be excited, not wary. Couldn’t she see how amazing the magic of the diary was? “And it’s a book; all it does is talk to you. I don’t see how it could be dangerous.”

“Well, does it at least tell the truth?” Susan asked. She passed the diary back to Victoria, and looked relieved to let it go. “There’s all sorts of books that can trick you, you know… like, do you even really know that Tom is a real person? And if he is, where’s he now? Maybe you’re not talking to a book at all… maybe there’s some old man on the other end, writing in a simulacrum.”

A cold rush of fear ran down Victoria’s spine. The things she had told the diary… they weren’t for anyone else to know.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she said. She’d been so caught up with the magic of the diary, she hadn’t really considered the possibility that it was lying. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell him so much…”

“No kidding.”

“Well, there might be one way to tell if he’s real,” Victoria said, “he doesn’t talk about himself much, but he did tell me he was a Slytherin prefect.”

Susan sighed. “You’re going to drag me to the trophy room, aren’t you?”

“If that’s okay,” Victoria said. “But first—hot chocolate.”

The trophy room was on the third floor, just above the second floor armoury, and was always kept
unlocked. The door opened to a long gallery full of glass cabinets, each one brimming with gleaming silverware, all of it polished on a regular basis by the caretaker, Mr Filch. It was Mr Filch’s odious presence which kept the students away, and Victoria was not at all surprised to find the room empty.

Near the centre of the room was an enormous ledger resting on a stone plinth, which contained a record of all the school prefects dating back to the 15th century. The book was so heavy that it took Susan and Victoria together to open it up, and the earlier pages were all written in runes.

It took quite some time to locate Tom Riddle.

“Here he is,” Susan said. “Slytherin, 1942, Tom Marvolo Riddle. Weird name, right? Marvolo’s an old wizarding name, but Tom… not so much. And I’ve never heard of the Riddle family.”

“He told me he was an orphan,” Victoria said, “so maybe Riddle wasn’t even his real name.” She traced her finger down the page to where he appeared again in 1943. “Odd. He doesn’t show up for 1944… that should’ve been his seventh year.”

Susan bit her lip. “You don’t suppose… do you think he might have died? That diary almost sounds like a kind of ghost.”

“Maybe,” Victoria said, but she wasn’t convinced. She looked up at the far wall of the trophy room, where a series of long wooden boards hung. Each one contained a list of names next to a column of dates. “Or maybe his name’s on there.”

She approached the boards, her eyes scanning back through the years, noting the names James Potter and Lily Evans against the entry for 1978, quickly locating the name Tom Riddle against the year 1944.

“Found him!” she called. “He’s not dead, he was Head Boy.”

She glanced back towards Susan, who was lingering by one of the cabinets. “He’s here too,” she said, gesturing towards a silver shield, “an award for special services to the school. I wonder what he did? They don’t give those out easily. The next person to get one was—” she looked at Victoria nervously “—um, Sirius Black.”

Victoria frowned, dismissing the unfamiliar name. “But how come we’ve never heard of him?” she said. “Head Boy, a special award… surely he’d be, like, high up in the Ministry? Or a famous adventurer like Lockhart? Or something. But it’s like he just… left Hogwarts and disappeared.”

“Maybe he did die,” Susan said, returning to her earlier idea. “Not in his sixth year, but later. It was a dangerous time, after all. Maybe Grindelwald got him.”

“Perhaps,” Victoria said, remembering the way Tom’s very first questions had revolved around Grindelwald. It had sounded almost like he admired Grindelwald. “Or maybe Dumbledore did.”

* * *

The first Potions lesson of the term finally arrived on Tuesday morning. The class was unusually silent as they waited outside Laboratory Six, a nervous excitement hanging in the cold air which reminded Victoria of the tension before an exam. Today they would be completing the Draught of Sparta, the final step in a brewing process which had lasted since November.

She couldn’t help but feel a little sad at the prospect. She’d become rather accustomed to having the heart of autumn around her neck: it was her favourite item of jewellery, and the fact that it had
saved her life only increased her attachment to it.

The bell rang and Snape arrived with his customary scowl.

“’In!’

They filed into the room and found their cauldrons, the silvery liquid within still bubbling away after having been left to simmer over the winter break. Victoria’s was shimmering with an ethereal glow; next to her, Tracey’s potion was looking distinctly more grey, but it was nonetheless serviceable. Professor Snape had supervised the brewing closely, and every student’s potion was in a drinkable state—even Neville Longbottom’s.

“Today, at long last, I shall be released from this annual torture,” Snape said, his lips stretching into what might have been a smile. “You are to complete, and then drink, the Draught of Sparta. If you need any further direction, then you have already failed. You may begin.”

The class sprang into motion, the instructions for the final stage long since memorised, and they chopped, crushed and ground their ingredients with unusual focus. Only Neville looked lost, no doubt having forgotten to bring his textbook to class, and Hermione Granger was foolishly compromising the quality of her own potion by constantly intervening to fix his mistakes.

Victoria shook her head. If you asked her, Hermione was far too concerned with other people’s work. Perhaps if she had focused on her own, her potion might have had the same velvet-smooth texture as Victoria’s.

Turning back to her own work, she scattered Cretan dittany into the cauldron and gave it three stirs, the earthy smell filling the air as she added a single drop of incredibly precious Re’em blood into the mixture. The potion immediately turned a deep, blood red. That meant it was ready for the final ingredient: the stormheart which each student had collected from an autumn cloud.

Victoria prised the heart of autumn from its transfigured bronze pendant, taking one last moment to admire the way it sparkled and glimmered from within, relishing the spine-tingling brush of power that she felt each time she handled it.

“So long,” she whispered, and she raised her hand to drop it into the cauldron.

A hand seized her wrist.

“What is this?”

It was Snape, his long fingers curled around her wrist like a vice, his gaze fixed on the gem.

Victoria frowned. “My stormheart, sir. Is something wrong?”

“Do not play with me, Potter. That is no ordinary stormheart.” His gaze shifted and his dark eyes bored into her own, his expression inscrutable. “Come.”

He practically dragged her to the storeroom, his hand never leaving her wrist. The door slammed shut behind them, and suddenly she was alone with Professor Snape. They were standing uncomfortably close in the cramped space, his body odour barely concealed by the smell of the herbs and animal parts all around them, and it took all of Victoria’s self-control to resist the urge to wrinkle her nose.

Snape raised her hand so that the sparkling gem was held between them. “Are you aware of what this is?”
“Yes,” she said, not meeting Snape’s eyes. A deep blush extended from her chest up her neck. If he knew what it was, then that meant he also knew that she’d been running around the grounds naked. “It’s a heart of autumn.”

“And do you know what it will do, if you use it within your draught?”

Victoria bit her lip. In truth, she did not. When it came to such powerful magic, she doubted anyone could really predict the outcome. But one thing was certain. “It’ll be stronger.”

“Among other things,” Snape said, and he released her hand. “I will not forbid you from using it. But be warned! As you know, your identity shapes your magic. Every decision you make, every action you take, everything that you learn and believe… little by little, it determines who you are. It is no small thing to imbibe magic of such power. It will change you. Not even I can say how.”

She stared at the gem glittering innocently on her palm. Perhaps it would be better to keep it and use a different gem for the potion. “If I didn’t use it…”

“You would have to repeat the potion next year.”

No. She couldn’t wait another year, not when she had worked so hard to make her potion perfect—and not when everyone would know that she had failed. She could already hear Pansy’s voice, mocking her for falling behind even Neville Longbottom.

How bad could it be, anyway? The gem had saved her from that Death Eater… perhaps taking its magic into herself would be a good thing.

She looked up and met Snape’s eyes. “I’m going to use it.”

“Very well.”

Decision made, she returned to her cauldron and, before she could change her mind, added the gem without any further ceremony. There was no visible change to the potion, but Victoria could feel the whole liquid take on that unmistakable thrum of power. She extinguished the fire and poured the potion into a small glass.

Everyone was watching her. She was the first to complete the potion and had assumed the role of class guinea pig. With a smirk, she raised her glass in a mock toast in Hermione’s direction.

“Bottoms up!”

The potion was freezing. She downed it in three long gulps, her teeth aching from the sudden assault of cold, her stomach clenching tightly as it turned to ice—and then, quite abruptly, it was over.

She didn’t feel any different. “Is that it?” she asked, raising the glass to make sure she’d drunk it all. “Did I do something wrong?”

Tracey coughed. “Uh, Vicky… look around.”

She looked up and gasped. Laboratory Six was covered in frost.

* * *

By the time dinner rolled around, all anyone could talk about was Potions. The second years entered the Great Hall with a newfound swagger, their sense of invulnerability granting them a
renewed superiority over the first years, and the hall was filled with their excited chatter as they exchanged thoughts on their new abilities.

“I can’t wait for our next Flying class,” Tracey said, spooning a large quantity of mashed potato onto her plate. “I feel like I could fight a dragon.”

“A nundu, more like,” said Millie. “I bet I could headbutt a bludger and I’d be fine.”

As always, it amazed Victoria just how ignorant her classmates were of the magic they were performing. Snape had been quite clear: the Draught of Sparta didn’t increase your strength at all, nor did it prevent you from getting hurt. It just meant that when you did get injured, you could shrug it off easier. She was quite sure the others were imagining things—other than a sense that something was missing from around her neck, she felt no different.

She didn’t get a chance to set the record straight. Just as she was about to respond, the Carrow twins arrived at the table.

“Has anyone seen Pansy?” Hestia asked, “we can’t find her anywhere.”

Victoria snorted. “What, you can’t eat without her permission?”

Tracey and Millie laughed, but Daphne’s face was concerned.

“It’s not like Pansy to skip dinner,” she said, craning her neck to look around the hall. “Did anyone speak to her, after Herbology?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“Right.” Daphne stood up. “We should go look for her.”

“Now?” Victoria asked. She looked down at her half-eaten chicken pie. “Can’t it wait?”

“Think, Vicky!” Daphne said, her voice chiding. “What if it’s the Heir?”

Victoria sighed and put her fork down. “Fine.”

They split up, agreeing to rendezvous in the common room in half an hour. Daphne and Tracey were to check the greenhouses, the Carrows the potions labs, and Victoria was given the dungeons near to the common room.

It was surprisingly warm down there, even though she wasn’t wearing her charm bracelet, and Victoria made good progress in checking the deserted floor. The dungeons were occupied by all the hidden work rooms which made the castle tick: a giant wash room, full of dirty laundry waiting to be cleaned; the boiler room, where an eternal Gubraithian fire heated the castle’s water; and endless rooms lined with locked filing cabinets, centuries of student records collecting dust.

It didn’t take long to find Pansy. She was with Crabbe and Goyle, not five minutes’ walk from the common room, the three of them squabbling next to the entrance to a spiral staircase.

“...we can’t go up there,” Pansy was saying, “that leads back to the basement. The Slytherin common room’s in the dungeons, everyone knows that.”

“But we’ve already searched the dungeons,” Goyle said.

“ Twice,” added Crabbe.
Goyle nodded. “Face it, we’re not going to find it. Let’s just give up and go to dinner.”

“I’m not giving up!” Pansy said, “not when we’ve spent so long on this!”

Victoria laughed loudly, and the three of them spun to face her. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said. “You’re lost? Like, actually lost?”

“Oh, it’s you,” Pansy said. “Don’t be ridiculous. We’re not lost, we just got… turned around.”

“This is priceless,” Victoria said with a grin, already anticipating everyone’s reaction when she told them the story. “Well, come on. The others are looking for you, too—we should get back before Daphne has kneazles.”

She led them back towards the common room, Crabbe and Goyle following behind like obedient puppies.

“Congratulations on your Draught of Sparta, by the way,” Pansy said, filling the silence. “It was actually very good.”

Victoria raised her eyebrows. Pansy gave compliments frequently, but rarely to her. She tended to bestow them only on those who did things for her. “Thanks, I guess.”

“What was it Professor Snape said to you?” Pansy asked. “You know, when he pulled you into the storeroom?”

“Just sharing some advice,” Victoria said. She wasn’t in the mood to explain.

Pansy’s eyes glinted. “I knew it. I knew he was helping you… that’s how your potions are always better than—” she paused “—better than Hermione’s.”

“Granger’s?” Victoria said, her voice incredulous. “Please. Draco’s potions are better than hers. She’s so stuck in the textbook, she wouldn’t know an original thought if it was dancing naked in front of her.”

Pansy gasped. “Why, you—”

Goyle cleared his throat, and Pansy fell silent.

They arrived back at the common room. “Fiendfyre,” Victoria said, and the wall parted into an archway. “After you.”

The others had already returned and were huddled around their usual couches. It looked like they were arguing—everyone except for Draco, who was casually sprawled at the centre of a sofa, not a care in the world.

“Found them!” Victoria called, and everyone looked up.

“Oh, thank god!” Daphne said, relief in her voice, and she rushed forward to hug Pansy. “Where were you? We looked everywhere.”

“They were lost,” Victoria reported gleefully, before Pansy could say anything. “I found them by the east staircase.”

Draco laughed. “Crabbe and Goyle I can understand, but Pansy? How many times have you walked to the Great Hall?”
Pansy blushed. “Well, I’m back now,” she said, and she sat down at the centre of the couch opposite Draco.

Victoria and Daphne traded nervous looks. That wasn’t Pansy’s normal seat.

“Oh god,” Daphne whispered, “not this again.”

The last time Pansy had decided to change their seating order, it had ended with three girls crying in the bathroom. Before anyone could intervene, however, Crabbe and Goyle took the spaces either side of Pansy.

Pansy did not object.

“Something’s not right,” Victoria said. Neither of the boys would ever willingly sit next to a girl, nor would Pansy have let them take so central a position.

“You’re right,” Daphne said, her eyes now examining Pansy carefully. “She’s far too… passive.” She smirked. “Let’s see how far we can push it.”

The two of them joined the others, Daphne taking a spot next to Draco, Victoria settling down on her usual cushion.

“Pansy,” Daphne said, her voice concerned, “are you feeling okay? It’s just… you’re not wearing your headband. You always wear a headband.”

“Oh,” Pansy said, and she patted her robes to locate her headband in a pocket. “How silly of me!” She put the headband on, far further forward than she normally wore it.

“And your hair,” Victoria said, leaning forwards, “didn’t you say you were going to wear pigtails today?”

Daphne sent Victoria an amused look. Pansy never wore pigtails.

“Did I?” Pansy said, her voice hesitant. “I must have forgotten.”

“Here, let me help you,” Daphne said, and she moved across to start parting Pansy’s hair.

Tracey was glancing between Daphne and Victoria in clear confusion. “What—”

“And you can’t be comfortable in those heels,” Victoria said firmly, not letting Tracey ruin their fun. “Why don’t you put your favourite slippers on?”

She reached to the side of the couch, where Tracey had left her very fluffy and very Muggle slippers, and pushed them towards Pansy.

Pansy glanced at Crabbe and Goyle, who shrugged. “Of course,” she said, and she took her shoes off and replaced them with the slippers.

Daphne finished with Pansy’s hair and returned to her seat next to Draco. “There we go! Just how you wanted it.”

Even Draco was paying attention now, his lips twitching as he took in the image of Pansy with her hair in pigtails and fluffy slippers on her feet. “God, I wish I had a camera.”

Victoria suppressed a laugh.
“So!” Goyle said loudly, making several people jump, “who do we reckon the Heir of Slytherin is?”

A chorus of groans met Goyle’s question.

“Not this again,” Malfoy said, “please, anything but yet another *Heir of Slytherin* session.”

“It’s more interesting than my hair, at least,” Pansy said, causing Victoria and Daphne to share another look. “Besides, you must have *some* thoughts. Hasn’t your father told you *anything*?”

“Nothing,” Draco said, “as I’ve said a hundred times before.”

Crabbe leaned forward to join the conversation. “It’s not Snape, then?”

“Of course it isn’t Snape,” Draco said with a roll of his eyes. “You’ve been listening to too many rumours. The Princes don’t have any connection to the Slytherin line, you should know that.”

“And don’t forget,” Victoria said, “Snape was the one who saved Justin.”

“Well, that’s the perfect cover, isn’t it?” Pansy said. “He saves the first one, and after that no one questions him.”

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose. “You know, I think that may be the dumbest thing you’ve ever said. And that *includes* the time you thought the lake contained a Giant *Squib*.”

Everyone sniggered. Even Pansy’s lips twitched, as if she was amused by her own error. Victoria frowned. Was she having some kind of bad reaction to the Draught of Sparta?

“But Snape makes the most sense,” Pansy insisted. “Both of the attacks involved poison, and Snape’s the Potions Master. He’s the *Head* of Slytherin. And—”

“He’s a vampire,” Goyle said.

Pansy sent him a dirty look. “Not that *again,*” she said, though Victoria couldn’t remember Goyle ever talking about it before. “We’ve seen him outside in the sun. *Multiple* times.”

“Well,” Daphne said, getting drawn into the conversation, “it’s been a while since there was an attack. Maybe the Heir’s gone?”

“They’ve not done anything since the Ministry came,” Tracey added. “Perhaps they got scared.”

“It’s just a pity they couldn’t take Granger first,” Draco said. “Did you see her in Potions earlier, lecturing everyone on how to shred dittany?”

There was a murmur of agreement.

“She’s such a prissy little know-it-all,” Tracey said. “No offence, Vicky.”

Daphne tossed her hair. “Vicky’s *our* know-it-all.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Victoria said, making a show of examining her fingernails with affected disinterest. “At least I’m not *prissy*.”

“It’s not the same,” Draco said. “Victoria has proper wizarding pride. Granger’s just a jumped-up mudblood.”
Victoria started, surprised by Draco’s use of such coarse language, but her reaction was nothing compared to Pansy’s loud gasp.

“You’re just jealous,” Pansy said, a bite in her voice, “jealous that she’s better than you at magic.”

Silence fell.

“Right, that’s it!” Daphne said, standing up abruptly. “We’re taking you to Madam Pomfrey. You’ve obviously been confunded or something.”

“What?” Pansy said. “I’m not confunded.”

Tracey snorted. “That’s exactly what a confunded person would say.”

“Let’s see,” Daphne said. “You got lost. You’re wearing Tracey’s slippers. You aren’t sitting in your normal spot. And you’re saying the strangest things. If you’re not confunded, then what?”

Pansy’s face went red. “You said these were my slippers!”

“Exactly,” Daphne said.

Goyle nudged Pansy’s arm. “Maybe we should go,” he said. “To… Madam Pomfrey.”

“Fine,” Pansy said, and she stood up to leave. Crabbe and Goyle followed suit.

Victoria looked between them. Whatever was happening, all three of them were involved. “We’ll come with you,” she said. “We wouldn’t want you to get lost again, would we?”

Pansy gave them a weak smile. “That’s really not necessary.”

At last, Draco seemed to have realised something more than a prank was going on. He stood, his wand jumping into his hand as if from nowhere.

“We insist.”

Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle exchanged a single look.

“Run!” Goyle shouted, and suddenly they were scrambling over the back of the couch, limbs everywhere. Daphne lunged to grab Pansy’s ankle, but she was too slow, and a moment later all three of them were over the couch and dashing for the exit. Tracey and Millie rushed to chase after them, but they got in each other’s way and hit their heads, falling to the floor with moans of pain.

“Stop them!” Daphne called—a few older students turned to look, but it was too late. Goyle was almost at the door.

Draco brandished his wand. “Tarantallegra!” A jet of pink light shot at Pansy’s retreating back, but it missed her by at least a foot.

Victoria had better luck. “Cadere!” she called, casting without thinking, and her spell hit Crabbe in a flash of silver light, sending him tumbling.

“Neville!” Pansy cried, and she went to help Crabbe up, just as Goyle reached the entrance.

The wall parted, the archway formed, and Goyle ran straight into Professor Snape.

Goyle stumbled back. “No!”
“Yes,” Snape said.

It was over in a moment. With a click of Snape’s fingers, living ropes uncoiled out of the air, rapidly binding Pansy, Crabbe, and Goyle like writhing snakes. Then he waved his hand upwards and all three of them were hoisted into the air.

“Oh god,” Crabbe wailed, “I told you this would happen!”

Pansy and Goyle just looked sullenly at the floor.

Behind Snape, three sheepish figures shuffled into view: another Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle, these ones wearing ill-fitting robes trimmed in red and gold. All eyes turned to the intruders bound in ropes.

“They weren’t confunded,” Victoria said. “They’re imposters.”

Daphne shook her head in disbelief. “Whoever they are, they’re so screwed.”

Across the room, Snape rubbed his hands together in glee. “Oh, happy day,” he said. “I think I sense an expulsion coming.”

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