

SALONI AT HOGWARTS

Fan Fiction Harry Potter Book

Rusha Bhagwat



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To the fans of Harry Potter ...



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This is a fan-fiction based on the Harry Potter series of books by JK Rowling. The characters are new but the situations and setup of Hogwarts is the same as created by the author JK Rowling.

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1. THE WEIRDEST BIRTHDAY EVER

The Mate family

A pleasant breeze blew across the busy streets of Mumbai. People were consumed in their daily routine having a blind eye to everything else as usual. The adults hurry away to work, the children skipping around enjoying the warm sun. Cars honking and people chatting; shopkeepers yelling - 'Fresh vegetables for sale!'. This was all seemingly usual and nothing seemed out of place. In the middle of all the hustle-bustle, a charming bungalow could be seen on a lone street. It was an ordinary house with slightly dusty windows and a nice lawn with lots of flower beds. The sunshine shone through a little window highlighting a peacefully sleeping girl.

The 'Mate' family was a normal, everyday type of family. The father going for work early in the morning, the mother bustling about in the kitchen, and the two daughters ... well - simply enjoying childhood. For now, the elder daughter Saloni snoring away in her bed having a carefree summer. But not for long ...

'Trrrrr ... Trrrrr ...'

Saloni jerked awake as her alarm started screaming shrilly in her ear. After mumbling something about certain clocks who had no business ringing in her ear on a Sunday, she slid out of bed, her tiny feet landing on the floor with a 'plop'. As she washed her face in her small bathroom, she

wearily glanced at her reflection in the mirror. A face with big brown eyes, a circular shape and tanned skin stared back at her. She also had shoulder length wavy-brown hair and a sharp jaw.

She shuffled downstairs with a big yawn, and dumped herself on a chair in near the breakfast table. Looking around the house, she furrowed her eyebrows in confusion after sensing no sign of life whatsoever.

‘Mom! Sharvari! Is everybody kidnapped or something?’ she said loudly, her voice still slightly hoarse from sleep. She turned around to check the wall clock, to see it was 10 ‘o’ clock and she still hadn’t received her breakfast; The nerve of some people!

Saloni grumbled irritably and forced herself out of the chair, roaming around the house on quest for her lost family.

‘Hello! Joke’s over – come out or I’m calling 911.’ she screamed, starting to panic slightly. She stopped yelling for a second when she heard whispering voices coming from the lawn outside the house. She gasped in fright because her first thought was – ‘Criminals! They got my family and are coming for me now!’

In such cases, she, unfortunately, let her imagination run haywire, unlike any other useful time. For instance, for a school essay which actually required creativity or imagination, her mind would be point-blank. But in cases like these ...

She quickly grabbed a nearby frying pan and started walking towards the door fearfully – Raised the utensil when she was an arm’s length away from the door and jerked open the door hoping to knock out the murderer, when ...

‘SURPRISE! Happy birthday!’

Her parents smiled at her and her little sister squealed, making her jaw drop [Or rather her pan drop]. They all were standing there holding a huge vanilla cake with - ‘Happy Birthday’ written in the chocolate glaze, Saloni reco-

gnized, her father's horrible cursive. They all were looking at her with big grins on their faces and her heart melted.

'Oh my! This is amazing!' she gushed, hopping up and down in joy. She had completely forgotten it was her birthday! She really wasn't expecting this – and on her 11th birthday! Her parents had never given her a surprise party before.

She ran forward and hugged her parents tightly. After cutting the cake and Saloni getting the largest amount of it, the three sat down for a hearty breakfast of omelettes and toast.

'Who has ever heard of having cake before breakfast?' her father chortled, rubbing his stomach heartily. She didn't know the answer but she definitely wasn't complaining. The four laughed and joked as they sipped on their tea; in the girls' case, milk. It was a funny breakfast but still surprisingly tasty. Suddenly, Sharvari gasped loudly, causing all heads to turn towards her just like she probably wanted. 'Oh! Mom, dad! Show her the gift!'

Her parents laughed in unison and then pulled out – 3 airplane tickets? Saloni's confusion showed clearly on her face, but her parents seemed oblivious. A few awkward minutes of silence passed, where each one was hoping that the other would guess what was going on in their minds.

'Well? What's the gift?' she asked after a moment, tapping her fingers on the breakfast table. Her mother seemed to finally understand that Saloni still hadn't realised what the gift was.

'Oh! It's three tickets to the plane that flies to London. We're going there for a vacation! We're leaving today evening.' she said with clear excitement. Saloni gaped at her for a moment in bemusement.

'But ... why do we have to travel someplace?' She blurted out. Her parents and sister blinked and then looked at her with crestfallen expressions. 'Oh! Not that I don't like it, of course! I've always wanted to visit London.' she commented in a cheerful voice.

She didn't want to lie to her family but she had enough of travelling. Her father was continuously moving cities because of his work, and naturally, everyone else went with him. But she had never visited London before and no matter how much she was bored with the aspect of travelling, she couldn't ignore the thrilling anticipation she felt at the mention of it. Her parents apparently seemed satisfied at her response and started discussing about the trip immediately. After a long time of packing, then having lunch, and then a game of cards, the four flopped onto the couch, feeling exhausted.

'Oh, yeah!' Sharvari suddenly spoke up from somewhere along the left. 'When are we leaving for the airport?'

Her father checked the tickets on the table and sighed. 'The ticket says the flight leaves at 8: 30 p.m. exactly. We'll have to be at the airport by 7:30 p.m. – that's plenty of time!'

Her mother agreed with a yawn and sat down in her favourite armchair, eyes closed. Saloni opened one bleary eye and saw that it showed 5 'o' clock. They really did have plenty of time. She turned her head and saw that her family had almost dozed off after packing their bags and having a heavy lunch. London was the last thought on her mind as Saloni dozed off into sleep.

It seemed hardly five minutes since she had fallen asleep when someone was shaking her awake.

'Saloni! Wake up – We're late!' Sharvari screamed in her face, shaking her so hard, she was getting dizzy. 'Come on! Mom and dad are loading our trunks in the car.'

Saloni snapped open her eyes to see that it was already getting dark, and it was 7:10 pm! She jumped out of her seat hurriedly and ran to her room. After trying to pull on her pants, tie her laces and comb her hair all at the same time, she grabbed a spare rucksack, stuffing some last-minute books and gadgets in it. After sprinting downstairs and tripping twice on her open shoelaces, she hopped in the car along with a rumpled-looking Sharvari. After a lot of scrambling, shouting, and complaining, the family was in the car and speeding away towards the airport. They spent

a lot of time recalling if they had closed every switch, turned off the iron, and locked the doors, even if there wasn't anything they could do about it now. After managing to reach the airport by 7:35 pm, they got out of the car and raced towards the check-in counter. After about an hour, they had checked in, ex-rayed their baggage, and now were waiting for the plane in the cafeteria of the airport. Saloni was feeling faint at how quickly they had gone through everything – not to mention she was still a bit sleepy.

'Goodness! I've never had such a hasty trip in my life!' Saloni said, munching on a sandwich. 'Nor have I ever gotten dressed that fast. I think my shirt's still on the wrong side.'

Saloni's mother tutted. 'Well, if only you would get ready for school that fast, you would never be late like you usually are.'

Saloni chuckled, and then a thought occurred to her. 'Oh, and speaking about school, what are we doing about school while we are on vacation.'

Her father dismissed that thought saying that he had already spoken to the principal and asked for a long holiday. It had taken a lot of time to make that decision, but a girl only has her 11th birthday once.

The three ate in silence until they heard their plane's number and their destination being called out. They walked towards the tunnel leading to the plane and after about 15 minutes, they were sitting in their seats; Saloni and Sharvari were sitting next to each other with their parents in the seats beside them. Saloni had hogged the window seat, claiming it was her birthday and she had the right to sit there, much to her sister's disappointment. She felt a swooping sensation in her stomach as the plane started moving. She did get air-sick sometimes, but she liked the feeling anyways. It was going to be an overnight flight and was going to land at 6 am the next day. The family chatted and played charades for a while, sniggering quietly when Sharvari imitated a horse very horribly. Soon the air hostess bought them some Thai noodles and orange juice for dinn-

er and they chewed on it reluctantly, not really knowing how the combination tasted when eaten together. It turned out to be delicious, and everyone was soon munching on their dinners, occasionally coming up with a topic to chat about.

Saloni soon found herself zoning out, as she stared out of the window taking in the scene. The dark, starry night sky with clouds so near, you could touch them. The merry lights twinkled from the building way down below as they were soaring away from all of the rush. After a while, the whole plane had fallen silent since most of the passengers had either fallen asleep or were listening to music using earphones. Almost 3 hours had passed by now and they were flying over the Indian ocean. Saloni yawned and felt her eyelids growing heavy. She turned around to see that her mother and sister had already fallen asleep, and her father was reading a sports magazine. She hummed drowsily and turned around, almost half asleep, when her body gave a sudden sharp jolt. Then she realized that it wasn't her body that gave a jolt – it was the plane! Her eyes snapped open, and the weariness in them turned to panic. Another big jolt, and by now half the passengers were wide awake. They weren't just regular jerks the plane was giving. It felt as if they were put in a blender and someone turned it on after intervals of about 10 seconds. Saloni felt Sharvari give a squeal of fright from beside her. Saloni turned to her mother, who was now awake too, as the plane jerked again. 'What is going on?' she gasped.

'I think that either we are in an avalanche, or there's something wrong with the plane.' Her mother replied in a hushed whisper. She had hugged Sharvari closer to her, and her father offered to sit with Saloni for comfort when the plane's next jolt emitted a little scream from her. She shook her head and assured that she was fine ... though she really wasn't.

'Attention passengers. There is a slight malfunction in the plane's main engine. Our people are trying their best to fix it. Kindly unbuckle your seatbelts in case of an emergency landing.'

Saloni shuddered as this announcement rang through the plane. Emergency landing? It was almost as if they were giving an early death notice. Now all the passengers were awake and everyone was whispering and screaming, because the plane was giving continuous jolts now, each one bigger and sharper than the previous one. Saloni squeezed her eyes shut and pressed against the seat, breathing deeply. Never in all her life had she gone through such a thing, and it was frightful all right.

'Please stop ... Please stop ... Please...' she begged uselessly in her mind. She was getting very dizzy because of the repeated jolts, and she was paralyzed with fear. She tried to focus on staying calm, but instead of that a sudden fog clouded her mind. It was like she was seeing through a hazy mist. After uselessly trying to rub her eyes to clear the sensation, but then she realized that her eyes had been closed the whole time. It was like her brain could see what was going on, except that it was only visible through a sheet of fog. As soon as she opened her eyes, feeling terrified, everything stopped. It was like someone had pressed a freeze button, and all the jerks, the voices, the screams, *and* the plane; everything stopped!

Saloni dared to peek through one eye and saw a surprising scene. Everyone was staring at each other in bewilderment, and the plane was moving quite smoothly again.

'What on earth just happened?' she questioned shakily. 'Are we safe?'

Her mother shrugged, though she was looking pale and clammy, and Sharvari was calming down by now.

'Dear passengers. We have – somehow – solved the problem. We are ... hopefully safe now. Kindly buckle up your seatbelts. Er, we will be landing in 6 hours.'

Saloni frowned as she heard this announcement. That didn't sound very sure, did it? And why did the person sound so disturbed? But the good news amongst this confusion was that they were safe; the problem was solved! She was so relieved that she flopped down on her seat, and in a minute, she was fast asleep. She didn't really know

why she felt so tired. The plane felt silent again after ten more minutes, as people went back to their activities.

Saloni was surprisingly one of the first ones to up in the morning at 5:15 am. She groaned as the bright light hit her face from the small plane window. Shielding her eyes, she sat up and took in the scene in front of her. Many people were starting to stir, and her mother who was wide awake already greeted her cheerfully. Saloni suddenly realised that she had spent her entire 11th birthday in a plane and burst into giggles. People started to stare at her funnily, and that's when her laughs finally subsided. Her mother threw a questioning look at her and she just shrugged back, indicating that it was nothing. After a hurried breakfast of pancakes and cereal, everybody was getting ready to land.

'Dear passengers. We are about to land. Kindly buckle your belt and do not move from your seats.'

Saloni quickly clipped on her belt and gazed around. Sharvari was still asleep because Saloni's parents had informed that she was too young to wake up at 5:30 am, and that they would just carry her around. Well, younger siblings do get favoured more, don't they? The plane landed safely, without any more calamities (which Saloni deeply appreciated), they walked out of the plane and were going to go to the airport to collect their luggage. That's when Saloni spotted an air hostess talking animatedly with a very flustered-looking pilot. Confused, she walked closer, straining to listen to what was bothering the pilot so much. She crept closer and closer to the plane until she was well hidden behind one of the wheels.

'... And I was trying to fix the engine while flying the plane, and it suddenly repaired itself!' The pilot exclaimed, looking ready to pass out.

'Wha – That busted wire in the engine repaired itself? That's impossible.' The air hostess snapped back.

'No, I'm telling the truth! The plane started jerking because the wire was busted. I tried to fix it myself but then couldn't fly the plane properly which caused more jerks! I

started focusing on guiding the plane and after a minute when I looked at the wire ... and it was fixed!’

‘Oh, for goodness’s sake ... and what about the co-pilot?’ The air hostess asked, still looking at him incredulously.

The pilot paled even more at the question. ‘Nothing! She says she didn’t even touch the wire. Too busy controlling the plane and calming down the passengers.’

Saloni decided she had heard enough and raced off towards her parents who had been calling out to her worriedly.

‘Oh, Saloni! Where did you run off without telling us? We were worried sick! Don’t you ever do that again, young lady!’ her mother scolded, dragging her by the arm inside the airport. But Saloni was too caught up in the conversation she had just heard. The wire had fixed itself. A busted wire in the plane causing all the jerks had fixed itself on its own? That seemed unbelievable. Almost like ... magic.

After a long while, she shrugged these thoughts away with much difficulty; it was really no point questioning things that she would never find an answer to. But she knew that this would nag her somewhere in her young mind until she found an answer. She was very thoughtful and curious about things, which wasn’t *always* a good thing. After the three bought a ham-and-cheese sandwich for breakfast, from one of the shops in the airport for Sharvari, they collected their luggage and got into a taxi that would take them to their hotel. While they were half-way towards their destination, Sharvari woke up and was now gaping at the sights in front of them in awe, while munching on her sandwich. The huge towers, fancy bridges, double-decker buses, and clean streets, not to mention the flower beds that were decked everywhere. Everything was absolutely fabulous and the Sharvari looked completely awestruck. Saloni loved it too, but something about it was off.

‘So, Salo,’ Her father smiled, ruffling up her hair affectionately. ‘Do you like it?’

Saloni nodded eagerly. She did like London's beauty a lot. Her father chuckled.

'Do you like our India more or London more?' he asked teasingly.

She thought about this for a second and then replied. 'Both.' Apparently, her father wasn't satisfied with her answer, because he frowned. 'How can you like both? That's ridiculous! Well, what do you *not* like about Mumbai?'

'It's loud and noisy and full of huge crowds with people rushing to board trains getting all sweaty and parents busy for almost all day. Not to mention the swarming streets and polluted beaches.' she replied casually. Her father looked stunned at this type of description of Mumbai.

'Oh, alright ...' He began uncertainly. 'Well then, what do you not like about *London*?'

Saloni grimaced. 'It's not Mumbai,'

Her parents laughed away at this, much to her and Sharvari's confusion. They reached their hotel shortly after and after collecting their luggage from the taxi, they set of inside.

They had to admit, they were very impressed by the hotel. It had a huge lawn filled with colourful-flowered bushes and cute little swings. The hotel inside was beautiful too! It had a royal look, with a big red carpet in the lobby and the chandeliers made with glass bottles adding a sophisticated yet creative look. The staff looked friendly, and the rooms were also rather big. They had rented two rooms, one for her parents and one for the girls because they simply didn't fit in one room together. The rooms were also great, with a queen-sized bed in each, a charming wooden wardrobe, a television set, and a small toilet with a big bathtub and little stone statues surrounding the sink. The parents checked in and immediately rushed to keep their luggage in their trunks. They just wanted to relax in the hotel room as all parents do, but the girls had other plans.

'Mummy! Are you coming with us to the pool?'

Sharvari asked.

‘No,’ Her mother replied.

‘But why?’ Sharvari moaned.

‘I’m tired, honey. Go by yourself.’

Sharvari huffed and turned to their father. ‘Dad? What about you?’

‘No.’ her father replied, looking at the room-service pamphlets of the hotel.

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t know how to swim.’ He explained ; though nobody could miss the mischievous glint in his eye.

‘At least dad has a valid reason. Unlike mom.’ Saloni giggled, looking at her mom who was reading on the bed. Her mother threw her a quelling look and the girls sighed in defeat. They changed their clothes and got into their swimsuits, pulling a long t-shirt on. Grabbing their towels, they raced towards the big, luxurious pool which was a bit further away from their room. That was another advantage of getting a room on the ground floor.

Saloni shivered as she dunked her feet into the freezing water. It did feel really cold at first, but she got used to it after a while. Sharvari didn’t know how to swim yet and just bobbed around in a unicorn floatie in the baby pool. Once they both used to the water, Saloni started swimming laps around the big pool and occasionally coming up for breath. She was a decent swimmer and had been told that she had plenty of stamina compared to other girls her age. As she was floating around in the pool with her sister, a few rowdy-looking boys, and girls arrived at the pool, talking loudly. Saloni tensed and gestured for Sharvari to stay near her. They didn’t go near the girls and boys since they looked much older than them – almost in high school. Saloni tried to ignore them and casually began swimming again, but she saw some of them gestured to Sharvari and her and then burst out into maniacal laughter. This continu-

ed for a very long while, but when she saw a blonde girl make rude hand gestures at them, she snapped.

‘Care to share the joke?’ she called out to them angrily when they began pointing at them again. ‘Go on, I like a good joke as much as you!’

The group stared at her for a moment and then looked at one another in clear amusement.

‘Well, there’s no need to *share* the joke when there are two great ones in the pool.’ a girl with a long black pigtail sneered, eyeing her swimsuit in disgust. Saloni frowned and looked at her baby-pink swimsuit with tiger prints on it. Her swimsuit was a bit faded since it was a few months old but otherwise perfectly fine. Saloni glared back at them and then turned to Sharvari.

‘Come on, Let’s go.’ she ordered, and Sharvari who had been watching the scene fearfully, quickly obliged. The two gather their towels trying to ignore the jeering voices of the older kids.

‘What? Running away from a fight now? Well, can’t say we expected anything else from a nine-year-old.’

They tried walking past the group, but one of the boys purposely stuck out his foot and Saloni tripped and fell flat on her face. She groaned in pain as the group howled with laughter, and Sharvari quickly ran to her aid. She thanked Sharvari and leaped to her feet, her face scarlet in anger and humiliation. She growled at the boy and gingerly touched her nose, feeling quite certain that it was broken. The older kids smirking at them were the last thing she saw before her vision went white as if all thought had suddenly been erased from her mind. She quickly shook her head trying to clear the woozy feeling and she suddenly heard a series of shrieks. She snapped open her eyes and saw that all the kids were gone!

Wait, they weren’t gone; they were at the bottom of the pool struggling to breathe and come back to the surface. Not knowing how they got there, her first thought was to laugh at them – but pushing these thoughts aside with much difficulty, her next thought was that they could

die through suffocation. She quickly grabbed some big floaties and plunged them into the water, and the kids gasping and retching clambered onto them. Once they were safely on the marble floor outside the pool, they stared at Saloni in horror.

‘You! You – what did you do to us?’ a blonde boy spat, still coughing out water from his mouth.

Saloni blinked and then fixed them with an unbelievable look. ‘I didn’t do anything but save your ungrateful lives.

‘You did not!’ a redhead girl rasped. ‘You pushed us into the pool! I don’t know how our when, but ... and ... and it f-felt like someone was holding o-our legs from beneath preventing us from coming back to the s-surface. You almost killed us, you ... you maniac!’

By now Saloni was gawking at them in utter disbelief. Sharvari was staring at them nervously, looking ready to break the fragile silence with a scream. Saloni cut her to it.

‘No, apparently you all are clumsy oafs and fell into the pool, didn’t know how to swim, and started drowning and *I* saved you.’ She snapped, storming off and leaving the kids behind her looking unhinged and still dripping wet. The girls both walked into their room and began drying themselves in awkward silence.

‘You know,’ Sharvari finally cut in quietly. ‘The kids there didn’t really fall in the pool. It *did* look as if someone pushed them ... and then was holding them from coming up. I saw.’

Saloni froze in the act of drying her hair. ‘And you blame me, do you?’

Sharvari hastily shook her. ‘No! Of course not! I just ... that was a bit weird, wasn’t it?’

Saloni nodded slowly. It was very weird – this entire trip had been the definition of weird. It was like nothing she had ever experienced and she was beginning to fear

her sanity. Why were such things only happening to her – it was rather alarming.

She was again forced to ignore the circumstances when a distraction came in the form of food. Their parents had got big bowls of warm Lasagne and roasted vegetables for lunch and everyone licked the delicious pasta clean from the bowls.

After such a heavy lunch filled with cheese, the family was feeling sleepy and Sharvari immediately went to take a nap, their parents too went to their room with a ‘See you later’, to Saloni. She didn’t really have anything to do, so she too went to lie down beside Sharvari. She was usually the laziest girl in the colony, but today she didn’t feel the least bit sleepy even after eating a lot of cheese! As she lay down beside her sister, Sharvari turned around to stare at her, a dreamy expression on her face. ‘Hey Salo.’ she sighed. ‘Do you think magic is real?’

Saloni snorted. Leave it to her sister to think of such ridiculous things at such an odd time.

‘No,’ Saloni whispered back in amusement. ‘What gave you that idea?’

‘The earlier incident. it was almost as if those kids were *magically* pushed into the pool!’ she mumbled, her eyes glimmering in the slightly dark room. Saloni shook her head and mumbled a ‘sleep tight’ before rolled over on her other side. She heard Sharvari huff in irritation and then everything was quiet again.



2. THE LIFE-CHANGING LETTER

The Life Changing Letter

Over the next week, the girls had a lot of fun visiting malls, theatres, and bridges all over London. Though some very strange things did occur like when watching a horror play, the actor playing the ghost suddenly fell off the stage when Saloni shrieked in fright during one of the scenes.

She had felt that misty feeling in her head but firmly told herself that it was just a phrase and would go away soon. She knew she would be lying if she said it did not bother her – she was terrified every time it happened. Having no idea what was going on with her, she thought it was best not to tell her parents just now. She would wait for another week.

Trying her best to ignore the bizarre feeling, as usual, she continued the trip along with her family. Surprisingly, the mind-fogging feeling did not occur again. She was so busy having fun after that, that she did not even notice if it did. That's the thing with children; they really do know how to forget the worst problems and enjoy the best pleasures in life.

A week flew by like a day, and soon the girls were sorrowfully packing up their bags, ready to go back home to Mumbai.

'Oh, I really don't want to go back! Can we stay for one more day?' Sharvari pleaded, her eyes shining with

hed tears. Her mother denied the request gently and then tried to console Sharvari saying that it was going to be a short vacation anyways and that they had to attend school. Saloni was packing her bags listening to their conversation silently and wishing they could stay one more day, too. But she knew that they had to go to school, which made her feel even more miserable. She was so busy being lost in thought that she didn't even notice a brown barn owl swooping down on their hotel room's window ledge. It was probably a good thing because the poor thing absolutely did not deserve another shock right before going back home – an owl in broad daylight was probably the worst she would have gotten during this trip. Unfortunately, things mostly seem to work the exact opposite way we want them to in many situations; you may have guessed that this was one of those situations.

Before any of them could spot the owl, their room's door knocked. Since everyone was busy packing their belongings and Sharvari was crying softly in the corner, her father asked her to get the door. She obliged and went to open the wooden door, admiring its sleek carvings just one more time. A receptionist was standing there when she finally opened it and was holding a letter in her hand, looking very confused.

'Er – Hi. Which one of you is Ms. Saloni Mate?' she asked. Saloni frowned and raised her hand quickly. Her parents had also arrived at the door, holding her sniffling sister in their arms.

'Good morning. This letter arrived for you last night, Ms. Mate.' The lady nodded politely before handing Saloni the letter and walking away.

'Who send a letter to you?' her father asked. 'Is it one of your friends?'

Saloni shook her head as she opened the letter. She didn't really have any solid friends in her school, but her parents didn't know that. She slowly opened the letter and began reading it aloud:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT

AND WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

[Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorcerer, Chief Warlock]

Dear Ms. Bhagwat,

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

Term begins on September 1 and we await your owl no later than July 31st.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

gazed at the letter in her hand and for a minute and then burst out laughing.

‘Oh, you guys! Sharvari, really? You couldn’t think of a better prank than a *magic school*? And mom and dad, you got included too!’ she giggled, looking up at their lost expressions. ‘Well? No need to look so surprised. I caught you in your little prank. Now, let’s finish packing.’

She hummed and went back to stuffing her clothes in her bag, all the while thinking about how cool it would have been if that school was actually real. Her family was still at the door, looking bewildered.

‘Actually, Ms. Mate. It was not a prank.’ An unknown voice abruptly spoke up.

Saloni turned around to see the owner of the calm, stony voice. She saw a middle-aged man with brown hair and green eyes, standing in their room wearing a gown-like robe.

‘Excuse me, sir! You cannot come in our room without permission!’ Saloni’s father snapped at him, stuffing a pair of his underwear back in the suitcase, flushing red.

‘Yes, I apologize. I’m John Mclaggen. I really need to talk to you. May I take a seat?’ he asked pointing to the cluttered bed. Saloni’s mother nodded cautiously, and Sharvari whose sobs had subsided was now looking at the scene with curious eyes. The man sat down, gesturing for the others to do the same. They all flopped down on the surrounding chairs and tables, looking at the man.

‘So, this will be a bit of a shock.’ he began. ‘But that letter you just received – it wasn’t a prank. It was 100 per cent true.’

Saloni scowled at him. ‘How do you know that? Did you send it?’

The man shook his head. ‘I did not, Ms. Mate. But I know who did. Minerva McGonagall, deputy headmistress of Hogwarts.’ He smiled at her mysteriously. Saloni was looking at him completely at a loss for reactions and words. She was staring at him in a daze.

Hogwarts ... magic ... McGonagall ... letter ...?

She snapped out of her reverie and then a thought struck her. ‘What’s Hogwarts?’ she demanded. ‘How can you even prove that this freak school is real and that this isn’t a big joke!’

The man smiled calmly and took out a long, brown stick with lots of carvings etched upon it, not unlike the door of their room. He gave it a light flick, and all their scattered clothes neatly folded themselves and flew into their suitcases, the entire room cleaned itself, the empty plastic bottles vanished, the broken plate [by Sharvari] mended, and the bed made itself. The room was perfect; just like how they first saw it.

The family was gazing at the room around them in pure shock and a perhaps tiny bit of fear. Saloni looked

from the room to the man and asked the first question that came to her mind.

‘Was that magic?’ she asked in a hushed voice.

The man almost looked like he was about to roll his eyes, but held himself in time. ‘Yes.’ Saloni was still too shocked so he took the time to continue speaking. ‘And that letter you have. That’s about a *magical* school, not a freak school. Ms. Mate, you are not a Mugg – a normal girl.’

‘I’m not?’ she questioned, still in a daze.

‘No. You are a very special girl. No offense.’ he added, smiling kindly at Sharvari. ‘You are a witch. You belong in the magical world along with all the other witches and wizards.’

‘A ... a witch?’ Saloni asked, not really registering anything at the moment. The man nodded and gave her that mysterious smile again which made her even more befuddled. Saloni took a deep breath to calm her popping nerves. She must be dreaming. She just had to! There was absolutely no way this was for real.

A month ago, she was shuffling through her school corridors reading her science textbook while munching on an apple, and now a man wearing a gown had hopped inside their hotel room and was telling her that she was a witch! Oh, but nothing to worry really. She had had weirder dreams than this. Although she did hope that their entire trip wasn’t a dream too; she really had a grand time in London. But maybe if it was, she would wake up on her birthday morning again and be able to spend it in some other fun way. She snapped out of her thought when the man in her dream waved a hand in front of her eyes. ‘Ms. Mate? Are you there with us? I’ve been calling your name for the past 2 minutes.’

She blinked and quickly apologized. The man nodded at her politely. ‘So? Now, what do you want to know about Hogwarts?’

Huh? Oh, right! The school in her dream. Saloni sighed tiredly, rubbing a hand over her face. She had to

wake up now. This had gone too far. Much to everyone's surprise, she suddenly grasped her arm and pinched it ... *hard*.

Apparently, that didn't work, because all she did was yelp loudly and jump in her seat. Blinking hurriedly for an unnaturally long time, she slowly turned to look at the man again. So, wonders of wonders – she wasn't dreaming.

'Ms. Mate. I know this is hard to believe, but you're not dreaming. Trust me ... this is real.' The man assured.

After about another half an hour of trying to make her believe the truth, showing her several other magic spells to prove his point and splashing cold water on her face to assure she wasn't dreaming, Saloni reluctantly agreed that maybe magic was real.

The man looked relieved since he too was half-soaked while dousing her in water. 'Ok. Now that you've calmed down ... what do you want to know about Hogwarts?'

Saloni pondered on this for a moment. 'Let's say this Hogwarts place *is* real, what exactly will I learn there? How to wear pointy hats and grow moles?'

The man chuckled loudly. 'No. you will learn something much more important. You will learn how to control your magic. How to use it in places you should and places you shouldn't. You will learn to protect yourself, to be one with your wand, and to fight using your magic. Because having magic isn't the only important thing – you have to figure out if you want to use it for the better or for the worse. Hogwarts will help you in all this.'

She let out her breath which she didn't realise she had been holding when the man finished his declaration. 'Alright, just to confirm ... you're *absolutely* sure I'm a witch? You haven't come to the wrong address or something?'

The man gritted his teeth and glared at Saloni causing her to smile back meekly. The man slowly got up and nodded at everyone again. His expression was serious, all trace of humour gone from his face. 'It's not the wrong address, don't worry. If you decide to go to Hogwarts, I will be

waiting for you right here next week on Monday to take you to Hogsmeade for your school shopping.'

He took out another letter and placed it on the dinner table. Looking at Saloni's still-hesitant expression, he smiled gently and leaned forward. 'One piece of advice – don't let your talent go to waste. Many people would die to be in your place. Good day to all of you.'

And with one last nod, the man disappeared with a loud '*crack!*' After a minute of silence, Sharvari clapped her hands together, her eyes shining in awe and happiness.

'See! I told you magic was real!' she whispered, and everyone laughed. Saloni's mother walked towards her and gave her a big, rather choking hug. After a few minutes of pin-drop silence, they all erupted into the conversation about the mind-boggling event that had just taken place. After a while, when they all truly started believing the possibility of Saloni being a witch ... well, that's when the hard part began.



3. ALLEYS, TRAINS AND IDIOTS

Alleys, trains and idiots

Over the following days, Saloni's mother kept assuring her that she didn't need to go to Hogwarts if she didn't want to. The newly-declared witch was just terribly confused. After a few days of thinking about it, she very hesitantly came to the conclusion that she couldn't go. Not that she did not want to – she just couldn't! It was all just too much to leave behind. Her school, her education, her family, her career; she couldn't live in some school far away even if it was a *magic* school, right?

When she finally voiced out her thoughts to her family after almost a week of fighting over her choices, they looked pretty shocked at her decision. Her mom seemed pleased that Saloni wasn't going away to a magical boarding school away from them, but Sharvari and her dad were in two minds. Sharvari declared that she would miss Saloni a lot and would prefer if she didn't go, but she was thrilled at the aspect of having a witch in the family. Her father said that as much as he would miss her, this was a rare chance that hardly many people got and that if indeed she had magical talent in her, she should use it. She promised to think about it, and they grinned because they all knew that she never missed a chance to try something new. The family decided they would give Saloni time to think about it, and they said that they would stay there for 2 more days, much to Sharvari's delight. As their father went to the hotel's register to inform them about the last-minute stay,

while Saloni sat there thinking about Hogwarts. Her mother noticed her sitting there alone, and went over to talk to her along with Sharvari. She asked her if she was okay, seeming a bit worried.

Saloni quickly poured out all her thoughts to her mother. 'What about school? And what about you guys?'

Her mother laughed. 'Well, we'll be fine! We'll miss you, but you can write to us, and we'll write to you! As for school ... you are going to a school. A magical one!'

Saloni laughed at her mom's and sister's excited expressions and nodded in agreement. They were right ... this was too big to miss! Without wasting any more time in unnecessary overthinking, she immediately declared that she would go to Hogwarts, making her mom and sister beam.

'Congratulations! Wait – does that mean that I can go too?' Sharvari asked, tone changing from supportive to gleeful. Her mother assured her that maybe she could when she grew up, and she seemed even more thrilled now.

Saloni spent the next 2 days reading and re-reading the shopping letter. The man had left it on the table and the names of the books and the funny clothes highly fascinated her.

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

Three sets of plain work robes [Black].

One plain pointed hat [Black] for daywear.

One pair of protective gloves [dragon hide or similar].

One winter cloak [black, with silver fastenings].

**Please note that all pupil's clothes should carry name tags.*

COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

The standard book of spells [Grade 1], Miranda Goshawk

A history of magic, Bathilda Bagshot.

Magical Theory, Adalbert Waffling

A beginner's guide to Transfiguration, Emeric Ewitch

One thousand Magical herbs and fungi, Phyffida Spore

Magical drafts and potions, Arsenfus Jigger

Fantastic beasts and where to find them, Newt Scamander

The dark forces: A guide to self-protection, Quentin Tribble

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

1] Set of brass scales

2] Telescope

3] Set of Glass or Crystal phials

4] Cauldron [Pewter, Standard size 3]

5] Wand

**Students may also bring a cat OR an owl OR a toad.*

She read it again and again with equal glee as she had felt the first time. They were allowed to bring a pet to school ... even an owl! She hadn't even seen one yet, and she was suddenly allowed to use it as a pet. Maybe this new school wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

She yelped as a tiny hand suddenly swiped the letter away from her.

‘Sharvari! Give it back!’ she hissed as her sister tried to read the letter upside down. Obviously, she didn’t know how to read and turned to Saloni with a bewildered expression asking what was written in it.

Saloni smirked at the opportunity which had arrived on a silver platter. ‘It’s written that only 1 person in a family can have magic powers – and the others, such as their siblings have to go to regular school and do math.’

Sharvari gasped as soon as she heard this. She had been going on about how she would go to Hogwarts when she grew up too for 2 days. Tears of misery sprang up in her eyes, and she almost started wailing when Saloni snapped at her about not being able to handle a joke. She quickly snatched away the letter back from Sharvari, who huffed and stormed away. Saloni sighed and shook her head, as she resumed waiting for the man who was going to take her shopping. Although she was exceedingly doubtful that they would find such things in London’s mall or store. Her father had told her that he would come with her because he didn’t feel very comfortable leaving her with an almost unknown man, even if he was a wizard police of sorts.

‘Salo ... I’m ready!’ he called out as he came in her room wearing a smart grey suit. Saloni grinned at him, hardly able to wait. She had waited for this for 2 whole days. And to think that she was doubtful she ever wanted to go.

After about ten minutes of impatient waiting, the man appeared with a loud ‘*crack*’, which made both of them jump just as it had the first time. He looked around and the room and beamed at Saloni when he saw her.

‘So, you did decide to go! Good for you,’ he nodded. ‘And I suppose you will be coming to shop with her?’ he asked, turning to Saloni’s father. He looked rather startled to be addressed so directly but nodded politely. The man walked outside the room, beckoning them to follow him. With a quick ‘bye’ to her mom and her sulking sister, she hurried off behind him, her father close behind. They continued walking out of the hotel, and when they reached the main street, her father voiced the question she had been

thinking about for a while. 'Er, where exactly will we be shopping for her school supplies?'

'Oh, Diagon Alley. It is good that you were already in London, or we would have had to apparate to the place – I do not suppose that would be a very good first impression to the wizarding world.' he chuckled, apparently expecting them to understand what 'apparate' meant. Saloni and her father exchanged confused looks with each other but followed the man silently. As they were walking, Saloni couldn't help but wonder one thing.

'What exactly do you do?' she blurted out, causing her father and the man to look at her. 'I mean ... what are you? Are you like a magical- police or something?'

The man chuckled at her. 'Well, I'm an Auror. That's what we call police or detectives in the wizarding world.' He explained. 'Why do you ask?'

'Well ...' Saloni's father spoke up this time. 'I was wondering what she would do after she left this Hogwarts school. Will she do regular business or become an engineer like us ... er, normal people?'

'Merlin, no!' the man frowned, looking horrified at the idea. 'We have lots of careers in the wizarding world! She could work in the Ministry of magic – plenty of posts there. Or she could become a healer ... a doctor, I think, in your words. Or she could teach here at Hogwarts later ... or she could become an Auror like me.'

Saloni immediately became interested in the conversation. She had always wanted to go in the NDA academy and get a career in the military. If she became an Auror, it would be almost the same thing – Except *way* cooler! But apparently, her father was thinking along much different lines.

'There's a Ministry of magic?' he asked incredulously. 'Is that like your government?'

The man nodded distractedly. 'Yes, you could say that. Ah! Here we are!' he suddenly stopped walking, causing Saloni to bump into him.

‘Sorry,’ She mumbled and then glanced, taking in her surroundings. ‘But where are we going to shop here?’

They were just there in New London on a street full of shops. There were cafés, hotels, book-shops of various sorts, but certainly none of them were magical! The man ushered them forward through the cars and the people rushing around, to a tiny little shop. The shop was very different to see in the middle of all the other lavish shops and stores. After looking over at the people inside it through a little window, Saloni was surprised how she didn’t see it before. The crowd it had was full of witches and wizards – she couldn’t spot a single normal person there. The shop had a little board on it with the name, ‘*Leaky Cauldron*’ written on it in a rather putrid shade of green.

The man walked inside the shop along with her and her father, who was looking like he would burst a vein in shock. ‘Morning! What would you like?’ the bartender of the shop bellowed, after spotting them standing at the door.

‘Oh, nothing really, Tom.’ The Auror nodded politely. ‘Hogwarts business.’

The bartender must have realised what he said because he turned to stare at Saloni, who grimaced at his oily hair and bushy beard. All the people in the shop were looking very funny, wearing long cloaks and pointy hats.

‘*But then,*’ She thought in amusement. ‘*I’m about to look like that too in about a month.*’

The bartender must have mistaken her grimace for a nervous smile because he too beamed back.

‘Hullo ... you a muggle-born?’ he asked. Saloni understood that reference and nodded stiffly, expecting insults for having muggles [non-magic people, as the Auror had explained earlier that day] as parents. But the man showed no intention of offence. ‘Well, you’re gonna love Hogwarts! I used to be there myself ... you can have a successful career like me after school. I had through go through a lot of struggles to get this job – including losing my pet cat in the process.’ The man smiled toothily.

Saloni looked disgusted at the aspect of being a bartender after graduating from Hogwarts, but again the bartender mistook her disgust as sympathy.

‘Yes,’ he nodded. ‘It was rather sad. Well, see you along then!’ and he went back to taking orders like she was suddenly invisible.

She shrugged and turned around to see her father and the man standing there patiently. She grinned and walked over towards them, and then again followed the man as he walked towards the back of the shop.

He went out through the back of the shop, and there she saw an empty yard with a brick wall in the end. The man quietly walked towards the wall, followed by an immensely confused Saloni and her dad. He pulled out his wand and tapped a few bricks on it in some synchronised order. He took a step back and they watched as the entire wall split in two and opened like an elevator door! Saloni gasped at the scene in front of her. Behind the wall was a whole street full of shops. Not just any shops ... Magical shops! Many children, small and big, were walking around the long street, visiting different shops. The street was very crowded, and people were carrying live owls, and cats with their hands full of book bags. Saloni walked on, awestruck, and zoning out the chattering of the people she turned to the man and her father. The man grinned, looking something like proud.

‘Welcome to Diagon Alley!’ he announced. Her father was as stunned as her and he mouthed a small ‘wow’, before walking forward beside her.

‘This is amazing!’ she breathed, her eyes taking in the scene in front of her once again. ‘Are we shopping here?’

The man nodded as he gazed at one of the owls absently. ‘Oh, yes – I forgot. I need to send a letter to Professor Dumbledore telling him that you’re coming to Hogwarts.’

As soon as he said this, he immediately pulled out a feathered quill and a parchment from thin air and scribbled

a note on it. He tied it carefully to one of the owl's legs and whispered 'Off you go. To Professor Dumbledore.'

The owl gave a delicate hoot and flew off gracefully. The man turned to Saloni, who was now watching the owl fly away, wondrously. 'Let's get started!'

'But sir,' Her father began. 'We *can* use our own currency here, can't we?'

The man suddenly took out a pouch full of gold, silver, and bronze coins at her father's words.

'No, but not to worry. I already exchanged some of the currency notes from your bank account for our currency. So, we don't need to go to Gringotts - it's the wizarding bank.' He added, meeting Saloni's curious gaze at the unfamiliar word. She gave a soft '*Oh!*' and nodded. The man took out a letter similar to Saloni's shopping list's letter.

'Hmm - we'll need your school robes first!' he decided. 'We'll go to Madam Malkin's, I don't really fancy Twillfits and Tattlings. Very grumpy lady.' He mumbled, mostly to himself.

Saloni nodded and then quickly pointed to a little robe shop with a board 'Madam Malkin's' written on it, as they walked a bit further down the lane. The Auror smiled and advised that she should go in alone since it was a quite small shop. She agreed and walked inside, bumping into a chubby lady as she bustled past her hurriedly.

'Hello dear! Hogwarts first-year, right?' she asked. Saloni nodded as she gazed around the clammy shop filled with wizarding robes. 'Well, step right on.' she instructed, conjuring a stool.

Saloni stepped up on it and as if on cue, some measuring tapes and cloths flew towards her on their own and begin taking her measurements, while the lady wrote them down quickly. Saloni just stood there feeling quite silly, until she noticed a black-haired boy standing next to her on a stool being measured too. She almost jumped at the sight of him. How did she not notice him before?

She was about to say something when another blonde boy with a pale face and silver-blond hair walked in. He too climbed up on a school beside the black-haired boy.

‘Hello,’ He greeted in a bored, drawling voice. ‘Hogwarts too?’ Saloni nodded and the black-haired boy said ‘Yes.’ The pale boy blinked and continued. ‘Do you know which house you’d be in?’

The black-haired boy shook his head, but Saloni was a bit confused. ‘House? As in red, blue, yellow, and green?’ she asked, referring to her school’s P.E house colours.

The blonde boy frowned. ‘Why do you refer to the houses depending on their colours?’

The black-haired boy turned to him. ‘You’re not supposed to?’

The pale boy shook his head in amusement. ‘Whatever gave you that idea?’

Saloni shrugged at him, guessing the boy’s parents were not muggles since he didn’t know this. ‘It’s how they do it in norm – er, muggle schools.’ She explained and the black-haired boy nodded along. The pale boy’s bored expression changed at once, and he now looked at them as if they were the most revolting creatures on the Earth’s surface.

‘Wait,’ he glared at them suspiciously. ‘Are you both Muggle-borns? You seem to be.’

The black-haired boy frowned. ‘We’re what?’

The pale boy groaned and muttered to himself, ‘Yeah, definitely Mudbloods.’

‘Wait, what does Mudblood mean?’ Saloni asked curiously. She had never heard of that reference before.

The pale boy gave her a nasty look. ‘Kids whose parents are filthy Muggles are called Mudbloods. Dirty blooded, it means.’

The black-haired boy looked affronted. ‘I’m not a

Muggleborn then! My parents were a witch and a wizard!

The pale boy looked a bit less horrified at that and then turned to Saloni. 'What about you? Are you just a very clueless pure-blood too?'

Saloni remained silent for a long moment and then quietly replied. 'No. My parents are muggles.'

The pale boy grimaced at her in disgust and was prevented from replying when Madam Malkin came bustling to them with three bags. 'Oh, you're done, dears! Here,' she said, stuffing the bags into their arms. 'That will be 15 galleons, please.'

Everyone handed her the money, Saloni's given to her by the Auror right before she entered the shop. She walked out of the shop, but not before throwing an uncomfortable glance at both the boys. As soon as she walked out, she saw her father walk towards her holding a pouch of coins. 'Hi there!' he greeted. 'Done with the clothes?'

Saloni nodded and then looked around for the Auror. 'Hey, where's that guy?' she asked.

'He had to run an errand at the Ministry of Magic urgently. Don't worry, he's told me where all the shops are. He's meeting us after we finish shopping right at this spot. Come on then!'

The two kept walking aimlessly for a while before her father asked. 'Er ... where are we supposed to go next?'

Saloni huffed in amusement and pulled out the letter from her skirt pocket. 'Hmm - next is the books!' she grinned. She loved books, especially informative books like science.

'Ah, yes! There's a bookshop!' her father exclaimed and the two walked into a big bookshop with shelves full of dusty or new books. A man wearing a suit walked up to them with a smile.

'Good morning - first year, right?' he asked distractedly and Saloni nodded.

‘Yes. Umm, we need ... The standard book of spells, grade 1.’ She looked up at him to see he was already holding the book and continued. ‘And – A history of magic?’

The man walked up a ladder to retrieve the book from a high shelf. ‘Yes, yes. Fascinating book ... one of my favourites.’ He commented, throwing the book on the counter. Saloni recited the rest of the book list, and when the man was running around the store gathering all of them, she turned around to see her father examining an old book shelf. She walked up to him and asked what he was up to. Her father jumped violently at her voice but relaxed when he saw it was just her. Apparently, he was still not comfortable enough around wizards who they had just met, wore gowns and pointy hats, and kept doing odd magic tricks with their funny-looking wands. She sometimes wondered why ...

He explained that he was just looking at some of these books and that some of them were about her school. Interested, she began looking at the books. Most of them were about dark curses and jinxes, but one book caught her attention. ‘Hogwarts: A history.’ Hogwarts had a book about its history? It must be a really old and ancient school, like in some of the movies. This excited her even more and she pleaded with her father if she could get the book. He wasn’t keen on exposing her to unknown magic but finally agreed when the shopkeeper approved of it. She almost hopped out of the shop with her books in her hand, all the unpleasant thoughts of the pale and dark-haired boy gone.

They then went to a shop full of odd-looking gadgets to buy the rest of their things. She bought her telescope, glass scales, crystal phials, and pewter cauldron without getting tempted by the gold cauldrons and other awesome things in the shop. She was also rather attracted to things like a key that could open any lock, or like a truth-telling potion called ‘Veritaserum’. Her father had to practically drag her out of the store when she began fawning over a mirror that could change your appearance into someone else’s. Saloni grunted and whined as she stalked out of the store with her father, their hands full of bags by now. Though she cheered up hugely, when her father announced that they had to get her wand next. After taking a

few more wrong turns into creepy alleyways, they finally saw the dark, dusty wand store filled with dozens of boxes. It was called 'Ollivanders' according to the board outside it. As soon as she walked inside the shop, she felt a cold chill run up her spine. Her father too crept up behind her slowly, and called out, 'Hello?'

'Ah, hello!' They jumped about a foot in the air as a soft voice greeted them. They spun around to see that a man was hidden behind a stack of boxes kept on a table. He had cool, grey eyes which seemed to shine in the dark room as he gazed at Saloni. She squirmed nervously under his piercing stare and her father just stood behind her awkwardly.

'*Does that man ever blink?*' she thought, swallowing sharply. As if reading her mind, the man quickly blinked at her and smiled. 'Hogwarts, first-year?' he asked. Saloni nodded impatiently. She was a bit irritated with people asking her that same question. Didn't she look her age at all?

The man shuffled around and retrieved a black, dusty box from the very end of the store.

'Very well – let's see, now.' He opened the box and pulled out a dark brown wand with squiggly patterns etched upon it at the bottom. '10 inches, rather stiff and made with holly-wood, good for doing charms, with one phoenix feather. Try it on.' He urged, handing it to Saloni.

She hesitantly took it and felt an unpleasant cold seep in her palm, making her shudder slightly. Ollivander frowned and snatched the wand away. He took out another dusty box from the right shelf, this one a bit longer. 'Hmm ... how about Elm wood, a bit bendy, with just one dragon heartstring and 11 ½ inches long. It is preferred for doing dark curses.' He commented, handing it to her. She held it again, feeling indifferent, and waved it around a bit. Nothing happened at first, but then Ollivander slowly started growing donkey ears. He noticed it and hastily vanished it with his own wand, and then stared at Saloni curiously. 'Hmm – Not at all what you look like, are you?'

Saloni frowned at him. What did he mean she wasn't how she looked? But Ollivander had already pulled out

ther brown box and taken out a jet-black, very delicate-looking wand with a circular ring somewhere a bit further up the bottom. '9 ½ inches, Beech wood with unicorn hair for the core. It's unyielding and is great at doing defensive spells like a Patronus. Try it ...'

Saloni quickly took it, wanting to get done, and then gasped softly. A pleasing, warm sensation spread through her, and she suddenly felt more powerful, more confident. Ollivanders clapped his hands in joy. 'Well, well – it matches you completely! The wand chooses the wizard after all.' he added wisely. 'That will be 7 galleons, please.'

After paying him, they walked out of the store where her father commented on how creepy the man was, causing her to giggle. They were exhausted by now and just wanted to go home. As they were walking towards Madam Malkins again, hoping to meet the Auror there, her father gasped. She turned to him with a questioning stare.

'We also have to get you a pet!' he groaned. Saloni smirked at this since she knew his dislike for animals. She didn't really fancy dogs or cats herself, but this was different. They had owls and toads, and she found herself wondering if they had any tigers or bears. They walked to the pet shop and as soon as she got in, she wanted to run out. The whole store stunk badly, and was compact and congested. It was also very dusty and filled with cages that held goodness knew what animals. A short lady trotted to the counter they were standing in and greeted them dully.

Saloni grinned back nervously and quickly turned around, not wanting to meet her eyes again. That's when she saw a boy her age standing a bit away from her, almost invisible in the dark room. He had short black hair, milky light-brown eyes, and fair skin. As soon as he met her eye, he turned to her with a grin.

'Hi, there! I'm Sameer Bhagwat. Who are you?' he asked in a bossy sort of tone. Saloni raised her eyebrows.

'Saloni Mate.' She replied, copying his tone. He looked taken aback and then started laughing. Saloni stared at him oddly for a minute and then turned back to the lady. 'Umm – hi. I wanted to buy a pet ...' The boy suddenly scoffed at

her. 'Wow! How unexpected ... and here I was thinking you were looking for groceries in a pet store.'

Saloni glared at him and then turned back to the lady, stiffly ignoring him. 'So – what do you suggest? Mind you, I don't like furry animals, so no cats ... or toads.'

The lady sighed impatiently. 'So, do you prefer birds?'

Saloni nodded slowly. She didn't really have anything against birds. The boy sniggered at her saying she should just get a penguin, and that way the bird's look would match its owner. Saloni angrily asked him what he was getting, and immediately he whistled shrilly. A tawny-brown eagle owl flew up and landed on his shoulder as if on cue. The boy smirked. 'I just got him – haven't named it yet.'

Saloni gazed at the owl in awe, and it stared back. After a moment, it flew from the boy's shoulder and landed on hers, biting her hair affectionately. She stiffened for a minute. She had never had an owl on her shoulder before, much less seen one! But after the owl hooted at her softly, she gave up and petted its feathery head, awestruck at how smooth it was. The boy was staring at her with a frown on his face.

'She likes you!' he exclaimed. Saloni was a bit offended by the surprised tone in his voice.

'Who doesn't?' she replied dryly. The boy gazed at her for a second and then asked her name. Saloni was surprised at the sudden almost-polite question after a series of jeers and taunts and haughtily told him that she just introduced herself a minute ago, though she really wasn't sure if she had. The boy insisted that he forgot, and she patiently told him again. The boy grinned at her, a mischievous glint in his eye.

'Saloni, huh? Well, I'm naming her –' He pointed to his owl. 'Salo! I'm naming her Salo!'

Saloni was now even more shocked but also much more curious as she asked him why he was naming his owl after her, and he just shrugged and said that since his owl was a female, and she was the first female he met, he

would name her after Saloni. Saloni was opening and closing her mouth like a guppy at his illogical logic when the boy stalked out of the shop with the owl. Shaking her head at his retreating figure, she muttered something about 'Illogic boys' and 'Annoying gits' as she turned to the lady working in the store again. She thought for a long while and then decided that she too would get an owl. After staring at lots of different ones for almost twenty minutes, she chose a gorgeous grey owl, with piercing blue eyes and a rather adorable hooting voice.

She pondered on what she would name him, but then settled on 'Bookeri', judging her love for books. The owl seemed quite pleased by the name because he hooted happily and nibbled on Saloni's finger. She walked out of the shop looking pleased with herself, and the owl carried itself equally happy in its cage. Her father, who was standing outside waiting for her impatiently, looked a bit alarmed at the thought of having a real-life owl in the house but warmed up to him quite soon when the bird sat on his shoulder and affectionately nudged him by his beak. They then rushed off towards Madam Malkins and saw that the Auror was already waiting for them with a ticket in his hand.

'Ah! There you are! Apologies for running off like that – something came up. How was your day?' he asked cheerfully, though he seemed quite tired.

Saloni smiled broadly. 'It was amazing! But ... where were you?' she added curiously. The man waved his hand carelessly and mumbled something about attempted stealing at Gringotts.

'Gringotts? The wizarding bank? Someone tried to steal from it? Who? And why? What did they steal?' she asked all in one breath, but the man simply laughed. He assured that it was nothing for her to worry about and that they should set off, which made Saloni very cross. They walked on until they came to the brick wall of the Leaky Cauldron. As soon as they exited the alley, Saloni was extremely upset about leaving such a marvellous place.

They left the Leaky Cauldron after having steaming cups of coffee and doughnuts, and then the man handed

Saloni a ticket. 'Here you go. This is your train ticket. You have to go to King's Cross station, platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ quarters. Go through the barrier.' The man informed and stuffing the ticket in her hand, he disappeared with a 'crack'.

She huffed as she had wanted to ask him a few questions but he had disappeared before she even got the chance to open her mouth. Now she was just standing there in the middle of the street, her father standing behind her. Because they were getting odd looks from people for carrying so many bags and a live owl, they both quickly walked off towards their hotel since it was nearby and after a lot of thought, her father and mother decided that they would rent an apartment in London since they couldn't keep living in the hotel for a month because that's when Saloni's school started. So, they moved there after 2 days, and it turned out to be a good place. It was not humongous like a mansion, but it wasn't small either. The house had a lovely garden in front of it and 2 rooms, out of which the slightly smaller one was given to the girls.

But Sharvari was the most excited by the magical supplies Saloni had bought. That is why she often found her wand, or her quills and books missing – and then miraculously turning up in Sharvari's cupboard the next day. So, she started locking it away in her trunk during the day and took it out usually when Sharvari was asleep. Her books seemed to be amazing, and she found herself going through them every hour of the day. Thank goodness that Sharvari couldn't read – she hadn't even touched the books and seemed to have no interest in them. Very soon, Saloni had memorized almost all the contents by heart, but her favourite still remained the book of 'Hogwarts: A History'.

It had all the ancient secrets and myths of Hogwarts, and looking at the pictures, it seemed wonderful! She spent the time memorizing the minor spells for first years, but didn't find it comfortable practicing them, in fear of blowing up the house.



4. PLATFORMS AND PROBLEMS

Platforms and problems

The month passed by like a breeze, and very soon Saloni found herself packing last-minute clothes for school as the train was leaving in three hours. She huffed and grunted as she tried to squeeze another pair of night-dress and denim in the already overflowing suitcase. After a long hour, she somehow zipped up her suitcase and immediately flopped on the bed, exhausted. She closed her eyes hoping to doze off for a second when her mother called her for breakfast. Sighing at her bad luck, she got up again and hopped off the bed, pulling her hair into a bun and making her way downstairs along with her suitcase and Booker's cage.

After a light breakfast of cereal and bread and butter, she got dressed, taking care to try to be as neat and tidy as it was her very first-time meeting so many witches and wizards her age. Sharvari suddenly came running into the kitchen and enveloped Saloni in a bear-hug, slightly sniffling.

'I'll really, really miss you!' she mumbled, and Saloni patted her back consolingly and a bit awkwardly. After a few breakdowns from her sister and lots of hugs and kisses from her parents, they set off towards the station. They reached the station at about 10:40 am, where Saloni assured them that she would be fine in the new school, for the thousandth time. After promising that she would write

to them every week, they all got in the car and set off home, waving until the car drove out of site.

Saloni smiled fondly and then pulled out the ticket the Auror had given her.

‘Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ quarters – that’s a queer platform number.’ She muttered to herself and looked around. The place was packed with people, but nobody there gave any sign of being magical. She too had cleverly covered her owl cage with a cloth so people would think that it was simply a parrot cage or some other regular bird cage.

As she walked around the station for a while, she saw platforms 9 and 10 but she couldn’t spot platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ absolutely anywhere. Then she suddenly remembered the Auror’s words: ‘*Go through the barrier.*’

She gazed at the big barrier in between platforms 9 and 10 quarters, and slowly walked forwards. She was a hair-length away from the wall, and she slowly brought up a hand and prodded the wall with a finger. It was as hard as a ... wall! How was she supposed to go past it? Quickly checking the time, she saw it was 10:50 am. If she didn’t board the train in 10 minutes, she was going to miss her chance at going to Hogwarts!

Hurriedly trying to prod the wall again, she then walked behind the wall, examining it from all sides. She must have looked rather funny because people were throwing her amused and weirded looks. She sighed in irritation and pulled out her wand. She was about to use the unlocking spell which she had read in one of her textbooks when she heard an amused voice behind her. ‘You know, no spell is going to work on the barrier. You have to go through it.’

‘I know, but how? This stupid wall won’t let me through!’ she hissed, turning around to see a girl with long, black hair and light-brown eyes, staring at her calmly. The girl shook her head disbelievingly. She gathered up her trolley and without replying to Saloni, ran towards the wall at full speed. Saloni yelped in shock and made to stop her

crash, but it didn't come at all! The girl simply went through the barrier!

Saloni prodded the wall again and found it to be hard ... again. She thought for a second, and then copying the girl, she too walked further away from the barrier with her trolley and took a deep breath. She closed her eyes in fear and sprinted towards the barrier. She was going to crash – she was sure of it.

Saloni ran and ran, and kept on running, but the crash never came for her as well. She slowly opened her eyes, to see herself in a train station. But not the station she was in before, but a completely different station filled with witches and wizards, some wearing their school robes, and others carrying their pets. Many of them were hurriedly getting on the train and giving last-minute kisses to their parents. The station was very crowded and the older-looking Hogwarts students were directing the younger ones toward the train. Saloni squealed in delight, and then spun around to see the same dark-haired girl smiling at her.

‘So, I see you found the station.’ She laughed. ‘I’m Ashwini Naik. And who are you?’

Saloni extended her hand. ‘I’m Saloni Bhagwat. You’re from India too?’

The girl nodded. ‘A decent amount in Hogwarts are Indians ... kids all over the world are there after all!’

The girls walked towards the train with their bags and pets chatting merrily, and got on the train quickly. Suddenly, two identical-looking red-headed boys suddenly came racing towards them with an awestruck expressions. They almost bumped into the girls, before Ashwini stopped him with an extended arm.

‘Whoa! Whoa! What’s the rush?’

One of the boys tutted at them. ‘We just saw Harry Potter on the train! He’s in that compartment, right George?’ he asked, pointing towards a compartment.

His twin nodded. ‘Right you are, Fred!’

Both of them walked off again, talking silently between themselves. Ashwini was looking quite astonished too. Saloni quirked an eyebrow. 'Who on earth is Harry Potter?'

Ashwini turned to her with an even more astonished expression. 'You don't know who Harry Potter is?'

Saloni shook her head looking lost and wondering if he was some kind of celebrity.

Ashwini snorted, but she didn't look disgusted; she looked amused. 'You're a muggle-born, right?'

Saloni felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. Of course, she was going to be hated by everyone for having a muggle family! She slowly nodded, looking miserable. The girl must have noticed her change of mood as she shook her head hastily.

'Oh, no! I don't have a problem with Muggleborns! I am a pure-blood but I never neglected a Muggleborn!' she patted her shoulder gently.

Saloni sighed in relief and gave her a small smile, which she returned. The girls continued looking for a compartment dragging their bags behind them. Saloni noticed Ashwini staring at the compartment Harry Potter was in longingly, a couple of times.

She smirked and grabbed the raven-haired girl by her elbow, pulling her along. Ashwini turned to her with a perplexed look, but Saloni just dragged her down to that compartment, ignoring her loud protests. Saloni opened the compartment door to see a red-headed boy [what is with this place and red-heads?] and a messy black-haired boy with bright-green eyes sitting there. She instantly recognised the black-haired boy from Madam Malkins. Apparently, the boy recognised her too, because his eyes widened. Saloni looked over at her friend who had gone pink.

'Hi! Is this compartment taken?' Saloni coughed, stifling her giggles at Ashwini's alarmed face.

The redhead turned to the black-haired boy. 'Umm ...

Is it?’

The black-haired boy laughed and then shook his head. Saloni nodded thanks, and the girls plopped their bags above them and sat down. Saloni was next to the red-head boy and a flushed Ashwini was next to the black-haired boy.

Saloni, who was still confused looked at the redhead and then at the other boy. ‘Which one of you is Harry Potter?’

The two looked shocked, but Ashwini blushed a bright red and discreetly pointed to the black-haired boy. A quiet ‘*Oh!*’ of realisation filled Saloni’s face.

‘Yeah! You, of course! Who else?’ she chuckled in embarrassment. The boy looked surprised and then nodded. ‘Yeah, it’s me. This is my friend Ron Weasley.’ He introduced, and the red-head boy called Ron waved nervously at them.

Saloni smiled. ‘I’m Saloni Bhagwat and this is Ashwini Naik.’

Ron furrowed his eyebrows, looking thoughtful for a moment. Then realisation dawned on his freckly face.

‘Hey, aren’t you the one whose father supported you-know-who before?’ he asked savagely.

Ashwini flushed and this time with anger, all trace of the shy, bashful girl gone. ‘He was under the Imperius curse!’.

The red-headed boy, Ron Weasley, snorted. ‘Yeah, right. Everyone has that same story to tell.’

Saloni knew who Voldemort was, after reading all about him in most of the books, but she had never experienced his true power and couldn’t find a reason to fear him even after reading about all the murders he had caused. She was shocked that Ashwini’s father was his follower but defended her anyways.

‘How are you so sure it’s a story?’ she snapped at him.

Weasley huffed. 'My dad has told me all about it.'

'Oh, he certainly knows all about what you-know-who's followers do, doesn't he? Some would even think he was one of them.' Ashwini challenged, jutting her chin out.

Weasley eyes widened, and now he looked furious. 'How dare you suggest that my father was with you-know-who?'

'How dare you suggest *my* father was with *Voldemort*?' Ashwini put an emphasis on his name, causing the boy to wince. 'You have no right to judge him!'

Weasley was now on his feet, glaring at them and looking ready to hex them. They were up too, their wands already in their hands. Harry Potter had no idea what was going on but he too was pointing his own wand at them for absolutely no valid reason. After a few more minutes of shooting eye-daggers at each other, the girls threw one last glare at the two and pulled their luggage out. Without another look at them, they walked out of the compartment with an uncomfortable silence between them.

As they walked on, trying to find another compartment, they almost bumped into a bushy-haired girl who was already all dressed up in her new robes. She looked in a hurry.

'Hi ... have you seen a toad? Neville's lost one.' She said, shaking a timid-looking boy in the shoulders. Saloni and Ashwini shook their heads, causing the boy to wail in anguish. 'He escaped while I was getting on the train! My gran's going to be so mad at me if I lose him!'

The two then walked off towards the other compartments without another word. Saloni and Ashwini shared amused looks and carried on looking for another compartment. Almost everywhere was full now and they stumbled in front of a compartment with 3 boys in it, after a while.

One of them had sleek blonde hair, Saloni recognized as the one from Madam Malkins. Not having a good conversation with him the last time, she tried to drag away

Ashwini, but she had already opened their compartment door. 'Hello. Can we sit here? Everywhere else is full.'

The pale boy looked at her with a bored expression, and then caught sight of Saloni. He sneered. 'Well, well. If it isn't the Mudblood! Fancy seeing you here after our last chit-chat.'

Saloni scowled angrily at him, but Ashwini looked confused. 'Wait ... you know each other?'

The boy laughed scornfully. 'Oh, yeah! We're the best of friends, right?' he smirked, looking at Saloni, who was gritting her teeth in suppressed anger.

'The very best.' She snapped back. Ashwini looked unsure whether they were being serious or taunting each other. She looked at the two in complete bewilderment. The boy seemed to notice this.

'I'm joking! Why would I be friends with a Mudblood?' he sneered malevolently.

'Oh, as if I need a friend like you! Come on.' She whispered to Ashwini, and they both walked away. They finally found an empty compartment in the back which was void of annoying gits, and plopped down, sighing wearily. They gazed at each other for a moment, and then both said in unison: 'You've got some explaining to do!'

Ashwini nodded and patted her chest twice, indicating that she would go first and Saloni fell silent.

'Well, my father ... he *used* to work for you-know-who when he was 29. He had been under the Imperius curse and the Aurors had even confirmed that later! After you-know-who was gone, he was accused and they took him to the ministry for his hearing. There they did tests and found out he really was under the Imperius curse ... and he did all this behind my mom's back, so it was news to her. But he was cleared of all charges, but some people still don't believe that he was innocent.' She finished, looking a bit tearful. Saloni nodded sympathetically, processing what she just told.

‘Er ... what’s an Imperius curse?’

Ashwini laughed aloud, and her mood changed slightly. ‘It’s a controlling curse. It makes its victim do whatever the conjurer wants.’

Saloni gaped at her for a second. ‘But do all the ex-death eaters go through eviction?’

Ashwini shook her head. She explained that some well-known wizarding families had expertly kissed up to the minister and didn’t have to go through the fear of being arrested. Saloni understood the trouble a person must go through while being controlled. The idea itself seemed horrid! Ashwini quirked an eyebrow, beckoning Saloni to talk.

‘Er, yeah. So that blonde boy we met in the compartment ... we first met at Madam Malkins, and I told him I was a muggle-born. Let’s say he didn’t take it well. And that Harry Potter guy, I met him at Madam Malkins too. And he didn’t defend me when that blonde boy insulted me, and he didn’t stop his friend when he offended you, therefore I don’t like him too. Quite a coward really.’ She sighed, shaking her head.

Ashwini laughed at that and nodded in agreement. That bought Saloni to a new query.

‘But ... why was everyone fawning over Potter anyways? Who is he really?’

Ashwini’s mouth formed an ‘o’ as she sat up straighter.

‘You really don’t know his story? At all?’

Saloni tried to remember where she had heard the name before. ‘Well ... I’ve seen his name mentioned in some of the books, but I don’t really know anything about him. Only that he defeated Voldemort.’

Ashwini flinched at the name. ‘Call him you-know-who, will you?’

Saloni gawked at her for a moment but then burst into giggles. ‘But you said his name in front of Weasley back in their compartment!’

Ashwini blushed lightly as she avoided her gaze. 'Yeah, well – that was only to bug him.' Before Saloni could laugh any more, she quickly cut in. 'Look, do you want to know about him or not?'

She hastily nodded and sat back as Ashwini started explaining. 'Well, you-know-who ... you must have heard of him obviously ... he was a very dark wizard. He was the worst you could get – he killed Muggles for fun and tortured those who did not serve him. He made the wizarding world a living hell, basically. He killed whoever stood in his way, and he had his eye on the Potter family next ...'

'Lily and James Potter – they were Harry's parents. When Voldemort went to their house one night, James and Lily tried to protect Harry, who was only one year old at that time. You-know-who killed them ... they were wandless and defenseless, and he took advantage of that and killed them that night. Not that they could have done anything even if they had a wand, really. You-know-who tried to kill baby Harry Potter next, but he couldn't.'

Saloni blinked in surprise. 'What do you mean he couldn't? He could kill two grown-up wizards but couldn't kill a baby?'

'Yeah – that was what surprises everyone too. Once you-know-who decides to kill someone, they do not survive ... ever. But Potter did, and he survived with just a scar on his forehead. Instead, he vanquished the dark lord himself! The dark lord disappeared after that and isn't seen again even after eleven years.'

They both sat in silence for a good five minutes after this gloomy story about the Potters. Saloni asked the next question that popped into her mind after a while.

'Why did he want to kill the Potters?'

Ashwini shrugged, looking quite disturbed at repeating this story again. 'Dunno ... I don't think anyone does. They don't even know how the dark lord vanished or how Potter managed to survive his killing curse with just a scar.'

Swallowing nervously, Saloni could almost feel the thousand different mysteries surrounding the story of the

Potters. Her opinion of Harry Potter hadn't changed quite that much, but she felt truly sorry for the boy. She couldn't imagine growing up without her dear parents all her life. Her fear of Voldemort had also increased a bit since hearing all these awful things he had done – how could he do something like that without feeling the least bit guilty or remorseful?

Because the silence was becoming a bit too awkward, the girls started chatting about Hogwarts and their lives before they got the letter. Saloni found out that Ashwini's father worked in the Department of magical law enforcement, and her mum was a healer. She was very fascinated by the different jobs at the ministry and made a mental note to ask Ashwini about it *later* because, at that moment, a lady walked over to their compartment with a trolley full of sweets!

'Anything from the trolley dears?' she asked sweetly. The girls immediately leaped to their feet, gazing longingly at the food.

'What all do you have?' Saloni asked. The lady laughed and told her all the names of the sweets. In the end, Saloni was sitting there with 2 pumpkin pastries, a packet of chocolate frogs, and a packet of 'Bertie Botts Every Flavoured Beans.' Ashwini bought the same and the two began feasting on the sweets talking about whatever they knew about Hogwarts. Ashwini told her all about the houses of Hogwarts and Saloni was immensely interested in the process of sorting.

'So ... we wear a hat and it tells us where we ought to go? Huh ... sounds legit.' Saloni mused in between bites of the delicious sweets. Ashwini nodded. 'Yeah, something like that. Where do you reckon I'll go?'

Saloni thought about this for a moment, trying to remember the personality choice of the houses. 'Maybe ... Hufflepuff?'

Ashwini looked a bit downhearted at the suggestion and it didn't need the genius to figure out why. Hufflepuff was known for its kindness and loyalty ... not something

too cool or popular. Not wanting to upset her even before the sorting began, she quickly asked to change the subject.

‘Well, where do you suppose you’ll go?’ Ashwini asked offhandedly, munching on an off-white Bertie botts bean, and spitting it out immediately. ‘Ugh! This is rotten-egg flavour! Why do these stupid beans have to come in literally every flavour? I once had a vomit one, and trust me – it ruined the colour yellow for me.’

Saloni burst out laughing at this, earning a glare from Ashwini. ‘Sorry. Umm ... I think I’ll be in ... I don’t know, Ravenclaw, probably?’

Ashwini looked lost in thought and then nodded. ‘Yeah, you could. Know what, let’s make a bet. If I’m in Hufflepuff, I’ll give you 2 galleons and if not, you will. Same with your house. Deal?’

Saloni immediately nodded. The girl began munching on their snacks once more, and their compartment door suddenly opened again. It was Neville and the bushy-haired girl from earlier.

‘Hi. Have you seen ... Oh! It’s you again!’ The girl exclaimed, recognising them. Neville was now almost wailing in anguish. Saloni still couldn’t understand all this fuss over a frog.

Ashwini nodded at them, fixing her eyes on a sobbing Neville, uncomfortably. ‘Umm ... yes. It’s us again. Did you find your toad yet?’ she asked, causing Neville to give a choked hiccup.

He shook his head and sniffed loudly. ‘No! I looked everywhere!’

Saloni looked at him in well-disguised disgust as he blew his nose on his sleeve. She suddenly heard a light *hoot*, beckoning that Bookeri had woken up. He gently flew down on her shoulder and began pecking her hair. Saloni turned to Neville again, who was looking at Bookeri appraisingly.

‘He’ll turn up sometime. If he doesn’t, just assume he does not like living with you and wish him good in life.’

Saloni joked, attempting to lighten the mood, but Neville gave only gave another sob as the bushy-haired girl grinned.

‘Ok, well we’ll get going. I’m Hermione Granger, by the way.’ She called out behind her shoulder, as she dragged away a sniffling Neville with her. The girls turned their attention away from the two and back to the remaining sweets. ‘Hey, what are these?’ Saloni asked picking up a packet of chocolate frogs.

Ashwini’s face lit up brightly as she opened her pack of frogs. ‘Oh, they are amazing! You get these cards in them – all of them of famous witches and wizards. Try one.’ She suggested, ripping open one of the chocolate frogs. ‘Ah! Carlotta Pinkstone. Got two of her already.’

Saloni opened one too and saw the card of Salazar Slytherin. She popped the frog-shaped chocolate into her mouth and read on as she saw Salazar Slytherin, an ancient-looking man with a long white beard, gazing up at her. She knew that the pictures moved in the wizarding world because Ashwini had mentioned it to her before, but looking at it, in reality, was a bit uncomfortable. It was even more uncomfortable when the photo of Slytherin blinked up at her and then promptly walked off the outline of the card and vanished. She went on to read the general information written on the card.

Salazar Slytherin was the founder of the Slytherin house at Hogwarts. He was one of the first recorded Parselmouths, an accomplished Legilimens, and a notorious champion of pure-blood supremacy.

Saloni shifted uneasily in her seat after reading the last sentence. Were all the people here going to give her a hard time because of being a Muggleborn? They even mentioned it in a card!

She quietly put down the rest of the pack of frogs, her appetite lost and gazed out of the window. Ashwini noticed this and looked at her in concern. ‘Hey, everything okay?’ she asked.

Saloni put on a calm front and nodded. She chatted with Ashwini casually but felt a constant worry nagging in her mind. Pushing the thoughts aside, she began petting Bookeri who was playing with Ashwini's cat, Ginger. They were about to begin changing into their robes, when a gang of loud and rowdy-looking boys came in their compartment – without knocking, obviously.

One of them Saloni recognised as Sameer Bhagwat, the boy who had not-so-graciously named his owl after Saloni. One of the boy's standing behind him was tall and thin, with brown hair and a winning smile. The other had dark hair and bright hazel eyes. 'Oh! If it isn't our dear Salo!' Sameer Bhagwat grinned.

Saloni gave him a look. 'Do you mind leaving, we need to change. And it's *Saloni* to you.'

The boy sniffed pompously and turned to his friends. 'I just wanted to introduce you to my friends. 'This is Manish Bhosale and Abhijit Goray.'

He laughed as the boys both bowed mock-courteously. 'Very pleased to meet you, fair ladies!' Manish declared, in an overly-exaggerated accent. 'And who might you be?'

Saloni sighed. 'I'm Saloni Bhagwat.'

'I'm Ashwini Naik.'

Manish gazed at them humourlessly for a minute, before turning back to his friends. They were about to open their mouth to say something again when a girl with mousy hair and brown eyes bumped into them. Abhijit yelped in shock and spun around to see the girl on the floor, rubbing her head dizzily. 'Oh, I'm sorry! I was in a rush and –'

Abhijit frowned at her for a second and then his eyes softened slightly.

'It's fine.' He nodded curtly, and then with another one of their silly bows, the boys walked off.

Saloni shook her head with a smile twitching at her lips at their antics, and the girls turned to the mousy-haired

girl. She had gotten to her feet and was dusting her robes.

‘Hello. I’m Pallavi Shikha – don’t worry, I already heard your names.’ She added as Ashwini opened her mouth to introduce themselves. The two nodded and then Pallavi hurriedly asked, ‘Can I please sit with you for the rest of the journey? I’m sitting with some bossy third-years and they are complete dunces.’

The girls smiled and ushered her into their compartment. They talked for a while and found out that Pallavi was a pure-blood too, and that her parents were both Aurors working for the ministry. They noticed that she carried herself with a confident air, but seemed quite sweet and timid to Saloni. The girls quickly pulled on their robes as the sky grew dark. The train was slowing down by the time they pulled down their trunks and caged their pets. As the train finally stopped, people rushed their way out of the crowded compartments and walked towards the door onto a dark platform, overcome with excitement.

The three walked onto the platform and were immediately greeted with a loud, booming voice. ‘Firs’-years, over here! Over here, firs’-years!’

They turned their heads to look at a gigantic man with a huge beard and carrying a lamp. They stared at him for a second, and so did everyone else. He was huge! After removing their gaze away from him after a shocking moment, they looked around the platform and spotted many familiar faces. They saw the Weasley and Harry Potter waving at the giant man, and Sameer Bhagwat and his friends strutting behind the giant, who was now leading everyone down a narrow path. They could make out the dense trees on either side of them as they too made their way past the swarming crowd.

‘Yeh’ll get yer firs’ sight o’ Hogwarts in a sec ... jus’ round this bend here!’ they soon heard the giant man’s booming voice. A great deal of excited ‘Ah’s and ‘Ooh’s rang around at this announcement, but Saloni was busy musing on how the giant’s accent sounded. He seemed to shorten the words in every sentence which ended with ‘f’ or ‘t’ and some of the other alphabets.

But her attention was soon averted as she heard a loud gasp coming from Pallavi. She looked around where everyone else was gazing and gasped too. The road had ended in front of a huge lake and on the other side of the lake, on a mountain was a huge castle, and they could see the lights in it gleaming like little stars.

Saloni had never daydreamed of living in castles filled with unicorns, even when she was small, but she was still extremely thrilled at the prospect. Though she wasn't sure about the unicorns.

Once they reached, they saw that there were little boats sitting by the shore, and the kids all immediately scrambled into one on Hagrid's orders. Each boat had four members, and as Ashwini and Saloni sat in [Pallavi had hopped in another boat with two Hufflepuffs and was joined with Abhijit Goray], they were joined by Sameer Bhagwat and his friend Manish. The girls groaned at the sight of them but made some room since the boats had already started moving.

'So, we meet again!' Manish grinned at them as he stepped into the boat. They returned the smile hesitatingly, though she was sure it looked more of a frown.

'So, we do.' Ashwini coughed awkwardly. The boat started moving and they went through a dark tunnel as the boat sailed nearer and nearer to the castle.

'Huh. It's just like the pictures in the textbooks!' Saloni whispered, looking up at the huge castle in front of her.

Sameer wasted no time in mocking her, imitating her voice rather terribly. 'Of course! It's just like the pictures in the textbooks! I was expecting the castle to actually look like a barn – what a surprise this is!'

'Do you need to throw an insult with every sentence that comes out of your mouth?' Saloni grumbled. He shrugged back and then started chatting with Manish, without sparing her another glance. She pursed her lips as she stared at him irritably, and Ashwini threw her a pitiful look. This was going to be a long year...



5. UNEXPECTED SORTING

Unexpected sorting

After a while, they all got out of the boats on the other side of the lake, and the giant led them through a passageway and finally onto the grassy ground of the castle. Saloni heard a relieved cry coming from somewhere behind and turned to see that Neville had finally found his toad and was hugging it tightly, making its eyes pop out of his head. She giggled at the scene and then turned back as they all marched up a flight of stairs and in front of a big, oak door.

The giant knocked on the door and it swung open. A witch in emerald robes, wearing a tight bun and a frown was standing there. Saloni heard the giant introduce them to her as 'firs'-years', and she opened the door fully, to reveal an enormous hall with a beautiful marble staircase leading to the floors above. She heard Ashwini's dreamy sigh from beside her and they were about to walk ahead when they were joined by Pallavi.

'Hi ... how was your boat ride?' she asked. Ashwini and Saloni both gave her patent looks and she seemed to get the message and nodded. 'Feel sorry for you. I was with Abhijit Goray and three other Hufflepuffs. Don't know much about the other Hufflepuffs, but Abhijit was surprisingly good company for someone who spends most of his time with Bhagwat and Bhosale!'

The three laughed and kept walking on the stone floor, as the witch in emerald robes, whom they now knew as Professor Minerva McGonagall, led them away from the

huge hall and into a small, cramped chamber. They were all squished together in there, as she greeted them.

‘Welcome to Hogwarts, First years. The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats to eat in the great hall, [Saloni’s stomach had already grumbled at the word ‘banquet’], you will be sorted in your houses.’

This sentence gained her attention quickly enough, and she hung onto every next word as the Professor went on about the houses being your families and where they would sleep. She was also rather excited by the point system where they would add or remove points from your house if you do something good or bad. Professor McGonagall advised them to smarten themselves up while they could, and then tramped out of the tiny chamber. Saloni turned to Ashwini. ‘The sorting! My favourite part!’

Ashwini sniggered. ‘More than the eating part?’ she teased, earning a playful nudge in the ribs from the muggle-born witch.

Pallavi looked thoughtful too. ‘It is very exciting. You think you know where you’ll turn up – and then, you could turn up somewhere totally unexpected. Like Slytherin!’ she exclaimed, earning a few glares from kids who must have been worshipping Slytherin. Saloni chuckled along with the girls until they heard a few people scream from right behind them. They quickly spun around in fright, to see about ten ghosts, all pearly white and translucent, gliding across the room. They seemed to be talking amongst themselves, but then suddenly noticed the first-years.

‘Ah! New students!’ exclaimed a fat, monk-like ghost. ‘I hope you’re in Hufflepuff!’

This caused a lot of students to snort and snigger. Ashwini looked a bit crestfallen at this reaction, and Saloni affectionately patted her on the back.

‘Students!’ they heard a sharp voice from behind them and they turned around to see Professor McGonagall once more. ‘The Sorting is about to start! Form a line and follow me.’

Saloni exhaled sharply at the announcement. All the worries stuffed in her were now leaking out. What if she failed all her classes? What if Pallavi and Ashwini get sorted in other houses and she gets sorted along with some complete nutters like Malfoy or Weasley?

She groaned inwardly, and got in line behind Pallavi who send her a quick thumbs-up for 'good luck', and Ashwini, who smiled and nodded at her. They walked along with the other students through the chamber and into the Great Hall. There were four long tables with floating candles above them, and all the older students were perched on the tables.

They all were staring at the first-years in interest and the teachers were sitting at the end of the table where there was another long table. A wizard with a long white beard, and half-moon glasses, was sitting there looking at them calmly. Pallavi quickly introduced him as Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts, as well as the only wizard Lord Voldemort was ever afraid of. This titbit suddenly made Saloni feel a little bit more comfortable in the ginormous castle. The ceiling above was sprinkled with stars, and didn't look like a ceiling at all! More like an open sky. She remembered Hermione Granger whispering about how the ceiling was enchanted to look like that, back in the little room.

Saloni looked back down as she saw Professor McGonagall place a little stool in front of them. Her first thought was that she was going to make them all sit on it at once, to see who would fit. Then they would throw out the ones who did not.

Finally pushing aside her insane imagination, she saw McGonagall take out a dusty, mouldy, old wizard's hat and put it on the stool. Saloni saw Ashwini grimace at the sight and she could tell why. It wasn't at all pretty and attractive like the hats they had bought in Diagon Alley. Those were much cleaner and smarter. Saloni had no clue what was going on and she only stared dumbly at the hat for a long moment, along with all others – until it started singing:

'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 folk 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!

A huge round of applause rang through the hall as the song ended. Saloni tittered along with them, but the thought of sharing your private thoughts with a hat was not at all very comforting. She was still wondering which house she'd be in, and now she was even *more* curious. But almost everyone in the first year zoned out after a while, as the hat called out the names of children in Alphabetical order, one by one.

'Hey, are you okay? You look lost.' Ashwini whispered to her. Saloni nodded distractedly, brushing her question away. Her attention quickly snapped back to the sorting, when Professor McGonagall called out the name 'Bhagwat, Sameer'.

Although, she could only ponder on which house he would get sorted into, and hope dearly that she wouldn't end up in the same one. The hat sat on his head for only about five seconds before it announced, 'GRYFFINDOR!'.

Goodness – it turned out the hat could talk, as well as sing.

The Gryffindor table clapped and whistled loudly as Sameer joined them, smirking and waving at his friends. Saloni had still kept her fingers crossed that she wouldn't end up in Gryffindor ... she wouldn't be able to stand living with those recklessly stupid people for seven whole years. After Sameer, immediately came his friend Manish Bhosale's name. The hat stayed on his head for about a minute and seemed a bit disgruntled before it shouted, 'GRYFFINDOR!'

Saloni shrugged. She was expecting this, really. A lot more students went by after that, including Abhijit Goray

who was sorted in Hufflepuff and exchanged disappointed looks with his friends at not being sorted into the same house. Next came Pallavi, and the girls held their breaths and waited as she uneasily walked to the stool and sat on it, and after a long minute the hat shouted, 'HUFFLEPUFF!'

Ashwini suddenly looked as if being in Hufflepuff wasn't the worst thing in the world, but kept glancing uncertainly at Saloni, unsure she would get sorted in a different house. Harry Potter, Neville Longbottom, and Ron Weasley got sorted in Gryffindor, and she saw the two high-five, Sameer and Manish. Well – you are like the company you keep, they say.

Hermione Granger got in Gryffindor too, and that made Saloni doubt the hat a bit since Hermione was clearly a Ravenclaw. She seemed like one and Saloni had heard her whispering important points from 'Hogwarts: A History' to other students like she had written the book!

Draco Malfoy got sorted in Slytherin, and Saloni thanked the stars that she wouldn't be in Slytherin with him since she was a 'Mudblood'. Suddenly, Professor McGonagall called out her name, and she froze for a second, not really expecting herself to be next. She took a deep breath, and walked to the stool, aware of the thousand eyes staring at her, which made her unpleasantly nervous. She sat on the stool and as soon as she put the hat on her head, it started talking in her ear – well, more like hissing.

The young witch freaked out a bit at first, but then started focusing on what the hat was saying, rather than how creepy it felt when the thing was speaking in her ear.

'Ah!' a voice whispered in her ear, sounding amused. 'A bit sardonic, aren't you? Oh, and extremely determined I see – can be quite stubborn though. And a natural leader! Good intentions you have, but plenty of artfulness showed in the past events. Quite talented. Where do I put you now? Ravenclaw?'

Saloni's mind soared in relief at the hat's words. So, she wasn't going to go in Hufflepuff or Gryffindor!

'Oh, and a dislike against arrogant or superior people. Mind you, only a little dislike.' The hat continued, ignoring her thoughts completely. *'No, Ravenclaw just won't do. This might be a bit of a shock, but it's the only house that entirely suits you. You would be great in, SLYTHERIN!'*

It was funny, how that single word could affect a whole crowd when used in a specific way. A stunned silence had followed this announcement, and Saloni herself had frozen to her seat. Her mind was racing at the speed of light, and yet it was empty! How could she have gotten into Slytherin?

Professor McGonagall too seemed shocked for a minute, but regained herself and curtly asked her to get off the stool and let other students continue. Saloni silently got up and started walking towards the Slytherin table, not being greeted by applause like the others but by surprised stares.

She dared herself to look up and saw the astounded yet pitiful expressions of her friends and the horrified looks of her fellow Slytherins. Word definitely must have passed that she was a muggle-born, no doubt by Malfoy. She flopped down on the Slytherin table, ignoring her neighbours scooting further away from her in disgust. She tried to zone out again and ignore the horrid glares, but her mind had apparently decided to start working again. A million questions were forming in her mind. How could she get into Slytherin if she was a Muggle-born? Why didn't the hat put her in Ravenclaw instead? What would Ashwini and Pallavi think of her? Her fellow Slytherins would absolutely hate her, wouldn't they?

She groaned inwardly, plopping her head on the table. This time she completely did zone out until the Sorting had finished putting everyone in their rightful houses, and then she gazed up tiredly when Dumbledore's voice rang across the hall. She looked upwards to the ceiling in boredom but was shocked to see some gold-coloured wordings hovering above in mid-air. Her first thought was that she was dreaming, but after repeatedly rubbing her eyes for about 10 seconds, she was quite convinced she wasn't.

‘Everyone, pick their favourite tune and we go!’ Dumbledore’s voice boomed across the hall. Saloni caught on quickly and sang the lyrics floating in the air, in the first tune she could think of: *Twinkle, twinkle little star.*

*‘Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy-Warty Hogwarts,
Teach us something please,
Whether you be old and bald,
Or young with scabby knees
Our heads could do with filling,
With some interesting stuff
For now their bare and full of air,
Dead flies and bits of fluff,
So teach us things worth knowing,
Bring back what we’ve forgot,
Just do your best, we’ll do the rest
And learn till our brains all rot!’*

Saloni giggled as the whole hall finished singing and burst into laughter. The Slytherins too had begun smiling and laughing, and it was the first positive reaction Saloni had seen on their faces. Dumbledore sighed, wiping a tear away.

‘Ah, music! A magic beyond all we do here!’ Saloni couldn’t help but marvel at his unique perspective on every simple thing and found her respect for him growing already. ‘Welcome everyone, to another magical year at Hogwarts! There are a few instructions before we began eating. The third-floor corridor is of bounds unless you wish to die a painful death.’

He chortled as a few others in the hall laughed nervously too, but Saloni was a bit confused since she felt his words seemed quite genuine. ‘The forbidden forest is off-

bounds too, as Mr. Filch reminded me the hundredth time. Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you.'

Saying so, he calmly sat down. She frowned at his odd words and began wondering if he really was a genius or just a bit mental. Or both. Unfortunately, she couldn't figure out which one, so she shrugged it off and looked at the table in front of her.

There was roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops, lamb chops, sausages, bacon, steak, joints, steak and kidney pie, boiled potatoes, roasted potatoes, mashed potatoes, chips, and plenty of other items, some of them she couldn't even name! Everyone else had already dug in and was heartily munching on the food, and Ron Weasley was stuffing chicken in his mouth like an unfed Neanderthal. Saloni grimaced and then turned around, piling her plate with the food. She was usually used to eating Indian food at her house but quite enjoyed this meal too, though she didn't think she could stomach it for a whole year. She made a mental note to write to her mother for some 'Daal-khichadi', in her next letter – she could just heat it up by magic once the owls got it to her.

As she was eating, she suddenly became conscious about the surrounding Slytherins whispering about something. Halfway while eating a chicken cutlet, she looked up to see lots of angry faces glaring at her in disgust. She closed her eyes in despair. Of course, she was going to get hated and teased by every Slytherin in school because of being a Muggleborn. After a long time of receiving glares from the others, she faced them wearily. 'What?'

'Oh, nothing. We were just wondering how a Mudblood could have got into Slytherin.' Malfoy sneered moodily, pushing his steak around on his plate.

Saloni plopped her head on her arms, which were resting on the table by their elbows. 'Honestly, I'm wondering the exact same thing.'

The others looked a bit surprised at her genuine reply

and tried to wound her up even more.

‘You know ... you don’t belong here. I mean, *all* your family is filled with filthy muggles!’ Snapped Marcus Flint, a tall, muscular, and rather nasty-looking Slytherin. Saloni ignored them and continued cutting her cutlet. Pansy Parkinson, a girl with short black hair who was in Saloni’s year, let out a shrieking laugh. ‘Yeah. Hopefully, we won’t catch some disease living with her so long.’

‘She won’t live with us for long if we can help it!’ Malfoy spat and was greeted by murmurs of agreement. Saloni cursed under her breath but was a bit scared at Malfoy’s words. What did he mean she won’t live with them for long?

She gulped down her pumpkin juice and looked over at her friends. She had completely missed Ashwini’s Sorting when she was busy dreading how she got into Slytherin, but Ashwini seemed to have gotten into Gryffindor! She was sitting there chatting with Manish and eating her mashed potatoes. She must have felt someone’s eyes on her because she turned around and waved at Saloni, who grinned and waved back, and then turned to Pallavi who seemed busy gazing dreamily at the ceiling while Abhijit tried to get her attention. Saloni chuckled and turned around to see that the dinner had all disappeared and was replaced by delicious plates of dessert.

There were blocks of assorted ice cream, apple pies, spotted dick, chocolate gateau, treacle tart, pumpkin tart, chocolate éclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, jelly, and rice pudding. Saloni licked her lips and filled her plate with some Apple pie, treacle tart, and chocolate gateau. She started filling her mouth with the delectable desserts when she felt a sudden cold gush of wind making her gasp and shudder slightly. She looked above her and saw a ghost bound in chains, who had wide black eyes and a sullen face, looking back at her.

‘Oh! Er ... hi?’ Saloni tried awkwardly. The ghost just stared at her dully and then opened his mouth, speaking in a booming voice. ‘I’m the Bloody Baron. The Slytherin ghost as you all know.’ He introduced, still keeping his eyes

trained on Saloni, and all the Slytherins politely nodded. They seemed to respect him, she noticed.

‘You ... You’re the Slytherin Mudblood Nick has been talking about, aren’t you?’

Saloni gulped, having known that Nearly headless Nick was the Gryffindor ghost. ‘Yes.’

The Slytherins around her sniggered, but the Baron silenced them by raising a hand.

‘You’ve been the talk of the school ... almost as famous as Harry Potter!’ he exclaimed. Saloni nodded meekly and went back to eating her dessert, trying to ignore the hovering ghost above her. ‘Well ... I must say I’m disgusted by the Sorting Hat. Letting such common, filthy blood into such the noble house of Slytherin.’ The Baron continued, gaining more laughter, but this time he didn’t stop them but joined in the jeering and laughing. Saloni slammed her fork on the table in anger. She hadn’t even been there an hour and they were already getting on her nerves! How was she going to live with them for a year – seven years, if she didn’t get herself thrown out of Hogwarts.

The Baron, after a few minutes, glided away towards the other end of the table to stand beside Malfoy, who did not look very happy with the new sitting arrangement. Saloni thanked the stars when dinner was finally over, and Dumbledore stood up as the last plate of dessert disappeared. ‘Ahem. I just wanted you to that quidditch trials will be held in the second week of term. Anyone interested in playing for their house team should contact Madam Hooch. And now, bedtime. Off you trot!’

All the Slytherins got up and followed their prefect Alyssa Wright as she walked them toward their common room. She guided them to a door behind the Entrance Hall, and behind the door was a set of stone steps that descend deep into the dungeons. As Saloni walked towards the dungeons, she shivered as she felt cold air seep through her. She hugged her arms around her and followed behind Alyssa.

‘What? Scared already? And you were so certain you’d last here.’ Came a jeering whisper from behind her.

‘I’m not scared, I’m cold!’ Saloni grumbled back, without turning. A person with a hearing problem could have told that voice belonged to Malfoy. She heard him mumble something back, which sounded suspiciously like a sarcastic, ‘Uh huh. Of course, you are.’

She turned her attention back toward Alyssa as she stopped in front of a bare, stone wall. Saloni looked around hoping to see some sort of room in the dungeons but found none. ‘Are we just going to live here in the dungeons?’ she asked, puzzled. Several Slytherins sniggered and Pansy Parkinson scoffed. ‘Oh, we don’t know. Do you want to?’

Saloni chuckled nervously, aware of the thousand amused gazes on her. ‘Um ... no. It’s rather cold here.’

Malfoy looked affronted. ‘How dare you? How could anyone not like to live in here.’ he said, dramatically pointing around the dungeons. Saloni was speechless, and a bit disturbed. Of all the places, the Slytherins liked the dark, cold dungeons to live in? With no beds or blankets? Malfoy and Parkinson noticed her incredulous expression and burst out laughing. Alyssa sighed but was smiling too.

‘Oh, don’t listen to them. They’re joking, the lot of them. We’re sleeping here.’ she said, pointing to the stone wall again. Saloni stared at the damp stone wall for a second until it hit her.

‘There is a secret room behind the wall, isn’t there?’ she mumbled suddenly feeling a bit foolish about not realising this before. Pansy Parkinson made a sound that definitely indicated humour.

‘Finally, the mudblood caught on!’ she exclaimed and started laughing again as Saloni turned to glare at her.

Alyssa turned to the wall and said ‘Blood purity’, loudly. As soon as she said that, a wide hole opened in the wall. Some of the Slytherins gasped in awe and they all walked in. In there was a huge, dungeon-like room with greenish lamps and chairs. The dungeon extended partway

under the lake [As immediately commented by Alssya], giving the light in the room a beautiful greenish halo. The common room had lots of low-backed black and dark green button-tufted, leather sofas and dark wood cupboards. It was decorated with tapestries featuring the adventures of famous Medieval Slytherins. It was quite a grand atmosphere and gave a sense of pure power to those who were inside it.

Alyssa stopped in front of them suddenly. ‘Alright, listen up. Boys’ and girls’ dorms are on opposite sides, leading down that hallway. Bathrooms – one for boys and one for girls, are directly outside of the common room. Sleep tight, everyone.’

All the girls and boys parted ways and descended to their dorms. Saloni, who was now extremely sleepy and had forgotten all her worries, trotted down to her dorm, but not before one last call of, ‘Night, mudblood’ coming from some of the first-year boys.

As she walked in her dorm, which she shared with Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode, Daphne Greengrass, and Tracey Davis, she stared at the view for a moment. There were four-poster beds covered in green eiderdowns, a wooden nightstand next to them, and their school trunks at the foot of the bed. A wooden bookcase was also located on the other side of the beds and the dorm had a green carpet with the house crest in the center. This too, was sophisticated and grand, just like the common room. Saloni grinned and walked to her bed, feeling very much like a peasant in a royal palace. Salazar Slytherin may have been many things, but the man had style.

The newly-declared-Slytherin-witch pulled on her pajamas and flopped into bed, getting comfortable under the blankets. She felt her eyelids drooping and was about to fall asleep when she heard Pansy Parkinson arguing with Daphne Greengrass, a truly pretty girl with thick brown curls. Millicent Bulstrode was already asleep, and Tracey Davis was busy unpacking her luggage quietly.

‘But Daphne! She can’t stay here with us!’ Pansy could be heard whining.

‘And why not?’ Daphne’s voice could be heard replying, rather exasperatedly.

‘She just can’t! She’s a mudblood! We’re not about to stay with her for seven whole years!’

Saloni scoffed very softly so they wouldn’t know she was awake. They were all talking as if she had chosen this on purpose. Alright, she admitted that a part of her was utmost fascinated by Slytherin house, but she never meant to actually be sorted in the goddamn house!

‘Then go tell Professor Snape that you have a problem living with her. Quit whining in my ear. Stop acting immature.’ Daphne snapped back.

‘What do you expect? I’m 11! And why are you taking her side over mine anyway? We all have a problem living with her, don’t we?’

‘Since when did ‘you’ become ‘we’, Pansy?’ Daphne asked coolly, already turning away from the other witch.

Pansy Parkinson let out a frustrated cry, and flopped on her bed, drawing the canopy around the bed angrily. Daphne Greengrass huffed and went to bed too. After about 10 minutes, everything was silent and the lights had gone off. Saloni lay in bed thinking about Pansy and Daphne’s conversation. It was nice to hear that at least someone was by her side in her own house – even though she strongly suspected that Daphne only snapped back because she was tired of Pansy’s complaining. Slightly more assured that at least someone had defended her, Saloni fell into a dreamless but peaceful sleep.



6. A WHOLE NEW WORLD

A whole new world

The next morning, as soon as she went down to breakfast, she was greeted loudly by Pallavi and Ashwini. They were both shaken that she had gotten into Slytherin, and pulled her towards them as soon as she entered the hall.

‘Goodness! We are so sorry we didn’t talk to you last night. We were ever so surprised when you got into Slytherin, being a Muggleborn and all.’ Pallavi whispered, gazing at her face deeply as if checking for scars or tear marks.

Ashwini nodded. ‘If any of those gits are bothering you, we’ll all curse them together.’ She spat, and Pallavi sent her a quelling look at once. ‘Er ... I mean ... we’ll report to Dumbledore, and he’ll punish them for us?’ she tried again meekly.

Pallavi nodded in approval. Saloni laughed at their reactions and tossed a grape in her mouth.

‘Calm down, you two. Nobody is bothering me.’ Ashwini immediately sent her a disbelieving look. ‘Well, I mean nobody has crossed their limits yet. And if they do – I’ll be sure to tell you.’

They both seemed convinced, and after a rather hurried breakfast, the three rushed off to their classes.

There were many stairs in Hogwarts, half of them which moved and suddenly went invisible. But after some

days, the girls got the hang of it. They did get lost many times, but then they'd just asked a ghost, a portrait [Yes, the portraits talked], or a prefect to show them the way. They usually didn't have many classes together, since the classes were divided house-wise, but they always met up during lunch, dinner or in-between free periods. All their lessons were very exciting and very different from what Saloni had thought magic to be. She always imagined waving a sparkly wand and yelling 'Abracadabra', to do magic. But they had lessons like Astronomy, where they studied stars and the movement of planets, Transfiguration, the art of changing the form and appearance of an object or a person, and potions, where students learned the correct way to brew magical potions.

Saloni liked most of these lessons and looked forward to them just like she did in her muggle school. But sometimes, when the Professors went on to absurd topics like witches and wizards setting themselves on fire just for fun, she couldn't help but wonder if she had banged her head too hard on the wall at King's Cross and was in a coma, dreaming about all of this. As Saloni was walking towards the library at a free period where the three had agreed to meet there, she bumped into an uninvited student.

'Hi there!' Sameer Bhagwat's haughty voice rang in her ears. She groaned and tried to walk away from him, but he blocked her. 'What do you want?' she asked tiredly, rubbing her forehead and getting ready for repeated taunts to attack her.

But he just sniggered. 'What? Long day? It's going to be even longer because you have Double potions with us Gryffindors next period.'

She blinked. 'Ok? Thanks for the warning. Now - can I go?'

'What is your problem?' Sameer said irritably. 'I'm just trying to make a conversation.'

'Well, I don't want a conversation with you!' she protested but felt a twinge of guilt looking at his sudden

crestfallen expression. It changed back to its usual look so fast, she thought she imagined it.

‘Why not?’ he asked, trying to sound offhanded. It sounded more offended according to her.

Saloni opened her mouth to snap something back, but couldn’t form a sensible answer. She herself couldn’t understand why exactly she didn’t want to talk to him. ‘Huh. I don’t know.’

He frowned at her. ‘You don’t know why you don’t want to talk to me?’

She nodded absently and tried to find a way to leave since she was getting late to meet Pallavi.

He sneered at her in clear distaste. ‘Well, maybe it’s because you’re now a snooty Slytherin. Tell me, how does it feel to be utterly unpopular even in your *own* house? You must have lots of experience.’

‘I don’t think I don’t want to talk to you because I’m a ‘snooty Slytherin’. I think it’s because you can’t talk to anybody without insulting them, for more than 1 minute.’ She huffed, and pushed past him, storming to the library. When she got to the library, she saw that Pallavi was already sitting there, talking to Abhijit. Saloni walked over to them with a small grimace on her lips. ‘Hi, guys! What are you talking about?’

Pallavi looked up at her with a rather cross expression. ‘Nothing much. Just discussing how the Slytherins should stop bullying every Hufflepuff and Gryffindor and mind their own bloody business.’

Saloni was taken aback at her accusing tone and also a bit affronted. ‘Hey! I swear I had nothing to do with it!’

‘I know! I wasn’t blaming you,’ Pallavi reassured quickly and her features softened.

But Abhijit turned to her with a moody expression. ‘You don’t, but your pals do.’

Saloni grinned at him sarcastically. ‘Well, I’m not my

pals, am I?

Abhijit sighed and checked his watch, looking a bit less downtrodden. 'I got to run. I've got Transfiguration in 5 minutes. Bye!' he called out as he ran out of the library, earning a glare from the librarian, Madam Pince.

The girls sat and talked about their classes so far when they were joined by a panting Ashwini.

'Hi. Why weren't you at breakfast? I was looking all over for you!' she complained, flopping on a chair heavily. The girls laughed at her huffy face which made her glare even more sinister.

'Sorry. I wasn't hungry, so I came here, though I don't know why Pallavi didn't have breakfast.' Saloni explained, looking at her questioningly.

Pallavi just shrugged. 'I woke up early today and ate breakfast much before you. Couldn't see you two anywhere.'

Ashwini narrowed her eyes. 'What time did you have breakfast?'

Pallavi blushed and murmured something which sounded like '6 'o' clock'. Ashwini clapped her hand on her forehead in disbelief. 'How do you expect us to be there at 6?'

Saloni laughed in agreement and quickly checked the watch on the wall of the library.

'It's almost time for potions.' She pointed out. The girls got up quickly and were going to walk towards the dungeons where potions class was when they saw Bookeri gliding inside the library through the window. 'Bookeri! What are you doing here?'

The owl gave a little hoot and tapped her beak on the letter tied to her leg. 'She must have noticed you weren't at breakfast. The post usually comes early in the morning.' Ashwini noted. Saloni nodded and quickly untied the letter and opened it as the girls gathered around her to read it.

Dear Salo,

How is your first week at school going? Which house did you finally get in? You had been talking about it all summer! How are the teachers, and the classes? Did you make new friends? We are so curious! Sharvari misses you dearly too, and almost cried herself to sleep for the past three days. Please let us know how you are doing.

Love,

Mom and Dad.

Saloni stopped smiling at the letter when she felt somebody breathing in both her ears. She chuckled as she turned to her friends who were looking at the letter curiously.

‘Your sister seems sweet!’ Pallavi commented, and the girls walked to potions hurriedly after giving Bookeri a biscuit and a little pat. The potions class looked very interesting, but a shudder ran through her as she walked in due to the cold. There were pickled animals floating around in glass jars which looked a bit creepy, and the rest of the atmosphere was quiet and mysterious. She felt Pallavi shiver beside her as she whispered in Saloni’s ear. ‘Horrible, isn’t it?’

Saloni quirked an eyebrow. Horrible was the last word she would have used for the classroom. Sure, it was ... different. But certainly not horrible!

‘I know! It’s awful!’ Ashwini grumbled. Saloni didn’t know how to reply to both these comments when she certainly wasn’t going to get any support in her opinion, and just pretended not to hear them. Everyone had different opinions, after all. The girls quickly sat on their seats, as the rest of the Slytherins and Gryffindors began coming in. Everyone felt silent at once when Professor Snape came in, and Saloni noticed that he had a superior and arrogant look on his pale face, but very different from the annoyingly smug expression, students like Malfoy had on. Snape

started the class by taking attendance and everything went smoothly until he stopped at one name... 'Harry Potter. Our new...celebrity.'

Saloni stifled a giggle as she looked at the furious look on Potter's face. He looked like an angry cat, as his green eyes narrowed behind his spectacles. Malfoy and his enormous friends, Crabbe and Goyle, laughed not-so-subtly at the comment. After some time, Snape called Saloni's name, to which she said an audible 'Here!', and thought that he would continue with the roll-calling. Instead, he glanced at her for a second, and then his lip curled.

'You. You're the Slytherin Muggleborn everyone has been talking about.'

Saloni shut her eyes in distress. So, she was going to be bullied by the teachers as well. She nodded curtly, staring at the floor. She couldn't see him, but she could feel his curious gaze on her, as well as the whole class's. When she looked up, the Slytherins were looking rather ashamed at calling her one of their own and were all shaking their heads, sneering nastily at her. Snape grimaced, but there was some unknown expression in his beetle-like eyes. Was it sadness? Or regret?

He quickly turned his eyes back to the class, his expression cold once more.

'You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making. There is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses ... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death – if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach.' He finished, and an awe-filled silence greeted this speech. Saloni's mouth was halfway open, and she was already a bit scared, along with being impressed. Professor Snape didn't seem like someone to ever cross, and she felt fright-filled respect increase. Saloni looked around the class to see that the Slytherin students were looking equally impressed, but the Gryffindors were all scoffing and rolling their eyes as if

Snape was just trying to show off. She didn't know why, but just this little action made Saloni slightly agitated. It was all part of being in Slytherin – she didn't like when others mocked someone in *her* house, no matter how horrible the Slytherins treated her.

'Potter!' Snape's sharp voice cut across her thoughts. 'What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?'

Saloni looked at Potter, who was looking stumped. Hermione Granger's hand shot up hastily, but Snape steadily ignored her. Saloni tried to solve the problem by herself in her mind while Potter stammered with the answer, and then her mouth formed an 'O'. She had read about it in one of the textbooks! Anyone who knew her, also knew that she had a pretty decent memory, and she definitely remembered this answer.

'The Draught of Living Death.' she whispered to herself and smiled. Suddenly she noticed that the class had gone surprisingly silent. She glanced up slowly to see that everyone in the class was looking at her, Hermione looking rather annoyed. Snape stared at her and then blinked wearily. 'What?'

Saloni reckoned they all had heard her answer, and swallowed. She was quite shy when all the attention was on her. She hated it, really. 'Er...Draught of Living Death? T-The answer?' she stammered.

Snape smirked leisurely. 'Well, well. Not a bunch of dunderheads, it seems. Especially not from *my* house. 10 points to Slytherin.'

Saloni beamed happily when she realized she *had* been right. The Slytherins were now looking at her like she was slightly less revolting, and a few like Astoria Greengrass, were actually smiling at her. The Gryffindors were not looking very happy though, except Ashwini who was grinning back at her proudly, and surprisingly Sameer, who also had a slight smile on his face. Potter looked relieved that he hadn't need to answer the question, but Hermione was red with jealousy.

‘Well, let’s try again, Potter since Ms. Mate has already answered *your* question correctly.’ Snape sneered at him. ‘Where would you look if I told you to find a Beozar?’

Hermione send Saloni a warning glare as to not answer the question and raised her own hand quickly. Saloni ignored her and once again tried to answer the question in her mind. She pondered on this one for quite a moment, even after hearing Potter’s ‘I don’t know, sir.’, and Snape’s taunt. A goat’s stomach! She had read it in *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*! She sat back, smiling in satisfaction at having answered the question, even if it was in her mind.

Snape began again. ‘What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?’

Saloni was a bit confused as to why he was only asking Potter all the questions, but one look at the Slytherin’s sniggering faces made her realize that Snape was taunting him! She didn’t know if teachers were allowed to do that but still chuckled softly as she watched Hermione stand up raising her hand even farther. The witch was quite an annoying know-it-all, but she was a Muggleborn, and extremely clever, so she gave Saloni some hope.

‘I don’t know.’ Potter’s voice rang through the room. ‘But I think Hermione does though, why don’t you try her?’

Saloni’s eyes widened, as a few people around her laughed. Snape snapped at Hermione telling her to sit down. ‘For your information, Potter, a Beozar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons, as for Monkshood and Wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of Aconite. And Asphodel and Wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful, it is known as the Draught of Living Death, as Ms. Bhagwat told us.’

He said coldly, glaring at Potter in pure loathing. Hermione was also glaring at Saloni in jealousy as if they were opponents in a gruesome battle. Snape took a point from Gryffindor for Potter’s cheek, and the Slytherins all watched in satisfaction at the Gryffindors, who looked

ready to throttle Snape. After putting them into pairs, Snape told them to brew a simple potion to cure boils. He walked around the classroom watching them work and criticizing every Gryffindor except Hermione, who seemed to be doing everything perfectly. The Professor seemed to like Malfoy a lot for some reason and began complimenting him for every little thing he did, causing him to smile smugly every time.

Saloni shook her head as she feverishly stirred her cauldron, and saw Snape walk up behind her.

‘Seems acceptable, although the horned slugs are not properly stewed.’ He commented lightly and walked off. Saloni smiled in relief for not getting any criticism, making a mental note to stew the slugs well, next time. By the corner of her eye, she could see Hermione grinning at her rather triumphantly. She just made a soft ‘tsk’ sound and continued working on her potion, when thick green smoke suddenly filled the room.

Coughing and retching rapidly just like everyone else, she could see Seamus Finnigan’s cauldron had completely melted as Neville Longbottom’s potion spread across the floor. Everyone jumped up on their stools at once, but Neville had been drenched in his own potion and was crying, as blotchy red boils covered his whole face. Saloni observed the scene from her stool as Snape easily cleared up the potion with a flick of his wand, and was now yelling at Neville, jeeringly telling him where he went wrong.

She could feel her pity for the boy growing by the second, as he whimpered in fear. Snape quickly told Seamus to take Neville to the hospital wing because his boils grew even larger, but Seamus looked too devastated about his melted cauldron and disgusted to touch Neville at the same time.

‘I’ll do it!’ Saloni quickly offered, and the Slytherins looked at her in horror. She hopped off her stool and walked to Neville, helping him up. He looked rather scared at being handed over to a Slytherin, but as the pain became too much, he solemnly followed her out without a word. As they walked outside the chaotic class and began walking to the Hospital wing, Saloni glanced at him. He was still

crying and the painful boils seemed to be growing by the second. 'How did you manage to melt Seamus' cauldron?' Saloni mused.

Neville was looking at her as if her hair had caught fire. Or maybe he was just scared of talking to a Slytherin. After a moment he shakily answered. 'I don't know. I just couldn't get it right. I'm terrible at potions.'

Saloni gave him a sympathetic look. 'Oh, come on. It was just your first class. You'll do fine in the next one.'

He shook his head miserably, still avoiding her gaze. 'No, I won't! I used to help my uncle brew potions at home and even then, I was terrible! I just seem to have gotten worse over the years.'

Saloni hummed distractedly, and then promptly suggested taking help from Hermione since she was very clever. He shook his head again, looking even more terrified. 'No, that's just worse! You don't know her. She's really bossy and impatient! Oh – don't tell her I said that.'

Saloni giggled at his nervous expression and then fell into thought.

'Hmm ... maybe I can help? We can study together on some weekends!' She declared, and he glanced at her curiously. 'But ... you're a Slytherin.'

Saloni looked at him in amusement. 'So?'

'You're supposed to despise Gryffindors like me.'

'Well, I don't. My best friend is a Gryffindor.'

He looked quite convinced after this and agreed to study together as they walked into the hospital wing. Saloni bade him goodbye as she left Madame Pomphrey, the healer witch, to fuss over him. By the time she went back, Potions class was already over and everyone was gone, except Ashwini, Pallavi, and Sameer along with all his friends, all of whom were still packing up their stuff. The Muggleborn-witch was exhausted and was glad that they had the rest of the afternoon off. She decided that she would relax in the library with the girls.

‘Hi, guys.’ She greeted Ashwini and Pallavi wearily.

‘Hey. You were great in potions today!’ Pallavi beamed.

Saloni turned pink at the sudden compliment. ‘Not great, just OK.’

Ashwini rolled her eyes at her faked modesty. ‘You say that, but you should have seen Snape with the other students. He was bullying them mercilessly!’

‘He’s a right old toad, that Snape!’ Sameer cut through their conversation, pushing through Pallavi rather rudely. ‘His classroom is as cold as he is!’

Saloni narrowed her eyes at him. She grabbed hold of Pallavi, who had stumbled back after his push. ‘No, he’s not! He’s just strict – but so is McGonagall!’

‘Oh, yeah.’ Manish scoffed, joining his friend. ‘Docking points off opposing houses without no reason is just a habit of McGonagall, isn’t it?’

Saloni pursed her lips. It was a decent chance that they were among those dunderheads Snape had been talking about. Ashwini and Pallavi looked very uncertain, and then Abhijit suddenly piped in. ‘I don’t like him much either. He’s really unfair to the other houses. Especially Gryffindors.’

Ashwini nodded in agreement, looking grumpy again. Pallavi glanced at Saloni awkwardly for a second, but then nodded her agreement too. Now that she had nothing to say against the five, she frowned and walked outside the class, the girls hot on her heels. They both rounded on her once they were in an empty corridor.

‘What is it with you?’ Pallavi said huffily. Saloni just shook her head, gesturing that she didn’t want to talk about the topic. She wasn’t mad at them since she knew everyone could have different opinions, but she wasn’t about to talk about a person she would definitely not like criticizing. The girls shrugged and the three walked towards the library. The library was one of the places in which the three could talk together since they were not allowed in each other’s common rooms. As they were chatt-

ing softly in the library as to not disturb the others, they saw Malfoy talking to his cronies, Crabbe and Goyle, while holding a copy of the Daily Prophet, the wizarding newspaper.

‘– and nothing happened to them. No one knows who tried to break in though.’ Malfoy finished, and Crabbe and Goyle looked mildly stunned. Ashwini, who was never the subtle one, turned to them with a curious expression.

‘Hey.’ She called out. ‘You aren’t talking about the Gringotts robbery, are you?’

Malfoy turned to look at her with a scowl. ‘Yes, I am. So what?’

Pallavi looked thoughtful as she ignored Malfoy’s indignant tone. ‘I heard about it too. Though not the exact details.’

Saloni peered at them in confusion. ‘Gringotts? The wizarding bank? Was it robbed?’

Ashwini shook her head. ‘No, but somebody tried to break in!’

They both exchanged dark looks and fell into an unpleasant silence. She understood their concern, but Saloni really didn’t know why they were making such a big deal about it.

‘That’s intense.’ She remarked. ‘Although in the muggle world, banks are robbed quite often. They catch the criminal in the end.’

Malfoy rolled his eyes, while his cronies sniggered. ‘Yeah, well this isn’t the *Muggle world*. And for your information, nobody has ever been able to break into Gringotts before. It’s the safest place there is. And many are afraid that the break-in could be related to ... to the dark lord.’ He gulped nervously.

Pallavi drew a sharp breath, but Ashwini just frowned at him. ‘Why are *you* scared? Didn’t your father work for him before? I thought he had made a good impression on you-know-who.’

Saloni coughed, choking on her own saliva, and Pallavi flinched at Ashwini's abrupt comment. That was quite harsh, even if it was Malfoy, but she was one hundred percent sure Ashwini didn't mean it in an offensive way. When Saloni glanced over at him slowly, she saw Malfoy had gone red. His friends had gotten oddly silent, and even the girls didn't know what to say. Ashwini realised what she did and immediately went pink. 'Sorry, Malfoy. That was a low blow. I didn't mean it that way.'

Malfoy sneered at her, regaining some of his old swagger. 'Hark who's talking! Your father worked for him too, didn't he? You're still scared of the dark lord though, aren't you?'

Ashwini nodded slowly, still pink in the face and looking rather guilty. He glared at them again, and then stormed out of the library, Crabbe and Goyle right behind him. Pallavi glared half-heartedly at their retreating figures.

'What a prat! You did say sorry, didn't you? Just had to taunt you.' She scoffed but didn't look cross at all.

Ashwini sighed. 'No, it's fine. Shouldn't have started the topic in the first place. I deserved it.'

'Oh, you think so? Well, then ... Glad we're on the same page.' Pallavi said, and pulled out a big dusty book, flipping through it casually.

Saloni burst into a fit of giggles, but Ashwini narrowed her eyes at her in mock anger. The girls talked some more about the Gringott's break-in and found out that the vault which was searched had already been emptied before. Saloni wondered what might have been in that parcel, and who emptied it. These questions were playing in her mind the whole day, along with a pinch of fear. Would Voldemort really return?



7. FLYING CONUNDRUMS

Flying conundrums

The next day as the girls were walking to the great hall, they saw a large crowd gathered around a pinboard, reading a notice of some sort. Pushing their way through, they quickly read the notice through. It said that their flying lessons were starting on Thursday! And Gryffindors would be in that class with them too.

Saloni laughed in delight, as she reread the notice again. She was always intrigued by witches flying on broomsticks but had never actually experienced flying, except in planes. Ashwini and Pallavi, who were both pure-blood witches, at once began chatting about flying on broomsticks. Ashwini recalled when she had ridden a broomstick accidentally at the age of four when her father left it in her room. Her parents were horrified to see her flying a broomstick in their backyard while hanging upside-down on it. Pallavi also seemed nervous about flying and narrated the incident when she was left dangling from a tall tree and the broomstick crashed on their rooftop.

They all laughed and enjoyed everyone's stories about their experiences, and Saloni found herself getting ever more interested in the class. Some of the students were also highly *boasting* about flying, such as Malfoy and Sameer, who didn't stop talking about it all day. Saloni shook her head exasperatedly after Sameer began his story about how he caught his mother's vase on a broomstick, as it was falling from the window, for the fifth time that day. She caught Pallavi's eye and rolled her eyes, pointing at Sameer in irritation, and Pallavi sniggered. She turned away

right in time to see Malfoy's eagle owl gliding towards their table. The witch began looking around in search of Bookeri with a reply from her parents since she had already answered their last letter. Sure enough, she was gliding gracefully towards her with a thick letter and a large round packet. She frowned as she quickly caught them both and fed her a piece of sausage. Bookeri hooted happily at her, before flying away once more. She opened the letter in excitement.

Dear Salo,

We are glad to see you are settling in well. [Although you are always welcome to come back home if you wish] We all really miss you, and Sharvari has finally ceased her little tantrum. We hope you're doing well in your studies! We've enclosed a little gift for you which we hope you'll enjoy.

Love,

Mom and dad

Saloni smiled at the letter and tore open the package which came with it. She gaped at the gift in front of her for a whole good minute, and then laughed elatedly. It was a basketball! Her parents obviously knew her love of basketball, because she had been dribbling balls around since she was four. It was a kind of stress reliever for her; listening to the *tap-tap-tap* sound of the ball hitting the ground or wall. She held the ball securely under one arm with a broad grin on her face and started eating again with the other hand. It was then that she realised that the entire Slytherin table was looking at the ball in utter confusion and some curiosity. Saloni blinked, looking up at them. 'What?'

Blaise Zabini, a dark-skinned Slytherin boy was the first one to respond.

'What is that?' he asked, with a puzzled expression on his face. Saloni looked at the ball tucked under her arm and then looked at him.

‘Erm ... it’s a ball. A basketball.’

‘What’s a basketball?’ Pansy Parkinson demanded, glancing at the ball as if it had called her something highly offensive. Saloni chuckled at all their bewildered faces and then began explaining.

‘It’s a muggle toy. They throw it in hoops to score points and the opposite team has to block them. We can also play with it without hoops. You know ... dribble it around?’

They all stared at her for a rather long time looking at her as if she had grown three heads, and Saloni stared right back until Malfoy broke the awkward silence.

‘So, it’s like Muggle Quidditch?’ he asked, trying and failing to sound disinterested. Saloni pondered on his question for a while before nodding slowly. She remembered how Ashwini had told her about that wizarding game. It was really just like basketball in the air – played with broomsticks. And there were four balls used in it. The Quaffle, used as a basketball, was passed to each person and thrown through the hoops in the air to score points. The two Bludgers, used as sort of cannon balls, were used by the opponent team to throw at the other team players and try to knock them off their broomsticks. And the golden snitch, a tiny ball that was said to be extremely fast had to be caught by the team’s seeker. The match only finished once the snitch was caught, and the seeker who caught the ball was given one hundred and fifty points for his or her team.

‘Yeah, you could say that. Except you don’t use brooms to play it.’ Saloni finally replied, mentally finishing her list of basic Quidditch rules.

‘Don’t use brooms? Then how do you play it?’ Pansy’s shrill voice rang through the table.

Saloni sighed. ‘Well ... you use feet. You have to run.’

Everybody was gawking at her again, and honestly, it was making her supremely uncomfortable.

‘Run? That’s barbaric! Why do Muggles run?’ A third-year boy asked in puzzlement.

Saloni tutted at him loudly. ‘Well, that’s obvious, isn’t it?’

When they still continued to look at her cluelessly, she groaned, flopping her head on the table and getting a dollop of jam in her hair. ‘You guys should honestly take Muggle studies in the third year.’ She mumbled inaudibly and then began explaining again loudly. ‘See, Muggles don’t have brooms, do they? They don’t have any supplies through which they can fly. So, they run.’

A loud echo of, ‘*Ohhh!*’ rang through the table, but somebody again chipped in. ‘But why don’t they use that thing called a Helicopter? I’ve seen Muggles fly in those before.’

‘They’re too big.’ Saloni explained, stuffing some cereal in her mouth. A chuckle coming from right behind her and the Slytherins sneering up at that familiar laugh, made her spin around in her seat. Sameer Bhagwat stood her with an amused grin on his face, surprisingly without his friends. ‘Trouble in paradise? What’s wrong, Salo? Are the big, bad Slytherins bothering you?’

Saloni frowned up at him. ‘No, they aren’t. What are you doing here?’

‘So? Basketball, huh?’ He asked, ignoring her question. ‘You play?’

‘Yeah ... I’m not an expert, though.’ She replied, still eyeing him suspiciously.

He nodded. ‘I play too. It’s one of my favourite Muggle sports.’

Saloni blinked at him in amazement. ‘*One of?* You play other Muggle sports as well?’

She had always thought that being a pureblood would mean he’d have never seen or played any Muggle sports, just like Malfoy. So, the fact that Sameer Bhagwat of all people played them, was a shocker.

He nodded again. 'Yes – I'm particularly fond of Hockey. My mum used to take me to various Muggle sports events, so I know almost all. I've even played in some.' He stated proudly.

Saloni smiled, pleasantly surprised by this titbit, and was about to reply when a drawling voice broke through.

'Excuse me. We would tell you to get lost Bhagwat, but it seems you already are. The Gryffindor table is that way,' Malfoy pointed out nastily. 'And by all means, take your Mudblood girlfriend with you; you'll be doing us a favour.'

Sameer flushed in anger and a perhaps bit of embarrassment. 'I don't remember asking you to butt in, *Malfoy*. You may have been able to order about your little Slytherins, but I'm not one of them. And she's not my girlfriend.'

With a last furious look thrown at the Slytherins, he stormed out of the great hall, Manish and Abhijit following close behind from the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff table with curious looks on their faces. Saloni grimaced at the sudden unneeded fight and turned to Malfoy. 'Do you have to be so rude to every single thing which has a beating heart?'

He rolled his eyes, and they all started eating again as if nothing different had happened. She shook her head and quickly finished her breakfast when she saw Ashwini and Pallavi get up from their seats and wave to her, beckoning her to follow them. She quickly hopped to her feet and they all walked out of the hall together.

Thursday came by sooner than expected, and Saloni was practically skipping to the Hogwarts grounds for her lesson. She reckoned Ashwini was already there since she hadn't seen her at breakfast and unfortunately, Pallavi didn't have this lesson with them. Being a Hufflepuff, she had lessons with the Ravenclaws the following evening. All the corridors were filled with Gryffindors and Slytherins filing away towards the grounds, and Saloni was amongst them. She was being pushed through the hounds of students and it somewhat reminded her of being at the train stations in Mumbai. She was finally pushed onto the grounds and she almost tripped. No, there was no almost

about it ... she actually tripped and fell on someone, who yelped loudly. She quickly sprang up and began apologizing.

‘Ow! What the – You!’ Sameer Bhagwat’s said, scowling at Saloni as if she had seriously offended him.

She looked back at him in dazed confusion. She still felt pretty dizzy from her fall. ‘Me?’

‘Yeah, you,’ He huffed. ‘So now you’re molesting me? Wasn’t it enough that your friend insulted me in front of everyone in the Great Hall?’

‘Hey! That wasn’t *my* fault! And I’m not molesting you – I tripped.’ Saloni said, but he just raised an eyebrow.

‘Right. So, think you could handle flying? Being a muggle born and all?’ He asked haughtily.

Saloni gasped in outrage. ‘Excuse me! I can perfectly well handle it even if I am a *muggle born*. Honestly, I thought you were better than that!’

How dare he prejudge her when almost everyone else had stopped it. Even the Slytherins only called her a Mudblood about twice a day, and that was saying something.

Sameer looked flabbergasted at her accusation and hastily tried to correct his error. ‘No, no! I didn’t mean it like that! I meant that you know – living in the muggle world you never flew, right? So, this is your first time and you could be really lousy. Or not ...’ He added nervously, looking at her expression.

Saloni narrowed her eyes at him searching for any lies. He seemed a bit frightened as well as guilty but had no trace of arrogance or jeering, so she shrugged it off and relaxed. ‘Yeah, I think I can still handle it.’

He blinked again, and his smirk returned so immediately, it made her unhinged. ‘Hmm ... we’ll see.’

They turned around and walked to their own positions after that because they saw Madam Hooch walk towards them waving her fists in the air wildly. Saloni flushed when

almost the entire class was staring at her and she caught Ashwini's eye. Ashwini raised an eyebrow, but Saloni shook her head mouthing that she would tell her later. Once she took her place, she saw that there were about 20 brooms lined up right beside the students, and all the Slytherins were eyeing the tatty old brooms with clear contempt. A sudden sharp voice made everyone jump at least 4 feet in the air.

'Well, what are you waiting for?' Madam Hooch barked.

The students looked at her in exasperation. Wasn't it obvious they were waiting for her to tell them what to do? Clearly, this teacher wasn't the cleverest wand in the store.

'Er ... we're waiting for you to tell us what to do next,' Manish said, his voice laced with amusement.

All the students nodded vigorously and Madam Hooch sighed. 'Oh, of course. Everyone, stand by a broomstick, stick out your hand over your broom, and say *'Up!'*

Almost everyone, including Saloni, shouted 'Up!', except some of them who merely mumbled the word.

The young witch gasped in amazement as her broom obediently shot up in her outstretched hands. She grinned and scanned the lawn, realizing that she was one of the few who had managed this. Potter's broomstick had jumped in his hands at once too, and now he was smirking as if he had received the Nobel prize. Bhagwat and his friend Manish had succeeded too and were doing some sort of weird victory dance. Saloni barely stifled a snort when they twirled in unison and tripped on their robes. Hermione Granger was apparently having no luck, and while her broom lay rolling on the ground, she threw Saloni and her broom a look of deep jealousy. Saloni hid her small smile and watched as Madam Hooch took rounds correcting them. She showed them how to mount their brooms which reminded Saloni of climbing a horse.

'Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off the ground hard.' Madam Hooch said. 'Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down

by leaning forwards slightly. On my whistle – three ... two ...’

But Neville Longbottom had apparently panicked and kicked off too soon. He started rising in the air slowly like a gas balloon, and Madam Hooch gasped in shock. ‘Come back, boy!’

Thankfully, he didn’t float up too high because Sameer and Manish who were standing on either side of him quickly jumped and caught both his legs. They were about to float away hanging on Neville’s leg too, but Madam Hooch and a few other Gryffindors forced them back on the ground. Neville who was whimpering in fear quickly jumped on the floor. He scrambled on his feet, dusting his robes, and then began thanking Sameer and Manish gratefully. They both push back smug looks as Madam Hooch also starts praising them for their quick thinking. The Gryffindors looked impressed but the Slytherins looked ready to kill when Madam Hooch awarded them 20 points for Gryffindor each.

The lesson continued quite smoothly after that, and it turned out that Malfoy, Sameer, Manish, Potter and Saloni, and a few others were the only ones who were fairly well at flying. Potter, of course, was miraculous in flying, since he performed a difficult loop-the-loop in mid-air and even succeeded in standing up on his broomstick without any hand support. Not that the others weren’t good though.

Saloni had lost her balance in mid-air once, but regained it and swung around, sitting back on the broomstick. This was a remarkable feat for her first lesson, Madam Hooch had declared, causing Saloni to go red. Sameer had flown with the agility of an eagle, making a quick swerve here, and a sudden lunge there. Manish was really good too; he had circled a tree 10 times continuously, not stopping for a second. It was like watching the clothes spin in a washing machine, and it was no wonder he got very woozy later. Malfoy looked like he had gotten plenty of practise in flying before since his posture, stance, and grip were close to perfect. Well, that was it really. The rest of the student population looked like confused bugs hanging on to a flying log.



8. TROUBLEMAKERS RUNNING LOOSE

Troublemakers running loose

So, as you can expect, Saloni was in a pleasant mood during dinnertime as she told Pallavi all about their lesson. Ashwini, however, was not so happy and kept grumbling about how she did so much better than Madam Hooch said. Poor Pallavi was stuck between complimenting Saloni and soothing Ashwini, while she desperately tried to eat her steak-and-kidney pie all in one breath. The three had sat at the Hufflepuff table that night after seeking permission from Professor Flitwick, their head of the house. Honestly, the Hufflepuffs didn't seem to mind and kept offering their '*new guests*', as they called them, second or third servings of dessert.

'That was so unfair. She was worshipping some of the others while she didn't even glance at me and the others.' Ashwini said miserably.

'Who cares? You were still great. I saw you.' Saloni said consolingly.

Ashwini still looked pretty unsure and then Saloni tried her final card. 'Look, remember when you told me that first years aren't allowed to play in their house team yet? You have to wait until the third year anyways – you'll definitely get better by then if you practise well.'

Ashwini seemed to think about this for a minute but then looked convinced enough and began eating her pudd-

ing in a much more cheerful mood. Pallavi sighed in relief, her mouth dripping treacle tart from the edges. She must have been fed up with them after a while since she didn't care much about Quidditch anyways.

'Well then – that's settled. Now eat. I'm really tired. I had to attend potions while you two were frolicking around outside.' She grumbled moodily. They were about to protest that they weren't frolicking, but then they saw Sameer and Manish walking towards their table, whispering furiously amongst themselves. Saloni looked at their table curiously to see Hermione Granger glaring daggers at Harry and Ron, hands on her hips. They both looked perfectly calm and continued eating but Saloni spotted Malfoy walking back to the Slytherin table with a dangerous smirk on his face. It was never good news when it came to those three. Sameer and Manish reached the Hufflepuff table and whispered something in Abhijit's ear; he hastily got up and followed them out of the hall at once. Saloni looked at the girls to see that they two were also eyeing the three suspiciously.

'What was that all about?' Pallavi whispered. Ashwini shrugged, looking completely at ease.

'Who cares? All I care about right now is that my tummy is full and I have my soft warm bed waiting for me.' She sighed sleepily. The girls laughed and very soon the incident was out of their minds. After a hearty dinner, they bade each other goodnight and walked back to their own dorms.

Saloni walked into the Slytherin girls' dorm feeling blissfully tired. She had planned to sleep soundly the moment she fell on her bed, but unfortunately Pansy and Daphne were still awake. They were chatting about something in hushed voices and stopped talking as soon as Saloni entered the room.

'Er ... what's wrong?' She asked them cautiously. Daphne seemed unsure of whether to answer her or not but eventually did. The two had gotten off well together, and Saloni was even in a sort-of polite truce with Pansy.

Well, at least they didn't insult each other every second of the day, anymore.

'Well ...' Daphne began nervously. 'Malfoy has challenged a few Gryffindors to a wizards duel. He told us he was meeting them in the Trophy room at midnight.'

'By *'a few Gryffindors'*, you don't mean Sameer and Manish, do you?' She asked, remembering how they had rushed out of the great hall.

Pansy shook her head, a short fringe of her hair falling on her eye. She impatiently brushed it away before answering snappishly.

'No! It was Potter and Weasley. Obviously ... *saint Potter.*'

'Wait – midnight, you say? But that's past curfew!' Saloni exclaimed, the good girl hidden deep within her, coming out. Leave it to Potter to break the rules within the first few weeks of school!

Daphne sighed dramatically. '*Boys.* When have they ever followed rules, unlike us virtuous girls?'

They all giggled, and after a few minutes of gossiping in hushed voices, got dressed and clambered into their beds. After fifteen minutes or so, Saloni could faintly hear Daphne's snores and Pansy mumbling something in her sleep but come what may, *she* just couldn't sleep. What would happen if Potter got expelled? Well, that wouldn't be too bad. But what if Malfoy got in trouble? Well, that wouldn't be absolutely awful too. She was suddenly caught in two minds. Should she be wishing well for her fellow housemate, or should she be bearing ill will about the blond git who taunted her continuously?

After another hour of tossing and turning in bed, she finally got up. God, she had been feeling so peacefully drowsy after dinner. She just *had* to listen to that distracting news!

Saloni quietly got out of bed and walked down the girls' dorms. When she reached the common room, she looked around in confusion. There was no sign of anybody

and it was pitch dark everywhere. She pulled out her wand and muttered *Lumos*, and the tip of her wand instantly lit up with a faint light. She walked to the clock near the mantelpiece and saw that it was 11:55 p.m.

She felt a bit nervous when there was no sign of Malfoy, anywhere downstairs. Did they cancel the duel last minute? No, there was a really less chance of that because she hadn't seen the two Gryffindors near Malfoy after breakfast that day. And they were in all her classes. Maybe Malfoy had already left? But then she would have heard the shrill creaking of the stone wall as it opened and closed since her dorm was on the first floor.

Suddenly she gasped loudly, slapping a hand on her forehead in realisation. Of course – why hadn't she seen this before? Malfoy was a Slytherin ... he had obviously tricked them. He wasn't going to show up and let those two get in trouble for roaming the corridors at night. She wasn't sure about this accusation of hers, but there was a 98 percent chance Malfoy would do just that. It was very like him. The next question was that, now that she most likely knew what Malfoy was up to, what would she do about it?

Saloni cocked an eyebrow at the blank wall in confusion, her mind spinning swiftly. She could either forget that she ever knew about this and go back to bed, or go and warn them. She wasn't at all fond of roaming the corridors at night, but something about Malfoy's scheme felt wrong. Firstly, Slytherins would most likely be noted as cowards in Gryffindor's eyes but worse, if Potter and Weasley got expelled, *she* would have to live with the guilt of never warning them, because Malfoy most certainly wouldn't live with it. He would be delighted instead.

After a few minutes of debating with herself, she grabbed her cloak and quietly walked out of the stone wall. Quickly muttering a *Nox*, she put out her wand light and determinedly strode towards the Gryffindor common rooms, carefully looking out for teachers taking rounds.

She got there just in time as she spotted three silhouettes climbing down the hole concealed behind the portrait of the Fat lady which led to their common room, whisperi-

ng amongst themselves. She sprinted towards them hastily and tapped one of them on the shoulder. It turned out to be Weasley who screamed in fright and spun around wildly.

‘What the – what are *you* doing here?’ He hissed angrily, rounding on Saloni.

‘Listen to me ... you can’t go for that duel with Malfoy. It’s a trap.’ She whispered urgently. Potter opened his mouth to say something but Hermione cut in quickly. Saloni hadn’t even seen her come out of the hole behind the portrait, but for once was grateful for her being there when she started speaking.

‘Yes! That really makes sense! Malfoy’s a Slytherin – he’s just trying to get you in trouble.’

‘Oh, please. You, Hermione, just don’t want us to go because you’re afraid Gryffindor will lose points! And you ... I don’t know what you’re playing at but you definitely wouldn’t come to warn us. You’re on Malfoy’s side; you’re a Slytherin!’ Potter whispered furiously.

Saloni and Hermione sighed in unison, pinning a glare at the two. Apparently, the boys didn’t want any other excuses because they set off without another word. They ran so fast, it almost felt as if they’d disappeared into thin air, and left the girls spluttering behind them angrily. Saloni huffed, glowering at their retreating figures still running in the distance. She wasted her precious sleep to come to warn those ungrateful weasels, and they didn’t believe her!

Suddenly, she heard Hermione squeak shrilly from right behind her. Saloni turned around to see that Hermione was gazing at the empty painting of the Fat lady in panic.

‘She’s gone! The Fat lady is gone! How do I go inside now?’ She whined. Saloni couldn’t do anything except stand behind her shuffling her feet awkwardly. As Hermione moaned and complained for almost a whole minute. She was about to suggest staying hidden in the shadows to prevent getting caught till the Fat lady came back when they heard a loud snuffling noise behind them.

Hermione immediately stopped grumbling and slowly turned around, looking terrified. They caught each other's eye, and without another word, shot off in the other direction after the boys; but not before tripping on their own or each other feet about five times, and falling down on their knees about twice.

After running blindly for what seemed like hours, they finally crashed into somebody. Saloni felt a bit ridiculous that she was actually waiting for something or someone to *crash* into because her feet just wouldn't stop; she really had been very scared.

'Ouch! Hey, what are – *You again!*' Potter's voice broke through sounding extremely irritated. 'What is it with you and scaring innocent students?'

Innocent? Did he dare call himself innocent?

Hermione groaned as she rubbed her head painfully. 'You're not at all innocent, you know? Prowling through dark corridors at night.'

'We're doing the same, actually. But for different reasons.' Saloni commented lightly, pulling Hermione to her feet.

Weasley sighed, rubbing a hand over his overly-freckled face. 'What are you doing here now?'

Hermione swallowed sharply. 'The Fat lady has gone for a nighttime stroll. I was locked out and then we heard a sound behind us. We thought it was Filch, so we panicked, and ...'

'Bolted, without actually seeing what it was?' Saloni offered because Hermione seemed unable to describe what exactly they had done.

She turned pink and nodded curtly. 'Yeah ... that's one way to put it.'

The boys exchanged long, exasperated looks before turning back to them again. 'Well, fine. You can tag along, but don't try to convince us to go back again. We're alr-

eady there at the Trophy room anyways.' Potter added, pointing to a room in front of them.

The crystal trophy cases inside, glimmered where the faint moonlight caught them. Cups, shields, plates, and statues shined silver and gold in the darkness. They all edged along the walls slowly, keeping their eyes on the doors in case somebody entered abruptly. They all just stood there in silence, waiting for whatever was coming. The minutes crept by steadily.

'Malfoy's late; maybe he chickened out?' Weasley suggested, checking his wristwatch.

Saloni scoffed at his ignorance. How did they still not believe her? 'No, you idiot. More like he *tricked* you.'

Potter threw an exasperated look at her and she glared back indignantly.

A sudden noise from the other room made them all jump. They all yanked out their wands even though they knew it would be no use against a teacher. The voice of somebody speaking rang in their ears - and it wasn't Malfoy. It was Filch, the truly horrendous caretaker of Hogwarts, who loved to get children in trouble.

'Sniff around, my sweet, they might be lurking in a corner.' They heard him whisper sneeringly to his equally awful cat, Mrs. Norris.

She could hear Potter inhale sharply before he beckoned everyone to follow him. They all quietly crept towards the other door and exited the room at the right moment since they could hear Filch enter in through the other door. They heard him mutter something to his cat, Mrs. Norris before they ran through a passage full of suits of armour. Suddenly Hermione wrinkled her nose and quickly covered her ears at the repulsing sound while Saloni turned around to see if they were being followed. The boys quickly got to their feet and Saloni jumped as Potter screamed, 'RUN!'

They all ran down the alley and crossed another doorpost and galloped down one corridor then another, without any idea where they ran. They also ran through a tapestry

and found themselves in a hidden passageway, hurtled along it, and came out near their Charms classroom, which they knew was miles from the trophy room.

‘Now do you believe me?’ Saloni panted leaning against a wall. ‘Malfoy tricked you!’

Hermione nodded furiously while the boys looked anywhere but at her.

‘Although, if Filch was here ... who was that *thing* or *person* we heard near the Gryffindor common room?’ Hermione asked after she finally caught her breath. Saloni shrugged nonchalantly. That was actually the last thing on her mind right now. She bit her lip trying to push away the feeling of weariness from her nerves. She was seriously regretting coming to ever warn them, judging by where she was stuck now. She was very far away from the Slytherin common room by now, and leaving at that point would be useless. Filch would just be waiting on the path back to pounce on her. So, she had no choice but to, reluctantly, stay.

‘Let’s go,’ Potter whispered to everybody after catching their breaths. They started walking but hadn’t walked a dozen paces when the doorknob of a classroom rattled and Peeves, the school poltergeist came shooting out. He was a nasty old thing and adored causing trouble. Peeves cackled gleefully at the sight of them as they all froze.

‘Shut up, Peeves – please – you’ll get us thrown out.’ Potter begged desperately.

Peeves grinned unpleasantly. ‘Wandering around at midnight, ickle firsties? Tut, tut, tut. Naughty, naughty, you’ll get caught.’

‘Not if you don’t give us away, Peeves, please,’ Hermione squeaked looking really frightened. ‘Please!’

‘Should tell Filch, I should,’ Peeves said in a godly voice, through which Saloni had to fight down the urge to throttle him and then remind herself that he couldn’t be throttled since he was a ghost.

‘It’s for your own good, you know.’ The troublesome ghost said with a cackle.

‘Oh, since when do you care for our good, Peeves?’ Saloni asked trying to keep her voice calm.

‘Since now.’ Said Peeves mockingly at her.

Then Weasley did the stupidest thing ever. He snapped, ‘Get out of the way’, and took a swipe at Peeves. And then the bloody poltergeist screeched at the top of his lungs – ‘STUDENTS OUT OF BED! STUDENTS OUT OF BED DOWN THE CHARMS CORRIDOR!’

They all ducked under Peeves and ran right to the end of the corridor, where they banged into a door one by one. Potter banged first, then Granger banged into Potter, Weasley banged into Granger and Saloni banged into him. It was like a five-layered sandwich if you considered the door. They separated quickly and Weasley tugged at the door but it turned out to be locked!

‘This is it!’ he moaned. ‘This is the end! We’re going to die!’

Saloni almost laughed at his overdramatic conclusion. Almost...

They could hear Filch running towards the Charms corridor. Hermione scoffed impatiently and stepped forwards, extending her palm in front of Saloni as if expecting her to give something. Saloni raised an eyebrow in confusion causing Hermione to bristle at her irritably.

‘Your wand!’ she hissed.

Saloni gave an ‘Oh!’ of realisation and quickly pulled out her wand, handing it to her.

‘Alohomora!’ she whispered, and the door instantly flew open. They all scrambled in quickly and shut the door, pressing their ears to the cold wood in anticipation.

‘Where did they go, Peeves?’ Filch could be heard saying, sounding a little too excited.

‘Say Please.’ Peeves demanded cheekily.

‘Don’t mess me about, Peeves, now *where did they go?*’

‘Shan’t say nothing if you don’t say please,’ Peeves replied.

Saloni sighed in relief as she realised that the nasty poltergeist was unknowingly buying them time. Filch suddenly snarled loudly, making all of them jump a little. ‘All right – *please.*’

‘NOTHING! Ha-haaa! Told you I wouldn’t say anything if you didn’t say please! Ha ha! Haaaaaa!’ Peeves guffawed gleefully, at what they assumed was Filch’s furious face.

‘He thinks this door is locked,’ Potter whispered in her ear, making her jump again. ‘I think we’ll be ok. What is it?’

They both turned around when someone tapped on their shoulder, to see Ron and Hermione looking so pale that they contrasted with the dull moonlight coming from a hole in the door. One look upwards confirmed exactly why they were so frightened.

With her eyes wide, Saloni felt petrified as she stared into the eyes of a gigantic dog with three heads. Its eyes, as big as Hagrid’s whole palm, looked at them with unmistakable anger. It growled as rope-long strings of saliva dripped from all three of his mouths. Someone, Saloni wasn’t sure who, opened the door and without another word all of them raced outside, slamming the door shut. Nobody was sure why, but it felt like the right thing to do at the moment and so they kept running down the corridor, not stopping even to catch their breaths. When Saloni was finally able to comprehend that they all were going towards the Fat Lady’s portrait, she suddenly stopped. With a yelp, Weasley collided with her but fortunately, they didn’t tumble to the ground as expected. Although Weasley’s head did crash on hers with a stone-like force. Hearing the sudden commotion, Potter and Hermione stopped too.

‘What?’ Potter asked.

‘Well, I’m not going near the Gryffindor common room. I have to get back to my own one.’ Saloni reminded him, wiping a thin layer of sweat from her forehead.

He only grunted in response.

‘It seems you were right about Malfoy.’ Weasley muttered quietly, looking as though he had seriously wounded himself while confessing that. Hermione’s expression turned into one full of smugness as well as fury, which shocked Saloni. She’d never known one could look a combination of both.

‘Of course, we were!’ she crossed her arms over her chest. ‘And do you listen? No! And now we were almost killed by a *three-headed dog!*’

The last line made Saloni plunge into deep thought for a few seconds. Why didn’t Dumbledore mention there was a monstrous dog *in the castle*, instead of going on about the forbidden forest, which was miles away from the school. There could be a whole forest-full of wild animals living in the castle itself, for all they knew.

‘Er ... not sure if it’s the right moment, but *why* is there a three-headed dog living in Hogwarts?’ She chided in faintly.

The question hung in the air for a few seconds before everybody’s faces lit up in bewilderment.

‘Oh, yeah!’ Weasley gasped. ‘What do they think they’re doing, keeping a thing like that locked up in school? Hold on ... where did we see that dog again?’

Hermione’s eyes widened and filled with worry. ‘The third-floor corridor on the right-hand side. It’s not allowed for students to go into! We could get in so much trouble!’

Potter gulped audibly and Weasley looked ready to throw up. But apparently, Hermione wasn’t done talking yet.

‘Did you see what it was standing on?’ she whispered

frantically.

Saloni frowned in confusion, shaking her head since neither boy was in the condition to reply.

‘It was standing on a trapdoor! It’s obviously guarding something!’ she said sharply. After a second, she abruptly straightened her posture and glowered at them.

‘I hope you’re pleased with yourself. We could have all been killed – or worse, expelled. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to bed. Goodnight, Salo.’ She nodded and stormed off toward the Fat Lady’s portrait. Saloni blinked and gave a smile to herself as she looked at the offended looks on the two Gryffindor’s faces. She had a feeling Hermione Granger and she were going to get along very well. *Very well indeed ...*

The next morning, Saloni walked into the great hall and spotted Ashwini and Pallavi huddled together near the Gryffindor table looking rather concerned. As soon as they caught sight of her, they ran towards her at breakneck speed; knocking over two second-years on the way.

‘Where were you? Breakfast is almost over and Astoria said that you weren’t in our bed last night!’ Pallavi said, her brown eyes raking Saloni’s face suspiciously. She took a weary glance at her friends’ faces.

‘Good morning to you too.’ She grinned, trying to lighten the air. But when neither of their stoic expressions wavered, she chuckled nervously. She quickly gave in after they kept giving her glares throughout breakfast, and guided them outside the great hall behind a pillar, and explained all the details of the night before. After she finished the story, they both looked stunned.

‘*Honestly,*’ Ashwini said. ‘Did you have to go after them? I mean, I’m happy Gryffindor didn’t lose any house points but you could have gotten in serious trouble! Or killed! What’s with that three-headed dog anyway? How is it even in Hogwarts?’

Saloni shrugged, but her face screwed up in thought. ‘I don’t know. But Hermione said it was guarding something

– it was standing on a trapdoor.’

Pallavi cocked her head to the side, looking curious. ‘Guarding something? What would it be guarding? Is there something in Hogwarts *worth* guarding? By a giant three-headed dog, no less.’

‘Well, either it’s really valuable or really dangerous,’ A voice whispered from behind Pallavi, who squeaked in surprise and fell to the floor. Ashwini jumped and stared at the spot wildly. Saloni did the same ... except a bit more clumsily.

Behind them, stood Sameer, Manish, and Abhijit hidden in the shadows, all three of them with inquisitive looks on their faces.

‘Hey! Stop eavesdropping, you creep!’ Ashwini shrieked, looking a bit amused. Pallavi was still catching her breath from the sudden assault and Saloni helped her up.

Abhijit gazed at Pallavi’s limp form and grinned sheepishly. ‘Sorry about that,’

‘So,’ Sameer said, turning to look at Saloni. ‘We heard from Harry and Ron that you were with them in their little adventure last night. And you saw a three-headed dog ... and it is guarding something,’

Manish nodded solemnly. ‘You remember the news about the Gringotts break-in? Do you think it has something to do with that? Harry told us that he and Hagrid had gone to Gringotts and cleared of the exact vault in which someone had broken in.’

Pallavi looked at him in shock. ‘What? Why didn’t anyone else know about that? Why would he tell *you*?’

‘Oh, he didn’t tell us. We *overheard* while he was talking to Ron.’ Abhijit piped in. Ashwini sniggered at them and Saloni could exactly see why.

‘You seem to have a slight problem of *‘overhearing’* things you’re not supposed to,’ she pointed out coolly.

Sameer brushed her accusation away and his eyes gleamed with sudden excitement. ‘So? Do you think that

dog is guarding whatever is in that vault?’

‘Well, we don’t even know if the thing in the vault is at Hogwarts. Why would Dumbledore keep it at Hogwarts?’ Pallavi asked, more to herself than anyone else.

Manish shrugged and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. They all fell into a thoughtful silence; nobody knew how long they stood there but were snapped out of their reverie when Potter came skipping out of the great hall with a long parcel in his hand, and Weasley following him, practically drooling at the parcel.

‘What is that?’ Abhijit asked, looking at the parcel. Potter looked at them with an annoyingly smug look while making a show of waving the parcel around under their noses.

‘It’s a Nimbus Two Thousand!’ Weasley said gleefully. Manish and Sameer looked stunned, now staring at the parcel as if it was the great Merlin himself.

‘Whoa! But how did you – first years aren’t allowed their own broomsticks!’ Manish breathed.

Potter chuckled lightly. ‘I know. McGonagall gave it to me. I suppose she doesn’t want me to ride the old school brooms while playing for the Gryffindor team.’

‘You’re not on the team, Potter.’ Pallavi said stoutly, looking annoyed at his smugness. Potter suddenly jumped and looked toward the girls, as if just noticing them. Maybe he had; the girls just noticed that they had been hidden quite well by the eerie shadows clouding the pillar

‘What the – Hey! McGonagall had told me not to tell any other house students about me making the team! You can’t just eavesdrop on us!’ Potter snapped, hiding the parcel behind his back as if they were going to steal it.

‘No, we can’t. That’s their job.’ Ashwini commented, looking pointedly at Manish, who grinned back. She shook her head in exasperation. ‘We didn’t know you made the team, though. Congrats!’

Potter eyed her for a while before his gaze evened out. 'Yeah ... thanks. McGonagall saw me practise my flying techniques on the ground yesterday and she was quite impressed. I'm the seeker.'

Pallavi gave him a small smile too, which he returned and then looked over at Saloni as if expecting a smile or some other niceties. But then he scowled at her when she firmly crossed her arms and avoided his eye. She wasn't about to be nice to him when he was playing for the rival team.

Weasley had finally stopped salivating over the poor broomstick and threw Saloni a quelling look, too.

'You can't tell anyone about this. You never heard anything, alright? Don't breathe a word about me being the new seeker to *anyone*,' Potter warned. Saloni tried to look as innocent as she could when she nodded.

'Wouldn't dream about it.' she said, smiling at him. Potter at once returned her smile and nodded in satisfaction.

The three walked off in the other direction, with a last look back at the chatting boys. While going through the hallway, she grinned when she saw Malfoy standing there with his bodyguard goons.

'Hey, Malfoy! Tell Flint that Potter is the new secret seeker for Gryffindor. He's got a Nimbus 2000 too!'



9. AN INSULT GOES A LONG WAY

An insult goes a long way

It was Halloween morning when Saloni woke up to the smell of pumpkins all over the castle. It had been two months since she had arrived at Hogwarts, and it was now so familiar and homely, it felt like many years had passed. They had started learning a bit more complicated stuff in class, now that they had cleared the basics, and Saloni found the challenge highly enjoyable. As she sat in charms with the other Slytherins and Gryffindors, Flitwick was teaching them flying charms. He had sorted them into partners and made Saloni sit with Pansy Parkinson. Saloni had felt a bit disappointed that she couldn't sit with one of her friends but laughed when she saw the other class' partners.

Hermione had been paired with Ron, and both of them looked prepared to choke the other if *one* wrong word came out of their mouths. Ashwini was with Manish, but neither of them seemed terribly sulky about it even though they kept quarrelling, so it was probably not the end of the world. Potter was with Seamus Finnigan, and Sameer and Neville Longbottom were together. Saloni snorted when Neville beamed happily at Sameer. The other boy looked almost scared to work with Neville, but reluctantly returned the smile.

'Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practising!' squeaked Professor Flitwick, his beady

eyes sweeping over the class. ‘Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too – never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said ‘s’ instead of ‘f’ and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest.

This scene caused her to release a small giggle, as she pictured it in her mind. After stifling the laugh, she screwed her face in concentration. Saloni blinked at the feather on the table in front of her – the feather which she was supposed to send flying. Taking a deep breath, she swished and flicked her wand, loudly whispering – ‘*Wingardium Leviosa!*’

The feather twitched a bit – or maybe that was just her imagination – and then stubbornly stayed on the table, unmoving. After trying the spell unsuccessfully for a few more times, she growled in annoyance. Taking a little break, she looked around the classroom to see how everyone else was progressing. By far, only Sameer and Hermione had been able to make their feathers float and were being heartily praised by Professor Flitwick. Pansy, her partner, had somehow turned her feather black; instead of making it float, the feather was doing some sort of jig on the table. Others weren’t faring any better too – Ashwini’s feather was not flying, but her long black ponytail was, making her look like a peacock. Saloni wasn’t sure if this would gain her points or not.

After the lesson, Ashwini and Saloni caught up with Pallavi who had just returned from Transfiguration, looking quite happy.

‘I finally managed to turn my water beetles into buttons at transfiguration! Although one still had antennas – how was your class?’

They entered the great hall, chatting and laughing, the wonderful Halloween décor adding well to their joyous mood. A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while some more of them swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkins stutter. Students were already sitting at their respective house tables, enjoying the feast. After a quick goodbye, Saloni flew towards the Slytherin table, her mouth watering

at the sight of the delicious food. She sat beside Daphne who grinned at her and resumed eating her mashed potatoes. As she sipped on a glass of pumpkin juice, her eyes went to Malfoy, who was sitting right in front of her. He was looking at her coldly, poking his food around his plate. A moment later he leaned forward slightly.

‘Why did you go warn Potter at the night of the midnight duel? Crabbe saw you that night when you were leaving the common room – you had no right. It was between me and Potter.’ He whispered angrily. Saloni blinked in surprise at this sudden subject and then flushed. She had no idea that someone in her own house had seen her do that, even though it definitely *was* the right thing to do. She opened her mouth to defend herself when Professor Quirell, their rather jumpy and timid defence against the dark arts teacher, came racing in the hall, looking even more scared than he usually did. And that was saying something. Every eye turned to him filled with curiosity, as he reached Professor Dumbledore’s chair and leaned on the table, panting.

‘Troll ... in the dungeons ... thought you ought to know.’ He wheezed, and then promptly fainted.

A second of pin-drop silence fell before the great hall erupted into chaos. The students were screaming and talking on the top of their voices, each one looking more frightened than the other. It took several sparks and fireworks from the Professors’ wands to quiet them.

‘Prefects,’ Dumbledore thundered. ‘Lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!’

Alyssa quickly hopped up and started gathering the Slytherins.

‘Slytherins! Follow me – no need to panic, everyone! Come on, now ... in a single line!’

Saloni whimpered as she was shoved through the corridors by a swarm of students. Right now, none of the houses were going separately and all students were trying to squeeze their way to safety first. Suddenly, someone grabbed her by the back of her collar and pulled her back

into a deserted corridor. She squealed in fright and spun around, coming face-to-face with Manish.

‘What are you doing?’ she hissed, still a bit shaken. He just gazed back at her sheepishly.

‘Sorry – I thought you were Sam.’ He muttered.

Saloni blinked in confusion before frustration overtook her. ‘*What?* You honestly couldn’t tell me apart from Sameer! My hair are much longer than his! Do I look so much like a male from behind?’ She asked, craning her neck, trying to look at her back. Manish sniggered silently, and when Saloni glared at him, he erupted into full-blown laughter. She ignored him and looked around, trying to catch sight of anybody. That ‘anybody’, being the troll. She’d never actually seen one, but if they were anything like the muggles portrayed them, they were not exactly her dream come true. She looked back at Manish to see him squinting at something behind her. Then his face lighted up and he began hopping on the balls of his feet, waving his hand madly in the air. She turned around and saw four figures running towards them and as the moonlight finally fell on them, she saw it was Sameer, Ashwini, Pallavi, and Abhijit. She released a breath she didn’t know she was holding, as the girls tackled her in a bone-cracking hug.

‘Oh my ... we were terrified! We didn’t see you anywhere in the crowd, and we thought you were lost or ... or that the troll got you!’ Pallavi said, finally releasing Saloni.

Ashwini released her too and then smiled. ‘We accidentally pulled back Sameer through the crowd because we thought it was you. You should have seen his face – he was livid. *How could you mistake me for her! I’m not that feminine-looking from behind, am I?*’ she mocked, imitating Sameer’s voice as an overly high-pitched one.

‘Hey! That’s not how I sound!’ Sameer protested from behind them, and that was when they finally remembered the other boy’s presence. Ashwini sniggered and was about to tease him more when Abhijit cleared his throat.

‘Can you smell something?’

All of them frowned and began sniffing the air when suddenly they caught a foul stench. A disgusting mixture of rotten eggs and old socks. And after a moment, they heard a voice – a low groaning and feet stamping; coming right towards them. All of them exchanged looks before quickly jumping into the shadows and peeking out, trying to keep as silent as possible. Although that was a bit of a challenge since there were six of them squeezed into a dark corner.

‘Hey, Ashwini! Stop pushing your head back so much! It’s digging in my chin!’

‘It’s not Ashwini, It’s Pallavi! And I’ll try to get my head lower, hold on ...’

‘Ouch! Pallavi, you’re stepping on my knee!’

‘Sorry, Salo ...’

‘*Shhhhh* ...!’

They all fell silent and watched, horrified, as a huge figure came into the light. A twelve feet tall troll, with greenish-grey skin, hands as big as boulders and the ugliest face ever seen. Gigantic hairy feet, with toenails as long as a knife blade. Someone inhaled sharply from Saloni’s right, and they were about to try to hide even more when two human figures crashed into them. Pallavi squeaked in surprise as she pushed back, her elbow digging against Saloni’s ribs. She winced and pulled out her wand. After quickly muttering *Lumos*, she directed the wand and shoved it right under the unknown figures’ noses.

‘*Harry? Ron?*’ Abhijit whispered cautiously. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Hermione! We’re here for her. She’s still in the girls’ bathroom on this floor. She doesn’t know about the troll!’ Potter replied hurriedly.

She was about to ask why she was still in a bathroom but decided she would deal with that later. Right now, they needed to save her. She only wondered whether the others would help.

The troll had now stopped next to a doorway and peered inside a big room. After a minute's hesitation, it slowly crawled inside.

'Let's lock it in. The key is still connected to the lock.' Weasley whispered.

Sameer made a sort of sound in between a snort and a sigh. But either way, it sounded exasperating. 'We can't! That's the girls' toilet – Granger would still be in there.'

They hid in silence before anyone could comprehend what he had said.

'Merlin's beard! We have to save her!' Manish yelled, and all of them jumped to their feet. As if on cue, a blood-curdling scream tore through the room the troll had just entered. They all scrambled up and tried to overtake each other as they sprinted into the room.

They cautiously peeked in once they reached the door and saw Hermione shrinking against the opposite wall, looking stark white. She was shivering uncontrollably as the troll advanced on her, knocking away all the taps and toilets in their way.

'*Now what?*' Abhijit hissed, looking panic-stricken.

'Confuse it!' Potter replied immediately, and Saloni was almost impressed at his quick thinking. There were lots of them, so they could easily distract the ugly troll long enough to get Hermione out of there.

Manish, Sameer and Abhijit acted at once, spreading out on all three sides of the troll. They pulled out their wand and began shooting loud and bright fireworks into the air. The others surrounded the other sides of the troll and began doing the same. The troll grumbled and turned around slowly, his tiny eyes taking in all the fireworks. It looked in every direction stupidly, trying to figure out who to go for first. As he was still staggering around, Weasley quietly crept behind it and pulled Hermione, who was still in a scared daze, to her feet. When he pulled Hermione near their side, they all abruptly stopped the fireworks and sparks and ran for the door as fast as they could.

The troll seemed confused by the sudden silence, as it looked around everywhere - It gave them enough time to race through the corridor and a floor up.

‘We ... did it. We ... made it out ... alive.’ Ashwini panted, leaning against a stone wall.

‘What is happening here?’

They all froze as the sharp voice of Snape broke through, coming from right behind them. They slowly turned around and saw Snape, McGonagall and Quirell standing there, looking furious (and in Quirell’s case, scared).

McGonagall looked so angry, that they were surprised they couldn’t see smoke coming out of her ears. She stepped forward determinedly and fixed her stern gaze on them.

‘What were you doing roaming the castle at night when there is a *troll* somewhere around?’ she barked. All of them looked at each other hoping that the other would answer first. They were all terrified.

Then a timid voice broke through.

‘Er, Professor? They were looking for me – trying to save me.’ Hermione mumbled, staring at the floor.

Professor McGonagall turned to her with a quizzical look and beckoned her to explain.

‘I went looking for the troll because, I – I thought I could deal with it on my own – and ...’ she whimpered, as she couldn’t explain any further. Everyone was staring at her with bewildered looks – Weasley, a relieved one. Saloni felt her loathing grow for him even more. It was obvious that he had done something but poor Hermione was taking the blame for his cowardly self.

‘Rubbish!’ Sameer suddenly snarled, stepping forward. ‘That’s not true and you know it, Granger.’

Manish nodded and glared at Weasley. ‘*He* insulted her after class this evening and Hermione had been in the bathroom, crying throughout the feast. She didn’t know about

the troll. Potter got cold feet at the last moment, it seems. They went to save her.'

Professor McGonagall looked puzzled for a while before her face fell into an unreadable expression. Weasley had turned bright red while Hermione had buried her face in her hands. The others just stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to say or do.

'So, that covers you three,' Snape gestured lazily to Potter, Weasley, and Hermione and then stared at the rest of them. 'But – what about you six?'

Abhijit coughed lightly. 'Er, we just got separated from the crowd – and then hid when we saw the troll. We did help in saving Hermione though.'

He was met by murmurs of agreement and a few shrugs until Pallavi quickly chimed in.

'Oh, you'll still find the troll somewhere over there,' she pointed towards the direction they just came from. 'If you hurry.'

Snape sharply turned to the spot, and after a fleeting look at them all, hurried off along with a trembling Quirrell. McGonagall was still staring at them and then gave a sharp nod.

'Very well – you all certainly broke rules, but it seemed you didn't know what you were doing. Although incredibly stupid, you showed a considerable amount of bravery. I'll give five points to each of your houses.' She said, and they all shared incredulous looks. 'But, Mr. Weasley, you were rude to a fellow student and even though it was not your fault, could have caused serious harm to Ms. Granger. I advise you to think and then talk, in the future. You all may go.'

Without another word, they all hurried off. After walking in silence for a while, they reached the staircase which divided the house's common rooms and went off in separate ways without another word, Weasley throwing a last furtive look at Manish and Sameer. Saloni walked towards the dungeons, praying to the gods that the troll had been caught. Looking back, their working together had been fun

– well, minus the presence of Weasley and Potter, though they weren't that bad to work with, truly. She slouched in the common room, walking straight to her bed. Hoping that her roommates were already asleep, she crept in quietly but sighed in disappointment when she saw Pansy, Tracey, and Astoria sitting in their beds, gossiping loudly. What pleasure they got in gossiping, she could never understand. As she walked to her bed, all eyes turned to her.

'Where were you?' Pansy demanded. Saloni groaned inwardly, not wanting at all to talk right now. She was extremely tired and they had classes early in the morning the next day.

'Oh, nowhere special,' she replied and without another word hopped in bed, closing her eyes. A few more questions were thrown her way, but she ignored them and after a while, the light finally went out.



10. QUIDDITCH AND GOSSIPS

Quidditch and gossips

As November dawned, the weather turned freezing. Saloni wasn't used to such weather, living in Mumbai and all – but she had visited several other countries during winters so it didn't bother her much. It snowed very heavily and the castle was soon covered in a thick white sheet. Hagrid could be seen every day through the frost-covered windows, defrosting the school broomsticks and wearing a ridiculously long coat made of a material that looked as uncomfortable as the rags the troll had been wearing. The quidditch season had started too, and so had the excitement of students. Saloni couldn't help but be thrilled too – she had heard so much about the magical sport and she would soon be seeing her first match. On Saturday, the Slytherins would be playing their first match against Gryffindor. Because of this, they were sharing even more taunts and hexes than usual and Saloni had narrowly avoided a trip jinx from a third-year Gryffindor.

The Slytherins already knew about Potter being the new seeker and were frantically discussing their moves against him, every day at breakfast. Ashwini had fallen into a pouty mood nowadays since she knew Potter, a first year, could play and she couldn't.

That day as the girls were walking across the grounds after their charms lesson, they saw Potter, Weasley and Hermione warming up. Hermione had conjured a little

flame which she had trapped in a jam-jar and they were standing there, basking in the surprisingly substantial warmth. When Hermione saw them, she beamed and gave a little wave which they all returned. They had got along quite well with her and found her to be surprisingly good company when she wasn't forcing them to study.

Ashwini suddenly nudged her and pointed discreetly at a figure who was limping towards Potter and the others.

'Is that Snape?' Pallavi asked with a bit of concern. Saloni could tell why – he was limping and they could see something was wrong with his left leg. He limped over to Potter and snatched a book out of his hand, saying something that caused him to glare at Snape angrily. After a moment, he left.

'What's with his leg?' Ashwini asked.

'Dunno – it seems to be hurting him a lot, though. Poor guy,' Saloni shrugged. They all walked off again, the topic still in their mind.

The next morning, the great hall was buzzing with enthusiasm. It was the first match of the season and Saloni was sitting there, amused, as she watched the Slytherin quidditch team discussing their plans urgently. She noticed that Malfoy, like Ashwini, looked rather down as he watched the team with envy.

'What's wrong? You want to play in the team too?' she asked him sympathetically. His eyes snapped to her as he quirked an eyebrow contemplating if she was taunting him. Apparently, he decided not, because he answered.

'Yeah – wish I could. They let Potter play but not anyone else. He gets the special treatment again ... as well as a new broomstick! And the teachers say they aren't partial.' He sneered, biting his toast viciously. Saloni grimaced as she realised what he said was quite true. None of the other students had been given a chance to try for the team, and nobody had definitely been given new broomsticks by the *Professors*.

'That's true, I guess. Too bad ... maybe we all will be permitted to try out next year?' she suggested. He just

shrugged and turned away to talk to Blaise Zabini.

By eleven 'o' clock that day, almost the whole school had gathered at the quidditch pitch, seated in the stands. Saloni was perched between Ashwini and Pallavi, both of who had big grins on their faces as they eagerly waited for the match to start. Her view of the pitch was suddenly blocked, as Sameer stood right in front of her.

'Yes? You want something?' she asked, pursing her lips.

'We have to get to the seat behind you – would you mind moving a bit?' he asked lazily. She scooted closer to Pallavi and he stepped past her climbing in the seats behind her with Manish and Abhijit. They were all wearing their house scarfs. She smiled as the Slytherin team entered the pitch and clapped and hooted loudly along with the other Slytherins. Ashwini gave her an exasperated look and Saloni stuck her tongue out at her jokingly. As she turned back to look as the Gryffindors entered, (Ashwini hooted even louder than Saloni had, and Manish and Sameer were standing on their seats cheering) her view was blocked again – this time by a dark-skinned boy with black hair and twinkly brown eyes. He was a Slytherin too, she noticed, as she looked at his green and silver scarf.

'Hello – can I help you?' she asked. He nodded to the seat beside her.

'Mind if I sit here? Everywhere else is full,' he said. She nodded and he sat down quickly, as a batch of Hufflepuffs pushed past to get to the other stand.

'I'm Kunal Dev – and you are?' he asked, looking at her Slytherin scarf. He seemed to be quite comfortable around his fellow Slytherins but kept throwing dirty looks at Manish, Sameer and the other Gryffindors.

'Er, I'm Saloni Bhagwat,' she said, grinning awkwardly. He frowned at her for a moment before his eyes lit up in recognition.

'Ah, the muggle-born Slytherin,' he chuckled. 'Yeah, I heard about you. It's really rare being a *muggle-born*

Slytherin, you know.'

'I've been told,' she murmured. They didn't talk anymore as the match started and both teams mounted their brooms. Saloni felt that familiar excitement bloom in her again, as the players went in the air and Madam Hooch blew her whistle, indicating that the game had begun. The commentator Lee Jordan was giving them a rather amusing time.

'And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor – what an excellent chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too ...'

'JORDAN!' McGonagall bellowed.

'Sorry, Professor,'

Pallavi giggled behind her hand as the commentary went on.

'And she's really belting along there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood's, last year only a reserve – back to Johnson and – no, Slytherin have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes ...'

Saloni swore under her breath, keeping her fingers crossed as she watched keenly.

'Flint flying like an eagle up there – he's going to score – no, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor keeper Wood and Gryffindor take the Quaffle – that's Chaser Katie Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and – OUCH – that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a bludger – Quaffle taken by Slytherin ...'

Saloni cheered loudly as Ashwini scowled, and someone smacked her across the head lightly from behind. She looked around to glare at Sameer who was looking at her as if it was her fault Katie Bell was hit. She turned around quickly when the commentator started speaking again.

'That's Adrian Pucey speeding off towards the goal-posts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger – sent his way

by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which ...'

Saloni blinked but then she remembered that Fred and George Weasley were identical twins, one of the many brothers of Ron Weasley, they had met on the train on the first day of Hogwarts.

'Nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead, and off she goes – she's really flying – dodges a speeding Bludger – the goalposts are ahead – come on, now, Angelina – Keeper Bletchey dives – misses – GRYFFINDOR SCORE!'

She groaned as the Gryffindors, including Sameer, Manish and Ashwini, screamed in delight. She checked the seekers eagerly, hoping that the Slytherin seeker would catch the snitch – it was worth one hundred and fifty points. Potter was just soaring in the air high up, watching the game, so she supposed the snitch hadn't been spotted yet. The commentary began again.

'Slytherin in possession – Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys, and Chaser Bell and speeds towards the – wait a moment – was that the Snitch?'

Saloni looked away from Chaser Pucey so quickly, that her neck snapped audibly. Rubbing her sore neck, she squinted at the flash of gold she had seen. Potter seemed to see it too because he sped after it at once, Slytherin Seeker Terence Higgs, hot on his heels. All the other players seemed to have forgotten their roles and were looking at the two Seekers fly towards the Snitch with eager anticipation. Potter was on the lead, his hand extended – he almost caught the Snitch – WHAM!

They all jumped as Marcus Flint, the Slytherin captain, blocked Potter on purpose, sending him spiraling in the other direction. The Gryffindors howled in anger, and Sameer and Manish were now practically jumping on their seats, waving their fists at Flint furiously. Saloni couldn't help but feel guilty when she was actually relieved that Potter couldn't catch the snitch, even though it was Flint's fault he couldn't. Madam Hooch called Flint down and spoke to him angrily before offering a penalty shoot to

Gryffindor. Although she did laugh at the next bit of commentary. Lee Jordan was finding it difficult to take sides.

‘So – after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating ...’

‘Jordan!’ McGonagall growled threateningly.

‘I mean, after that open and revolting foul ...’

‘Jordan, I’m warning you ...’

‘All right, all right. Flint nearly kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I’m sure ...’

Even Ashwini, who had looked like she wanted to murder Flint, had to smile a bit when Jordan looked at Professor McGonagall timidly, asking if that was all right. When she nodded, Jordan continued –

‘So, a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinnet, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue play, Gryffindor still in possession.’

The match was back on track again, though Saloni couldn’t help but pout a bit when Spinnet easily scored during the penalty. Though her pout broke into a tiny smile when Potter narrowly missed another Bludger as it went straight for his head.

From here, she had a clear view of Potter as he gave a sudden and weird lurch. It happened again; it looked like his broom was trying to throw him off. He began zig-zagging through the air, every now and then giving a sharp turn. He looked like he was about to fall off his broom.

‘What the hell is going on with Harry?’ Manish whispered from behind her, having noticed the sudden movements too.

‘Salo – what’s with Potter?’ Ashwini whispered frightfully, gripping Saloni’s arm.

‘I don’t know! What is he doing? Why hasn’t anyone noticed?’ she answered urgently. Pallavi pulled a pair of

binoculars from her robes as she fixed her stare on the zooming form of Potter.

‘His broom – it’s acting oddly!’ she shrieked over the loud noise of the crowd. Lee Jordan, apparently, didn’t notice anything and went on –

‘Slytherin in possession – Flint with the Quaffle – passes Spinnet – passes Bell – hit hard in the face by a Bludger, hope it broke his nose – only joking, Professor – Slytherin score – oh no ...’

Saloni couldn’t be bothered to cheer with the rest of the Slytherins this time – she was too busy looking at Potter’s acrobatics which no one had noticed yet. How had no one noticed yet?

Sameer leaned forwards and swiftly swiped the binoculars out of Pallavi’s grip, ignoring her ‘Hey!’ of protest. He gazed at Potter, and Saloni could almost hear the wheels turning in his head.

‘If I didn’t know better, I’d say he’s lost control of the broom,’ he said, still following Potter through the binoculars.

Manish stilled. ‘But he can’t have ... has it been tampered with?’

‘No! Only really strong dark magic can tamper with a broomstick like Nimbus two-thousand.’ Abhijit replied. ‘No one here can do that, can they?’

A voice suddenly gasped loudly from beside Saloni. She looked around and saw Kunal, who was on the edge of his seat looking at Potter. He snatched the binoculars from Sameer, who bristled indignantly, and turned it away from the pitch in a completely different direction.

‘*What is she doing?*’ he hissed. They all looked around to see where he was looking. Hermione Granger was hidden behind Snape’s seat, but apparently, everybody was finally noticing Potter and nobody saw her. She had even knocked aside Professor Quirell in the act, and he now looked bewildered. Suddenly, Hermione pulled out the flame in the jam-jar they had seen on the grounds, and set

in on Snape's robes. All of them gasped and hissed at her sudden actions. Snape didn't notice anything as he was gazing straight at Potter.

'Hey, Professor! Look behind you!' Manish shouted, grabbing Snape's attention when Hermione quickly hurried back to her seat. A flurry of panic rose through the teacher's stall as everyone started putting out the fire. After putting it out, they turned their attention back to Potter, who had swung off his broomstick and was trying to get back on. After the fifth try, he succeeded – his broom had stopped misbehaving too. As the crowd was getting back to normal, Potter zoomed through. Suddenly, he stopped and clamped a hand to his mouth as if he was going to throw up.

'Is he sick?' Abhijit asked uncertainly.

As though answering his question, he landed on the ground and fell to his knees, and started coughing loudly; something gold fell in his hand. It took a while for them to guess what it was and for Potter to finish his coughing fit, but when they did, they all gasped in unison.

'I've got the Snitch!' Potter declared, waving the little golden ball in the air. After a second of silence, full of confusion, the Gryffindors erupted into cheers. The bitter truth dawned on Saloni as she screwed her eyes shut, and fixed a false smile on her face before congratulating Ashwini. As they all got down on the pitch, they saw Flint arguing with Madam Hooch.

'*He didn't catch it, he nearly swallowed it,*' Flint was howling at Madam Hooch who was staring disapprovingly back at him.

Saloni sighed as Pallavi put a hand on her shoulder, looking at her sympathetically. Ashwini was hopping in joy because of Gryffindor's victory but stopped abruptly when she noticed Saloni's mood.

'Potter got really lucky. Imagine just swallowing the Snitch like that.' She said in an attempt to cheer her up.

Saloni smiled at her and felt a bit bad for dampening her good mood. 'It's okay, Ashwini. Gryffindor played rea-

lly well – you can be happy,’

Ashwini blinked before a big grin settled on her face again. Pallavi chuckled lightly and waved over to Abhijit who was walking over to them.

‘Why do you think Hermione set Snape’s robes on fire?’ he asked as he fell in step with them while they walked to the castle.

‘Dunno – she wouldn’t do that without any reason. Wait, you think Potter’s broom going haywire, had something to do with Snape?’ Pallavi asked skeptically. Saloni frowned as she recalled her previous memories.

Snape had been limping the other day, and his leg was bleeding. Hermione had set his robes on fire at the game, and Potter’s broom had stopped malfunctioning at once.

This was missing a big part in the middle and she was determined to find out what it was.

‘We have to go talk to Hermione,’ Saloni said firmly and started walking, her steps a bit more determined than earlier. Ashwini and Pallavi shared knowing looks before hurrying off after her and leaving Abhijit looking at them, blinking in confusion.



11. QUESTION AND ANSWERS

Question and answers

They all searched for Hermione far and wide but they couldn't find her anywhere in the school. She wasn't in the Gryffindor common room, nor in the library. They asked some Gryffindors where she was, but nobody seemed to know. They were about to go back to sulk in the library when they bumped into Neville.

'Oh, hey Neville,' Pallavi greeted. 'Have you seen Hermione anywhere?'

Neville blinked, and then nodded, his round face alight. 'Yeah, she headed to Hagrid's cottage with Ron and Harry after the match. Gryffindor did great! Oh - nothing on you, of course, Saloni.'

Saloni smiled at the boy. 'Don't worry. Anyways, thanks for telling us where Hermione was.'

After a quick wave in Neville's direction, the three sped off toward Hagrid's cottage. He and Saloni had gotten along well after she kept her promise and tutored him in potions every other weekend. His improvement was noticeable in class, and sometimes even Snape seemed surprised at the sudden change.

They all were panting by the time they reached Hagrid's hut, and knocked on the clammy wooded door, timidly. Hagrid, the enormous groundkeeper of Hogwarts,

opened the door. He peered down his big bushy beard at the girls, in confusion. ‘Er – ‘ello. Don’ think we’ve met before. You here for somethin’?’

Ashwini cleared her throat slightly. ‘Yeah, actually – we’re looking for Hermione,’

As soon as she said this, Hermione appeared at the door beside Hagrid, frowning. When she saw them, she grinned at them at once, stepping aside to invite them in.

‘Oh, hi girls! Come on in – Er, you don’t mind, do you Hagrid?’ she asked, looking at the giant man unsurely.

‘Ah, no! Not at all! You wan’ some tea?’ he asked merrily, clapping Pallavi on the back with his huge hand and making her stumble.

They all nodded and sat in three on Hagrid’s lumpy chairs as he busied himself making more tea for them. Potter and Weasley were there too, glaring at them from across the table. Hermione plopped down on a chair beside Ashwini and stared at them.

‘So, why were you looking for me?’ she asked casually, taking a sip of her tea.

Saloni fumbled with the sleeves of her robes for a minute, before blurting out – ‘Why did you set Snape’s robes on fire?’ and then mentally cursed herself, when Weasley sniggered softly and Hermione turned red.

‘Wow – that was the epitome of subtlety,’ Pallavi whispered sarcastically in her ear. Saloni lightly slapped her knee before turning back to Hermione who was slowly returning to her original colour.

‘Oh – you saw that?’ she said uncomfortably. ‘Well, it’s a long story ...’

‘We have all evening,’ Ashwini said, crossing her arms tightly.

Hermione gave her a look before staring down at her tea. Pallavi leaned forward determinedly.

‘Well, actually that’s not all. Why was Snape limping that day on the ground? You know – the day you had conjured that flame in a jar. That was very clever, by the way,’ she said kindly, and Hermione perked up.

‘Thanks! It was rather tricky to conjure – I thought no one would notice. Anyways, that thing about Snape ...’ she trailed off, looking at Ron and Harry uncertainly.

‘Is none of your business,’ Potter intervened hotly before she could continue any more of her stuttering. Ashwini scowled at him and Pallavi gave him a glare.

‘But *you* know!’ she said, the irritation evident in her tone. ‘It’s none of *your* business either!’

Weasley opened his mouth, probably to protest, but Hermione cut him off. ‘She’s right, you know,’

‘Hey! You’re only taking their side because they’re your good friends. You know ... a sort of girl power!’ Potter finished lamely.

Hermione’s expression hardened. ‘You’re being stupid. I’m taking their side because they’re *right*. A feeling you must be completely unfamiliar with.’

Weasley and Potter turned slightly pink and sank back into their armchairs with matching sulks on their faces. Hermione smirked slightly and turned to them with a familiar glint in her eye – the one she got when she was about to go into a long informative ramble. Only this time, they actually wanted to hear it.

‘Let me start from the beginning. Well, girls, do you remember the news about that Gringotts vault being broken into? The object that was inside it ... Harry and Hagrid took it the day Harry was doing his Hogwarts shopping. And the object that was in it – Hagrid still won’t tell us what it was.’ at this Hermione shot Hagrid a cross look. ‘We think Snape’s trying to steal it.’

There was a noticeable amount of silence at this declaration, and Saloni had to replay her words a few more times before she properly caught on.

‘What? Why the hell would he do that?’ Ashwini asked, her mouth set in a confused frown. Hagrid grumbled something incoherent and then set the teapot down with a loud *‘thud’*.

‘He’s not stealin’ anything! I’m telling you!’ he boomed.

‘Hagrid, he almost killed Harry today at the Quidditch game!’ Ron exclaimed, and then noticed Pallavi’s confused look. ‘Oh, yeah I forgot about you – well, today at the game, you saw how Harry’s broom was acting up? Snape was jinxing it. Hermione saw him and then, well ... you know what she did.

At this, all of them laughed and Hermione turned red again. ‘I did stop him from sabotaging Harry’s broom any more, didn’t I? Anyways, moving forward – That day you saw Snape limping on the grounds? Harry found out what was wrong with him.’

‘He was bitten by that three-headed dog we saw that night.’ Potter said gravely. ‘He’s been in the room. He’s seen that trapdoor the dog’s guarding.’

Hagrid who had been listening quietly all this while gave a start. ‘How do you know about Fluffy?’

They all stared at him for a minute, before Weasley asked: ‘Fluffy?’

Hagrid nodded dazedly. ‘Yea’ that’s the dog’s name – he’s mine – bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las’ year – I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the –’

‘To guard the ...?’ Potter pushed on eagerly. Hagrid glared at him before shaking his shaggy head.

‘No, I’m not sayin’ any more. You know too much already. An’ for the last time – Snape’s not stealin’ anything!’ he added furiously when Potter tried to cut in.

‘How are you so sure of that?’ Ashwini asked. ‘I’ve always felt there was something wrong with Snape.’

‘He’s a Hogwarts teacher! He wouldn’t try an’ kill a student. And I’m tellin’ yeh – stop meddlin’ in things that don’t

concern yeh. What that dog is guardin' is only between Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel ...'

'Nicolas Flamel?' Pallavi cut in quickly. 'Who's that?'

Hagrid didn't answer but looked distinctly angry with himself.



12. ENGROSSING HOLIDAYS

Engrossing holidays

Christmas had come much sooner than expected. Maybe it was just all the schoolwork they had been engrossed in, so they didn't realise. But it was a great change. After a lot of provoking, fights, and questioning, Manish managed to get the information about Snape and everything Hermione had told them. Almost everything he said to persuade them was mostly about how Harry was his friend and how he deserved to know the truth as much as they did. They didn't really see anything in the logic he was trying to drill into them, but he was following them around everywhere, so they finally gave in. They did make him promise that he wouldn't tell anyone except his friends ... because there was no way he wasn't telling them. They just didn't want to cause any panic around the school. And if the teachers found out they knew about the stone, especially Snape, he would do anything to get them expelled.

The classes were especially hard, now that the holidays were arriving. It was like the professors had a competition going on, about who would give them the most homework. The only class which was bearable for the Slytherins was Potions, in which Snape would give them noticeably fewer essays, much to the other houses' anger. The weather was also freezingly cold, and since Saloni was only used to the lukewarm temperature of India, often caught mild colds.

Almost all the first-years were going back home for the holidays, and she couldn't wait. She had already owed her parents that the holidays were arriving, and they were

all ecstatic to have her back after such a long time. Ashwini and Pallavi had also promised to write to her and search for more information on Nicolas Flamel.

Potter and Weasley though, were now giving them the silent treatment. They were still mad at Hermione about including them in the case and were acting specifically cold towards them now that they knew. The girls didn't mind at all – in fact, they were quite happy at being rid of those sour pests. Hermione though had given Saloni some humongous books from the library and was insisting that she read it through in search of Flamel before the holidays. Ashwini and Pallavi helped a lot. Ashwini may not seem it, but she was exceedingly fast at reading. Pallavi said that she had many ancient history books about magic at her home, and she would definitely look them through. They both had decided to not mention anything to their parents since they would definitely get skeptical at the sudden questioning. Saloni couldn't ask her parents anything even if she wanted to – they were muggles.

After a week, Saloni found herself getting into the Hogwarts express with some of her luggage, shaking with excitement. She couldn't wait to show her parents some of the magical stuff she had collected for them – especially Sharvari. She would be thrilled. Saloni had collected different sweets including chocolate frogs, Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans, and Drooble's best-blowing gum.

'Whew ... that was an exhausting term,' Pallavi commented as they found an empty compartment. 'A great one though ... Hogwarts was everything I expected, and more.'

Ashwini nodded in agreement but she seemed distracted by the trolley witch who was coming their way with candy-on-wheels. Saloni laughed at her longing expression and gently bumped her arm with her own.

'Hold yourself – she's going compartment by compartment.'

They spent most of the train ride after that eating and talking over the fond memories at Hogwarts they were leaving behind for their Christmas vacations. When the train stopped and the final goodbye hugs were given,

Saloni watched the girls walk away with their parents with big grins on their faces. As soon as she saw her parents and Sharvari standing there, she sprinted towards them as fast as she could with the heavy luggage.

‘Mom! Dad! Oh, I’m so glad to see you again!’ she squealed, as her parents tackled her in a hug.

‘We did too! We missed you – how was school? What did you learn? How was the experience? Did you learn any magic spells?’ her father questioned, a mixture of emotions on his face. Sharvari was squeezing her into a hug as soon as her parents let go and was asking her so many questions at once that she couldn’t understand half of them.

‘Let her breathe, you two!’ her mom scolded, pushing Sharvari away and gently hugging Saloni. ‘Hi, Salo – how was school? How was it out there ... the big experience?’

Saloni grinned and began narrating all her escapades as they all walked to the car. The whole ride home was filled with chattering and loud noises and she tried her best to explain everything – though she had to snatch her wand away from Sharvari twice. She kept waving it around furiously as if expecting it to give off sparks or something. As soon as they got home, Saloni raced upstairs to her room and flung the door open. Looking around, she took in everything, smiling fondly. It felt good to be home.

Her holidays in Mumbai were amazing – her parents took her to the beach, to the mall, and to the theatre all in one week. It was wonderful, although she missed Hogwarts a bit. Ashwini and Pallavi had written to her, both saying they found no mention of Nicolas Flamel in their books, much to her slight disappointment. She had shown her parents and Sharvari a few easy spells that they were allowed to use at home, like Lumos and Alohomora, and they were all amazed. She also gave them sweets, which they quite enjoyed despite the weird looks they threw them.

It was a slightly chilly Sunday, and Saloni was lazing around in her garden, reading a muggle mystery novel. Her parents had taken Sharvari to the beach, since she had burst into tears that morning, saying they didn’t love her

anymore and were only paying attention to Saloni. The usual little sister drama.

Saloni was just about to head back inside the house to take a short nap when her telephone started ringing. She hurried inside at once and answered it, and was surprised when she heard a familiar voice:

‘Hey, Salo!’ Hermione’s voice rang from the telephone. ‘I gave Bookeri a break and decided to just call you instead – poor owl has been making many trips to my house.’

‘Er, yeah. That’s thoughtful of you,’ Saloni replied. ‘So, did Potter and Weasley find anything about Flamel?’

Hermione sighed, and it echoed through the phone. ‘No. They wrote to me yesterday, but no luck. You know, they told me they were doing their best, but I have a feeling they’re not really researching a lot.’

Saloni laughed at her cross tone. ‘Let them enjoy their holidays, Hermione. It’s not fair that we’re having fun here and they’re going through the whole library.’

‘We have a reason!’ Hermione insisted. ‘We’re in the muggle world – they have access to wizarding books! They should make the most of it. And I’ve already gone through three libraries in Muggle London. I want to see if Flamel had any sort of connections in the muggle world. Many wizard and muggle families became related when a wizard or witch married a muggle. Maybe Flamel had some ancestor who was a muggle too!’

‘Oh, that’s ... that’s very clever, actually!’ Saloni answered, pleasantly surprised. Not for the first time, she had to appreciate Hermione’s quick wit. She had never thought about the possibility that Flamel could also be included in the Muggle world in some way since he did not seem very popular in the Wizarding one.

Hermione seemed flattered and continued rambling on about how she was going to ask her parents about some Muggle named Flamel. They talked for a while, and then after Saloni promised to try and find out about Nicolas

Flamel, hung up. With a soft sigh, she walked back to her room, ready to finally take that nap.



13. THE STONE FIND

The Stone find

The rest of her holidays were quite uneventful, as she mostly spent her day going through big stacks of historical muggle books. Sooner than expected, she found herself back at Hogwarts after the vacation, along with Ashwini and Pallavi.

‘Hey, Salo!’ Ashwini called out from behind her, racing forwards to catch up with her.

Saloni looked around at her, frowning. ‘Hey. Where have you been? I haven’t seen you since breakfast.’

‘Yeah, sorry – I was at the quidditch pitch with Sameer and Manish. The next match is Slytherin vs. Hufflepuff. Wood’s really making the team work hard ... we’ve got a good chance!’

She grinned at Ashwini’s excited face. ‘Good for you! Let’s go find Pallavi now.’

They both walked towards the library while talking about the recent quidditch matches, when they saw Neville and Malfoy, apparently in some sort of feud. Malfoy was laughing at him, as Neville was on the floor with his legs stuck together, and staring back at the nasty Slytherin in fright.

‘Oh, that git.’ Ashwini whispered furiously. Saloni nodded in complete agreement, and they both went towards them hurriedly.

‘Malfoy! Let him go!’ she said loudly when Malfoy raised his wand to probably throw another hex at Neville. Malfoy quickly looked around and smirked at them.

‘I was just practising the leg-locker curse. A tricky one, you know ... but I think I got the hang of it.’ he sniggered, looking down at Neville, who looked close to tears.

‘Do you have to perform it on *him*?’ Ashwini scowled, as she set on chanting the counter-curse on the poor Gryffindor.

‘He’s the easiest target,’ was all Malfoy said, after which he sauntered away in the other direction. Neville whimpered as Ashwini completely removed the spell from him, and shakily got to his feet.

‘Thanks ... I thought I was going to have to have to hop all the way to the Gryffindor common room.’ He said miserably.

‘No problem, Neville. You know, I think you should do something about Malfoy. He keeps harassing you in between classes when nobody’s around. Report him ... or better, get yourself some giant bodyguard friends like Malfoy.’ Saloni commented, earning an amused snort from Ashwini.

‘I don’t think there are bulkier students than Crabbe and Goyle in our year, and they are friends with Malfoy already. And don’t tell me I don’t deserve to be in Gryffindor because I can’t stand up to Malfoy. He’s already done that.’ Neville sniffed.

Saloni really did think he wasn’t brave enough to be in Gryffindor, but she knew this would upset him more, so after a quiet consolation on their part, they walked away towards the library. They met Pallavi there who was lounging in one of the chairs with a book in front of her. She didn’t really seem to be reading it though, because her eyes were glassy and her gaze was an inch away from the book.

‘Hey.’ Ashwini said as they approached her.

She quickly snapped out of her daze and looked over at them. ‘Oh, hi. What are you guys doing here?’

‘Umm ... we had planned to meet here yesterday to do our homework, remember?’ Saloni said, gazing at her in concern. ‘Are you okay? You seem lost.’

Pallavi nodded, though a thoughtful frown was still etched upon her face. ‘Yes, yes – I was just thinking about what I heard at the Quidditch pitch today. You know, the news about Snape referring to the next match.’

‘What?’ Ashwini spluttered, turning red. ‘Snape’s referring? Why?’

‘Not a clue – I heard Wood talking about it.’ she replied.

‘That’s awful! He’s bound to find a way to make Gryffindor lose now!’ Ashwini moaned, flopping down on one of the chairs.

Saloni suddenly looked at the two in horror. ‘Oh no ... you don’t think he wants to try and kill Potter again, do you?’

The two looked at her funny for a while before Ashwini replied cautiously. ‘I thought you liked him.’

‘I do. But that doesn’t mean I completely trust him, you know.’

Pallavi nodded. ‘Well then, I suppose you have a valid point. Though I don’t think he’d do it twice during a match – that would be too obvious. We’ll have to keep an eye out for him.’

They all agreed and decided to keep a close eye on Snape during the next match, just in case he was up to something. They all pulled out their homework and started on it, although they wasted most of their time pointlessly discussing how many ways Snape could sabotage the match.

The next few days were tense for the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, since the match drew nearer. The girls had plenty of run-ins with Sameer, Manish, and Abhijit; all three of them were desperately hoping that their houses would win and were often caught gambling amongst

themselves. It was a normal day and they were all having breakfast at their specific house tables when Hermione came walking to the Slytherin table.

‘Hi Salo,’ she greeted, and Saloni’s eyes widened at her courage. All the other Slytherins were giving her disgusted glares, and she thanked the gods that Malfoy hadn’t come to breakfast yet. He would have made this a lot worse.

‘Er – Hermione! What are you doing here?’ Saloni gritted out, trying her best to be polite.

‘I want to talk to you.’ Hermione said, and then pointedly eyed the Slytherins. ‘Alone.’

Saloni blinked and then shoved a few pieces of bacon in her mouth before getting up swiftly. ‘Alright. Can we get the girls too, if it’s about ... Er, that person?’

Hermione thought about this for a second but then nodded swiftly, her bushy curls bouncing around her face. She turned around and waved enthusiastically at the other two girls, and after a few confused glances, they followed her out of the Great Hall. Saloni did notice that Weasley and Potter were looking sulky about something, but that didn’t bother her. They looked sulky about many things these days.

‘So, what’s this about?’ Pallavi asked once they were out of the Great Hall and in a narrow, dark corridor.

Hermione’s eyes sparkled at the question, and genuine excitement dawned on her face. ‘I found out who Nicolas Flamel is! Well, actually Harry did ... Harry and Ron didn’t want to tell you though. They said –’

‘Hermione! Stay on topic.’ Saloni interrupted, and Hermione stopped her ramble, turning pink.

‘Sorry. So, Nicolas Flamel – hold on a second.’ Hermione cleared her throat and pulled out a large, fat book from her book bag. She flipped it around until it landed on a page that had been dog-eared. Hermione looked at the folded part in disgust before looking at the girls again.

‘Sorry – Ron dog-eared it, even though I’ve told him not to. So here it is ... Nicolas Flamel. Read this,’ She quickly shoved the book in Ashwini’s hand, and they all gathered around to read what she asked them to.

*

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher’s stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The Stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Philosopher’s Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera-lover. Mr Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight)

*

‘Whoa ... we did it! We found out who Flamel is! And if my hunch is right, we also found what that dog’s guarding, right?’ Ashwini asked Hermione, who nodded eagerly.

‘Yes! The Philosopher’s Stone! That’s what was inside the vault Hagrid cleared that day, and that’s what the dog’s guarding!’ Hermione said breathlessly.

Pallavi looked a bit down for a moment. ‘Well, don’t you remember? Someone tried to break into the vault which contained the Stone – someone wants to steal it, and I bet you anything it’s Snape. That’s why he was in the

room the day we saw his leg bleeding. He wanted the Stone for himself!

‘I suppose there’s a good chance of that, but we must not jump to conclusions. It could also *not* be Snape.’ Hermione replied.

Ashwini made a sound that was in between a snort and a sigh. ‘Hermione, come on. Who else could it be? All the evidence point towards him.’

They tried to explain, but Hermione remained firmly convinced that it could also be someone else. Saloni had to agree. She didn’t completely trust Snape, but it felt like the girls were only trying to blame him because they didn’t like him. After a rather heated quarrel, they all went on their way because the students were starting to get to their classes, and they didn’t want to risk anyone overhearing them.



14. 'BOYS!' (NO OTHER EXPLANATIONS NEEDED)

Boys

The next time they saw Hermione, was during the Quidditch match. She was in one of the seats with Weasley beside her. When she saw them, she waved, gesturing them to come. They all walked towards her in a cheerful mood, with the light breeze making their scarves ruffle.

'Hello! Would you like to sit with us?' she asked brightly. Weasley looked a bit disgruntled about this but didn't say anything when she glared at him fiercely. They all agreed and sat down next to Hermione, discussing the chances of Gryffindor winning the match. Sameer, Manish and Abhijit were also in the seats right next to them, and all were wearing bright coloured paint on their cheeks to support their team. Sameer gave her a challenging smirk as she sat down next to him; She just scowled back heavily and turned away from him. The Slytherin boy Saloni had met during the previous match, Kunal, was also there about three seats away. He smiled at her when he caught her eye and then they both turned to look at the players who were starting to come on the grounds in their Quidditch clothes.

'I've never seen Snape look so mean,' Weasley whispered to Hermione, who nodded distractedly. 'They are off, look ... Ouch!'

The all jumped at the sudden yell and turned around to see Malfoy in the seat right behind theirs. He had poked Ron in the head rather sharply.

‘Oh, sorry, Weasley, didn’t see you there.’ Malfoy grinned broadly. ‘Wonder how long Potter’s going to stay on his broom this time? Anyone want a bet?’

‘Oh, sure. How about ... I don’t know ... the whole match?’ Ashwini snapped, though her gaze never left the game. Snape had awarded Hufflepuff a penalty because George Weasley had hit a Bludger at him. ‘Lunatic, that George! Why doesn’t he just focus on the game?’

‘You know how I think they choose people to play for the Gryffindor team?’ Malfoy began even more loudly, looking annoyed at being ignored.

‘Nobody cares what you think, so shut it, and let us watch the match in peace!’ Pallavi said angrily. Malfoy turned slightly pink and sneered at her.

‘You’re that Hufflepuff brat, aren’t you?’

‘I am a Hufflepuff – don’t know about the brat part, though. I thought those were usually in Slytherin.’ She replied coolly, and then shot Saloni an apologetic look. ‘No offense.’

Saloni rolled her eyes, but smiled, and turned to the game again. Potter was circling the stadium as he searched for the snitch. Manish cursed furiously when Snape awarded Hufflepuff another penalty, for no reason at all.

‘So, anyways,’ Malfoy continued as if nothing had happened. ‘It’s people they feel sorry for that they take on the Gryffindor team. See, there’s Potter, who’s got no parents. Then the Weasleys, who have got no money. You should be on the team Longbottom – you’ve got no brains.’

They all turned to Neville at this, who turned bright red. ‘I’m worth twelve of you, Malfoy!’

He looked even more scared when there was silence on Malfoy’s end for a second, but Hermione and Ron beamed at him encouragingly. Though, Neville’s delighted

expression only remained for a second, because then Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle started howling in laughter.

‘Longbottom, if brains were money, you’d be poorer than Weasley, and that’s saying something.’

Sameer put a hand on Neville’s shoulder, as he leaned forward, eyes scanning the pitch for Potter. Weasley look furious at Malfoy’s jab, but he seemed pretty worried for Potter too because his eyes kept flickering from Potter to Snape.

‘Oh, shut up, Malfoy!’ Abhijit said exasperatedly.

‘Guys! Harry!’ Hermione squealed suddenly, and they all stood up quickly as they spotted Potter flying at break-neck speed toward the ground.

‘You’re in luck, Weasley, Potter’s obviously spotted some money on the ground!’ Malfoy shouted as the crowd around them was yelling at Harry to go faster.

They all had seen this coming. Malfoy really didn’t know when to stop, and Ron had lost his patience. He was on top of Malfoy in a second, wrestling him to the ground. To their immense surprise, Neville also began to help him.

‘Come on, Harry!’ Hermione and Ashwini were screaming, jumping up and down on their seats, taking no notice of the fighting boys. Below the seats, Weasley, Neville, Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were tangled together, trying to punch and kick each other. It was such a rush that they couldn’t even see whose arms and legs were who’s. Pallavi screeched as somebody below grabbed her foot as leverage, and quickly pulled out her wand.

‘*Protego!*’ she shouted, and all three of them were yanked away from each other at once. Pallavi’s shield charm wasn’t very strong, since she was pretty startled when she cast it. The charm broke after a while, and all of them leaped on each other again. Turning away quickly, Saloni was just in time to see Potter speeding toward Snape. If she squinted, she could see a tiny glimmer of gold right near Snape’s ear. Potter shot towards him, and just as

the tiny ball of gold was about to streak past him, he caught it.

The entire stadium erupted in cheers at the quick victory.

‘Yes! Guys, where are you? The game’s over! Harry won! We’ve ... what is going on?’ Sameer stopped his yelling when Abhijit tapped him on the shoulder. He looked at the ground where the boys were still punching and shouting. ‘Oh, for god’s sake – *Protego!*’

At his rather powerful spell (which Saloni begrudgingly noticed), they finally sprang apart for good. Ron tried to leap on Malfoy once again but was blocked again by the charm. Malfoy scrambled up from the floor, and along with Crabbe and Goyle, raced off in the other direction of the stands hurriedly, Manish laughing madly at their scared expressions. Ron had a few deep gashes on his face where someone had obviously scratched him with fingernails. Neville was out cold on the ground, and Ashwini, Pallavi, and Saloni pulled him up together and after tremendous effort, they managed to bring him to consciousness. The girls quietly walked away, and in the distance, they could hear Hermione telling Weasley off. Chuckling softly, the three walked back into the castle. It had been quite an eventful day.



15. DEAR PROFESSOR QUIRELL

Dear Professor Quirell

The next day was comparatively normal, and Saloni found herself walking towards the library alone. Ashwini and Pallavi had classes, and Saloni was just returning from Transfiguration since she had a free period next. She was turning down the corridor when she heard some weird noises behind her. She looked around and saw Professor Quirell walking in the other direction, and some third-year Slytherins were blatantly laughing at him, not even bothering to lower their voices. The poor Professor looked faint with nervousness. Then, from out of nowhere, Potter arrived from a doorway and noticed the scene. He glared at the third-years until they walked away uncomfortably, and when Professor Quirell looked his way, he smiled at him. He said something to him, which would most likely have been something comforting because Quirell looked a bit less scared. He went away, and Potter was about to do the same when Saloni caught up with him.

‘Hey, Potter!’ she called, and he turned around in surprise.

‘What?’ he demanded, crossing his arms.

‘What was that all about? Why are you suddenly trying to play the hero for Quirell?’ she asked. He looked un-hinged for a moment before getting his senses back.

‘That is none of your business.’ He said, though looked quite uncertain.

‘Oh, come on – I already know everything about the Philosopher’s Stone and all. If this is something related to it, you can always tell me.’

He pondered on this for a while but eventually gave in.

‘Alright,’ he sighed. ‘Yesterday, after the match, I saw Snape going in the forest alone ...’

‘The Forbidden forest?’ Saloni interrupted. Potter glared at her.

‘How many other forests do we have here? Anyways, I saw him going towards the forest alone, and Quirell was there. I flew up there on my broom and overheard them talking. Well ... more like, Snape was threatening him. He was talking something about Quirell not wanting him as his enemy and about where his loyalties should lie ... I reckon he was talking about the Stone.’ Potter explained, lowering his voice at the last bit. ‘He wants Quirell’s help in getting it – there must be many other enchantments and curses aside from Fluffy, which only Quirell must know how to break.’

Saloni was slightly dazed by the end of his short speech. She never knew Snape could go that far as that. How could he use poor Professor Quirell like that? She remembered how everyone was giving him a hard time for being shy and timid, when he was actually really brave, standing up to a guy as intimidating as Snape. With this thought, her respect for Quirell grew abruptly. With this overwhelming information still in mind, she trudged off towards the library without another glance at Potter.

She told Ashwini and Pallavi about it, and they were both equally astonished about it. They did expect Snape to be up to something because of his behaviour at the game, but nobody expected him to blackmail and threaten another teacher to get to the stone. Saloni proceeded to throw disgusted looks at him the whole week, much to Snape’s confusion. He even tried complimenting her in class, but instead of her usual beaming smile, all he got was a curt nod.

Hermione, it seemed, had already begun her exam preparations even though the exams were ten weeks away. She had also drawn up a revision timetable for Saloni to follow, although she was pretty sure she never would; the timetable consisted of time for just a three-hour break all through the day, and the breaks included only lunch, dinner and breakfast. She claimed that these exams were terribly important to get into the second year.

The girls hardly got time for anything else, because the teachers gave them enormous piles of homework every day and Hermione was hissing after them, asking them to revise every second of the day. Saloni also spotted Sameer, Abhijit and Manish actually studying in the library. Turns out they did study like other students when they weren't creating havoc around the school. They had gotten along well with the Weasley twins throughout the year, which wasn't really a surprise. The Weasley twins were just as passionate about creating disasters as they were; if not, more.



16. DRAGONS AND ANGRY OUTBURSTS

Dragons and Angry Outbursts

The next few days were almost unbearably boring, because there was honestly nothing to do. Eat-sleep-study-rinse-repeat ... this was their daily schedule. As usual, Saloni was on her way to the Slytherin girls' dorm, when she bumped into Malfoy. He didn't say a word – just kept walking on, which was odd, since he never missed an opportunity to chastise her. He also seemed gleeful about something and kept muttering to himself.

'You seem happy.' Saloni commented, trying not to sound as suspicious as she felt. He turned around and scowled at her.

'So?'

She shrugged back. 'Nothing – I was just noticing. Why do you seem so happy?'

He said nothing. Just gave her a mysterious glance, and walked away toward the boys' dorm. Saloni narrowed her eyes at his back as she walked back to the girls' dorm with a weird feeling in her chest. Sitting on her bed, still fully dressed, she pondered what Malfoy was going to do. The last time he had that cruelly smug look on his face was during the Midnight Duel fiasco; that had definitely turned out for the worse, so she was right to be anxious. She had a good mind to go wait in the common room couch, in

ng against it, because it really was none of her business, she fell into an uncomfortable sleep.

The next few days, she could notice the abysmal looks exchanged between Potter and Malfoy. She tried questioning Hermione about the matter but she quickly brushed it off and changed the topic. It was very odd, but Saloni wasn't going to get more involved in anything that had to do with Potter any longer. The results were never nice. She had informed Ashwini and Pallavi about this, but neither was really helpful. Ashwini kept blaming Malfoy for every single reason she could find (most of the reasons were off topic), and Pallavi just rolled her eyes and made Saloni promise that she wouldn't get involved in their business again.

They all spend the rest of the week in noticeably grim silence. They all were walking towards the grounds on Thursday since it was the first pleasant evening in a few weeks, when they spotted a shadow looming behind the tall tree they all were sitting under. Pallavi looked around slowly and there stood Kunal, the boy Saloni had met during the first match, whispering something with Pansy. She seemed quite delighted at whatever he was telling her and after a moment, she smiled at him and sauntered off. He shook his head in obvious exasperation and flopped on the ground.

'Hi,' said Saloni. He jumped at the sudden sound, but relaxed when he spotted her.

'Oh, it's you. Hey.' He answered though she didn't miss the uncomfortable look he threw Ashwini. He was still wary of Gryffindors it seemed, but he didn't look as disgusted as he had during the match.

'What were you whispering to Pansy?' Pallavi asked, looking slightly curious. He narrowed his eyes at her and for a moment Saloni thought he was going to tell her to piss off, but then he surprised her by actually answering the rather personal question.

'I was telling her about the latest news. You know, the one about how Potter told Malfoy and Neville Longbottom

some stories about how he actually had a dragon.'

Ashwini's eyes widened almost comically. 'What? I haven't heard anything like that!'

'You're supposed to keep your ears open if you want to hear at all,' he replied sardonically. She bristled at the comment, but Pallavi stopped her from retorting with a hand on her shoulder.

'Potter has a dragon?' Saloni asked.

'That's what he told Neville Longbottom, apparently. He snuck out of his dorm at midnight to release the monster,' He explained. Ashwini sniggered. 'I meant the dragon, not Longbottom! Even told him to come and warn him if any of the teachers found out. Malfoy found out somehow and went to McGonagall. Blabbed everything'

'Oh, let me guess. Then they were all caught, lost a gazillion house points, got detention, and lived happily ever after.' Pallavi interjected, looking completely disapproving.

'Well, yeah. Except for the happily ever after part.' Kunal replied, his voice laced with amusement.

'Oh no!' Ashwini suddenly cried, making them all jump. 'Almost all of them are Gryffindors! Please don't tell me Potter had taken along Hermione and Ron!'

'Erm ... just Granger. Weasley's in the hospital wing - why?' Kunal asked.

'The house points. They lost house points. Just get on with it - how many points did we lose?' Ashwini said, squeezing her eyes shut as if the news was going to physically hurt her.

'A hundred and fifty!' he said cheerily. Her eyes snapped open again, and Saloni cursed herself for wanting to laugh when her face when blotchy red in anger. Pallavi patted her back soothingly, though she also seemed on the verge of hysteric laughter when Ashwini's face switched from an angry red to a pale white.

'Er ... I have to go.' Kunal cut in, pointing to some of

his friends who were waving over at him. 'See you.'

They both waved at him, as he raced off towards the other end of the grounds and then looked at their seething friend. Pallavi looked nervous but tried to slowly console her.

'It's alright, Ashwini. I'm pretty sure Gryffindor will -'

'How dare that selfish bastard!' Ashwini screamed suddenly, making them both take a step back in fright. 'How dare he! Does he *ever* care about how his little misdeeds may affect his house! Honestly, one hundred and fifty points!'

'I know, I know. It was horrible of him,' Saloni said but shrank back when Ashwini fixed her glare on her.

'Of course, it was! And how could Hermione help him like that - I thought she had more sense!'

'You know, now that you bring it up ... I'm pretty sure Hermione wouldn't have helped him without any good reason. There must be something going on. Hey - do you think there's actually a dragon?' Pallavi gasped.

'No, there's not,' said Ashwini scornfully. 'Potter just likes to get into unnecessary trouble. The midnight duel was clear proof.'

They didn't waste any more time trying to change her mind, since they were sure she wouldn't hear a word that would get Potter on the good side of any of their theories. She seemed determined to hate him, at least for the time being.

Saloni was having a hard time choosing a side. She did think that Potter had made up the entire thing, but a bigger part of her said there really was a dragon. Oh, curse it all! She was going to ask Hermione tomorrow. She told this to Pallavi, who agreed to come along with her for the interrogation. After finally giving up trying to console Ashwini, they all walked to dinner, feeling a lot less happy than they had previously.

The next day, they both cornered Hermione right after breakfast was over. She was heading out of the great hall alone, looking quite surly than usual. They had lied to Ashwini saying that they were going to make a quick trip to their dorm because if she had come along, she would have definitely thrown a temper tantrum in front of Hermione. The bushy-haired Gryffindor yelped loudly when they pulled her back behind a big stone pillar.

‘Oh, hi girls! You scared me. I just ... Er, what is it?’ she asked hurriedly, noticing the stern looks on their faces.

‘What is this about you and Potter tricking Neville and Malfoy into detention? I mean, even if Malfoy is mean to you, that was rather petty,’ Saloni said sharply, her hands flying to her hips. Hermione looked alarmed, but then her face cleared into one of disappointment.

‘You really think I’d stoop that low? And I’d never do that to Neville!’

Pallavi scowled at her. ‘Then what is that rumor we heard about you guys? That you and Potter had a dragon and were outside your dorms at midnight, for merlin knows what. You even told Neville to warn you if any teachers found out about you.’

Hermione blushed and looked down in embarrassment. ‘I’m not proud of it, but we did not lie. There really was a dragon. Hagrid got him while gambling with some wizard over the summer. It was just a baby but we couldn’t keep it in school, could we? So, we contacted Ron’s brother, Charlie ... Oh, he works with dragons in Romania.’ She explained when Pallavi raised an eyebrow at Charlie’s name.

‘You send the dragon away?’ Saloni asked. Hermione nodded before looking around nervously.

‘That’s why we were out at midnight. We couldn’t exactly parade around with a baby dragon in our arms in broad daylight, could we?’

‘Wait,’ Pallavi said. ‘That still doesn’t explain why Malfoy was there.’

Hermione waved her hand in the air in disinterest, as if trying to get rid of a fly buzzing in front of her nose. 'Oh, yeah ... that. Well, Malfoy saw the dragon because he was spying on us while we were at Hagrid's. Long story short, he found out about us giving Charlie the dragon at midnight that day, and then went and blabbed everything to Professor McGonagall, who naturally didn't believe him and gave him detention for being out at midnight.'

Pallavi grimaced at the injustice of it all, and then fixed Hermione with a glare. 'Wait ... Neville got detention, and you all got off with just a few points from Gryffindor once you were caught?'

Hermione looked affronted. 'A few? McGonagall took one hundred and fifty points of Gryffindor! That's quite a lot! And for your information, we got detention too. Neville included.'

'Yeah, well you all deserved it. *Gryffindors* ... so reckless.' Pallavi snapped back, mumbling the last bit to herself. Hermione swelled up in anger and now resembled a pufferfish with bushy hair. Saloni thought she was going to hex Pallavi, by the way her hand lingered near her wand pocket.

'So, you were saying that we should have just let Hagrid deal with it all on his own? I thought Hufflepuffs were supposed to be kind.' She said, her voice oddly calm. The look on her face was icily cold, though.

'We are,' Pallavi snorted. 'But only at the right moment. Trust me, this is not one of them. And as for Hagrid, he was just as stupid to go along gambling with people for *dragons*. Really, now!'

'You shut up about Hagrid!' Hermione hissed, and this time she did draw out her wand, although she didn't point it to them. Saloni jumped in between them that instant, in case the quarrel went out of hand.

'Okay, girls – cool it! We are not dueling each other on such a small matter,' she said hastily. They both glared at her but said nothing. Hermione reluctantly pocketed her wand, and with her nose in the air, she stormed off. Pallavi

just huffed and crossed her arms tightly over her chest. As soon as Hermione was out of sight, Saloni rounded on her.

‘Now you’ve done it!’

Pallavi looked confused as she blinked at her. ‘What?’

‘Hermione was the only person who was willingly telling us all the latest information about the case on Fluffy and Snape. Now I doubt she’ll even want to talk to us!’ she mumbled sulkily. Pallavi’s eyes widened and then she looked slightly embarrassed. That only lasted a moment, because the next second she was smiling widely.

‘What?’ it was Saloni’s turn to ask.

‘We don’t need Hermione! We’ll keep a look out for ourselves! How long were we going to depend on her anyway?’ Pallavi asked, a determined glint in her eye. Saloni frowned as she thought about the question. It was true that Hermione wasn’t keeping them up to date on the news nowadays. Maybe they *could* look around a bit on their own? But the only problem is – she didn’t know why they should.

‘Why? It was none of our business anyways. We never should have gotten involved in the case.’ Saloni spoke her thoughts out loud, her shoulders slumping. Pallavi narrowed her eyes and then slapped her sharply on her arm, taking her by surprise.

She yelped in pain and turned to look at her friend. ‘Hey! That hurt!’

‘It was supposed to.’ Pallavi sniffed. After earning a glare from Saloni, she uncrossed her arms and looked her straight in the eye. ‘Don’t you want to help our school?’

Saloni was startled at this sudden innocent question. This was the last thing she had expected her friend to say. ‘Er ... what?’

Pallavi just rolled her eyes. ‘Our school. Don’t you want to save it? If Snape gets hold of the Philosopher’s stone, who knows what he will do with it. He could destroy the school! And then we’ll have to go back home.’

Home. The minute she used to hear that word nowadays, she immediately thought of Hogwarts and not her house in Mumbai. She knew she should feel ashamed about that, but she just couldn't. She really didn't want to leave Hogwarts. Completely convinced, she turned to look at Pallavi and nodded in determination.

'Alright, then. Let's do it. We'll find that stone before Snape.'



17. LAZY DAYS (EH, NOT QUITE)

Lazy days (Eh, not quite)

They had explained Ashwini their plan the next day, and none of them were as pleased about it as she was. She kept saying that it was about time they took matters into their own hands. The next day, it was a weekend, and they all were sitting beside the lake. They had pulled off their socks and shoes and were soaking their legs in the cool water. It was very relaxing, sitting there, lazing around in the sun. After spending such a hectic week, this was a great change.

‘This is great ...,’ Pallavi mumbled drowsily. ‘Let’s talk about something.’

‘What?’ Ashwini grunted from beside her.

‘Anything. I don’t want to fall asleep – but I will if I don’t keep talking.’

Saloni laughed and turned to her side, propping up on her elbows. ‘Alright. Anyone got any gossip about the students?’

‘Oh, yes.’ Ashwini replied, suddenly looking very gleeful. ‘Potter and Granger got detention. Filch is dropping them off. They have to go somewhere right now with Hagrid.’

Oh, so it was *Granger* now, instead of Hermione? *I could live with that for some time*, Saloni thought.

‘Really? Filch *and* Hagrid. That must be one horrible detention.’

Pallavi suddenly shot up, and if the other two weren’t lying on the ground, they would have jumped. ‘What the – Potter and Granger?’

Ashwini nodded slowly, gazing up at her in confusion. ‘Yeah. They got detention along with Neville. But didn’t Granger already tell you that?’

‘No! Potter and Granger! And Malfoy and Neville!’ Pallavi said frantically, waving her hands around wildly. Ashwini looked around her and gave Saloni an alarmed look, mouthing ‘*Is she okay?*’

‘Pallavi?’ Saloni prodded cautiously. ‘Why do you keep repeating the name of the students who got detention? We got it ... calm down.’

‘No!’ Pallavi snapped, looking annoyed. ‘Look around, you idiots!’

They both turned around quickly and looked in the direction she was looking. Sure enough, Malfoy, Neville, Potter and Granger were standing at the edge of the Forbidden forest with Hagrid. All of them were looking terrified as Hagrid started beckoning them into the forest. He also had his black house dog, Fang, with him. Fang wasn’t nearly as huge as the three-headed dog Fluffy, but he was almost as ferocious.

‘What in Merlin’s name is he doing? Is he ... taking them in the forest?’ Ashwini whispered in alarm, quickly getting to her feet to get a closer look. Both the girls followed suit. It really did look as if Hagrid was taking them inside the forest.

‘Yes, I think so!’ Saloni said, squinting at the figures that were walking inside the forest. ‘Is he insane? The Forbidden Forest is ... well – forbidden!’

Pallavi looked confused for a moment before her face paled horribly. 'Oh, no! No, no, no!'

Ashwini seemed to think exactly as the Hufflepuff witch was thinking because she went white too. 'They're going to serve detention in the forest, aren't they?'

Saloni nodded before a wave of irritation swept through her. 'How could Dumbledore allow this? The old fool ... honestly, he was the one who named it the *Forbidden forest* and forbid students from going there! And now, he's ordered Hagrid to take them inside it - for detention, of all things!'

'It's strange, I know. What are they going to do in the forest anyways?' Ashwini asked curiously.

'Dunno,' Pallavi said worriedly. 'But there are lots of creatures in the forest. Werewolves, I've heard.'

'It's not a full moon.' Saloni pointed out. Pallavi nodded in agreement, though she still looked concerned. Ashwini sighed and picked up her shoes and socks, pulling them on one by one.

'Let it go. I'm sure they aren't completely unarmed against the big bad werewolves and other monsters.'

'This isn't funny,' Saloni snapped. 'They could die.'

'Puh-lease. Do you really think Dumbledore would let them go in such a dangerous forest without anything to protect them? They'll be fine.' Ashwini scoffed. Pallavi pursed her lips in disapproval, still looking unconvinced. But instead of arguing about it any longer, they all put their shoes back on, and then with a last glance towards the forest, walked back to the castle.

The next few weeks, they all were not going to investigate the forest incident because of their upcoming exams. They all were stuffed inside a big hall, with absolutely no air, and made to write their exams in the allotted time. Sometimes, Saloni really wished that Hogwarts had air conditioning. No, not sometimes - only the times when she

had to sit on her clammy desk and write her entire exam while sweating profusely. The exams were quite a breeze for her – or at least the written bit was. They were also called in by the Professors to do practical exams. Those were the tricky bit. They had to make pineapples dance across the tables, and turn mice into snuff boxes. Everything considered, she thought her exams went pretty well, and she even enjoyed the new kind of challenge.

She was walking towards the Slytherin dorms one fine afternoon, feeling cheery that the exams had finally finished and humming merrily. She was just about to walk into the dungeons when she saw Hermione walking down the stairs with a huge pile of books in her hand. She was trying to balance them by trapping them under her chin and arms, but they were wobbling furiously. Saloni smiled at her figure from a distance. She would never admit it out loud, but she missed Hermione. The girls had decided that they would solve the mystery on their own, without Hermione's help, but now Saloni wasn't sure if any of the mystery was left to solve. They had collected all the clues already, and though they connected together, she wasn't sure where they would lead. There was an unsettling feeling that they were missing something.

Without knowing what she was doing, Saloni began walking towards Hermione. She obviously saw her approaching, because she froze and stared at her eagerly. Almost as if she was waiting for her to start a conversation.

'Er ... hi. Want some help?' she asked awkwardly. Hermione just blinked at her, and for a moment Saloni thought she was going to walk away. But her reaction was completely unexpected. Hermione gingerly placed her books on a high seat beside the wall and tackled Saloni in a hug. 'Oh! What the ...'

'Oh, I missed you!' Hermione squealed, squeezing her tighter. 'I really missed you. I wasn't sure if you wanted to ever talk to me after I insulted your best friend. I was ever so sad – I'm sorry about that though. I was just upset she called Hagrid names. He was really going through a tough time, and –'

‘Hermione!’ Saloni coughed. ‘It’s alright! Just ... you’re sort of choking me.’

Hermione let go of her at once, looking relieved. ‘Oh, I’m so glad you forgive me.’

‘Yeah ... Er, I missed you too.’ Saloni said, grinning broadly. A pleasant feeling flooded through her at winning her friend back. It had been months since they had last talked, and whatever the other girls believed, they needed Hermione to solve out this Philosopher’s stone case. ‘Hey, I saw you go to the forbidden forest for detention the other day. What happened there? You weren’t injured, were you?’

‘No, no. Don’t worry,’ Hermione replied dismissively, picking the huge stack of books up again with a wheeze. ‘Although, I do have something to tell you. Something that happened in the forest.’

‘The forest?’ said Saloni worriedly. ‘Oh, I knew I should have complained to the Professors about sending students in the forest. What happened? Did you come across a monster? A ... A werewolf perhaps?’

Hermione made a narky sound which seemed like a mixture between a whale’s call and a pigeon’s coo. She would have laughed at the ridiculous noise, but the hint of annoyance on the bushy-haired witch’s face stopped her. ‘For goodness’s sake! How many times do I have to tell people that werewolves only turn into their wolf forms at midnight – during the full moon! This was neither, really. And a werewolf as a person certainly wouldn’t –’

‘Oh, who cares! Just get on with the story, will you?’ A voice yelled from behind them.

Saloni’s eyes widened involuntarily as she turned to see the student who had dared to interrupt one of Hermione’s rambling sessions. Because she definitely didn’t have enough gall to do that. As she turned, she saw Manish and Sameer hidden in the shadows, standing right behind them.

‘How long have you been standing there?’ she asked, torn between annoyance and amusement. Sameer huffed

agitatedly and they both stepped into the dim light coming out of the window.

‘Does it really matter?’

‘Of course, it does!’ Hermione scowled half-heartedly, looking a bit flustered. ‘I was about to tell her something very important.’

‘Well, get on with it then!’ Manish persisted, an excited smile forming on his face. Hermione scowled at him again, and this time it was in completely scornful.

‘I’m not telling you!’

‘Hey! Why not! We’re your fellow Gryffindors! You should be telling *us* instead of a stinking Slytherin, shouldn’t you?’ Sameer said though he grinned at Saloni mischievously, conveying that he meant no offence. She just rolled her eyes at their antics, though she felt her lips twitch slightly. Hermione was still not amused.

‘Oh for – come on, Salo. Let’s go someplace private, where these two bozos can’t hear us.’

She grabbed Saloni’s hand and picked up her books, storming off in the other direction, dragging her behind.

‘There is no place we can’t hear you! We have ears *everywhere!*’ Manish called after them patronizingly, and Saloni couldn’t help but laugh out loud This time. She soon stopped because of the look Hermione gave her, though. She pulled them along in another empty corridor, and after looking around for any unwanted guests, she set her books down again. Surprisingly, she didn’t immediately start babbling about the forest episode but instead sat down on a stone ledge in silence.

‘Well, what are you waiting for?’ Saloni questioned after a long silence. Hermione looked at her in puzzlement before her eyes widened slightly and she slapped her forehead.

‘Oh, I forgot to tell you. We’re waiting for Pallavi and Ashwini. I want to tell them too – it’s way too exciting.’

Saloni frowns at her. 'Wait – I thought you said it was *troubling*, not exciting!'

Hermione brushes a stray curl of her face tentatively. 'Troubling, exciting – same thing.'

She had always wondered how the girl had gotten into Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw, but this was her answer right here. The same recklessness and unreasonable courage she had seen in the other Gryffindors. Shaking her head slightly, she flopped down next to Hermione, waiting. Soon enough, Pallavi was racing towards them hurriedly, dragging Ashwini by her robe.

'You told me ... we'd meet in the library ... had to ... search the whole school ... to find you!' Pallavi said in between wheezing pants, looking completely out of breath as she managed a small glare at Hermione, who gave a small grin in return, looking quite abashed that she had forgotten to do everything in perfect order like she usually did.

'Yes ... sorry about that.' She apologized, and then promptly stood up. 'So, now shall I get to what happened in the forest?'

Ashwini nodded, leaning against a wall. 'You better – I had to leave my homework behind to come here.'

Hermione looked appalled, as she stared at Ashwini. 'What? Oh, I'm really sorry. I didn't know you were studying. I thought that when you told me you were busy, you meant watching Quidditch or something. We could reschedule this some other day if –'

'No, no! It's alright. I'll finish it later ... I promise.' Ashwini added when the other Gryffindor eyed her suspiciously. This seemed to be good enough for Hermione because her expression cleared and she turned to them again.

'Ok, then. Well, we saw you-know-who in the forest.'

Pallavi laughed, apparently having gotten her breath back. 'Way to get to the point.' After a few seconds of silence, she seemed to finally register what Hermione had said. 'Wait ... YOU WHAT?'

‘You’re pulling our leg – right?’ Ashwini said. Her eyes looked ready to pop out of their sockets. Hermione seemed rather amused and shook her head.

‘No! We ... that is, Harry ... saw you-know-who in the forest. At least that’s what Firenze told him.’

Saloni blinked up at her, getting a few of her wits back since the shocking declaration. ‘Who?’

‘Oh, he’s a centaur. One of the creatures in the forest. You know centaurs right? Half-horses and half-humans? He’s a good one though – saved Harry when he came across you-know-who,’ Hermione explained, though she shivered a bit as she recalled the memory.

All three girls were now pale in the face. The very thought of Voldemort anywhere near their school was enough to make them faint in fear. Although, all of them had only one question in mind now. *How* was Voldemort still alive?

Pallavi couldn’t help but voice the question out loud, and Hermione’s face instantly clouded over. They could see she wasn’t angry or anything – just really disturbed. She hesitated for a moment before she sat back down on the stone ledge, looking much less enthusiastic than earlier.

‘Well, you see we ... that is Harry, Ron and I think that he isn’t really alive. I mean, we never really knew if he was really dead, did we? Not for sure.’ She said quietly.

‘Yeah ... we just knew he had disappeared. I never thought he was dead, you know. Just sort of – weakened. I reckon he’d gone into hiding.’ Pallavi said. Hermione nodded vigorously, some of her excitement returning.

‘Exactly! You’re right. Do you know why we had gone into the forest?’

Ashwini looked at her quizzically. ‘Well, I heard Filch talk about you guys going in there to find someone who had killed ... what was it – Hippogriffs?’

Hermione pursed her lips, looking mildly disapproving at the lack of information. ‘Unicorns.’

Saloni gaped at her as soon as she uttered the word. They went to the forest to save Unicorns! ‘Did you find that thing?’ she asked.

‘The unicorn, or the thing that was killing it?’ Hermione asked.

Pallavi shrugged. ‘Both.’

Hermione hummed and stood up again, playing with the hem of her sleeve nervously. ‘Yes. We found both. A dead unicorn and the murderer who was ... Oh, he was drinking the unicorn’s blood.’ She finished, looking disgusted. Ashwini made a face at that but Pallavi’s face lit up.

‘I see where this is going!’ she said conversationally, as though discussing a rather interesting mystery novel. ‘I’ve heard of the uses of unicorn blood,’

Saloni frowned and racked her brain for any information she had read about unicorn blood. She remembered that they had used a unicorn’s tail and horn in potions, but never the blood. She was disappointed when she remembered nothing else because Ashwini had a knowing look on her face too.

‘Of course! Unicorn’s blood! It keeps you alive, even if you’re just about to die. But the person who drinks it lives a cursed life the moment he drinks the first sip, right?’ she said excitedly. Quickly noticing Saloni’s expression, she added: ‘Oh, don’t worry. We didn’t expect you to know. We aren’t going to cover *unicorn blood and its uses* till the third year. I only know ‘cause my dad told me.’

Hermione smiled at her. ‘You’re right about the blood. Now, think of a person who has been battling to come back to life for eleven years? Come back to power?’

All three of them gasped in unison, horror etched upon their faces. What she was telling them made perfect sense, but they did not want to believe her. They wished that it wouldn’t be true.

‘No,’ Ashwini whispered, swallowing sharply. ‘Are you saying ... you-know-who was -’

‘He was the one drinking the unicorn’s blood, wasn’t he? He is the one who is desperately trying to stay alive,’ Saloni finished because Ashwini looked so scared that she seemed faint. Pallavi had a similar expression on her face, so she knew the situation was terribly grave.

‘Hold on,’ Pallavi cut in, a curious look blending with her frightened one. ‘But why is he trying to stay alive using the blood? He would live a cursed life anyways, isn’t it? Why bother even *trying* to live?’

Hermione swallowed sharply. ‘You’re right. Why bother trying to live – unless the cursed life you’re forced to live is only a temporary one? Unless you’ve already found out about a permanent cure, hidden inside the school, and only need the blood until you achieve that.’

All of them stared at her blankly for a long moment. Saloni could almost hear the wheels turning in their heads. At first, even she couldn’t figure out the riddle the bushy-haired Gryffindor had set for them. But then they all understood at the same time; their eyes widened, looking comically shiny in the dim lights. It was obvious – What was something that could make you immortal, and was hidden inside the school right now? Something that you-know-who could want.

‘The Philosopher’s stone!’ All three of them yelled at the same time. Hermione made stifling gestures with her hand, telling them to keep it down; she still looked amused and a bit proud. How she could look anything except grim at a time like this, was beyond them.

‘Caught on, have you?’ She laughed. ‘You’re absolutely right though.’

‘That makes complete sense! Snape would have been trying to achieve it for you-know-who under his command! That’s why he’s been acting like this!’ Ashwini said hysterically. ‘Oh no ... you-know-who cannot come back to his full power! You know how he was last time. What he did to the wizarding world ... he’d be even worse this time!’

Saloni thought she was about to start crying, the way she choked on her words. She could completely unders-

tand her fear – her father used to be with you-know-who under the Imperius curse. Voldemort would surely track him back, and either force him to join him again or kill him.

‘I know,’ Hermione said somberly. ‘That’s why we’re planning to get to the stone before Snape can. It’s the only way – no one else knows about the stone anyways. We tried telling Professor McGonagall, but she didn’t believe us.’

‘We’ll come with you – just let us know when you’re leaving.’ Pallavi said determinedly. Saloni and Ashwini nodded along. Hermione looked rather startled for a moment before she went glassy-eyed and fell into thought. They thought she was going to refuse at first, but then she surprised them.

‘Well ... I don’t see why you shouldn’t come along. Harry and Ron would disagree of course, but I won’t say anything to them just yet. We’re leaving at about midnight. You can join us – the boys will get a bit of a surprise, that’s all.’ She said, her eyes shining mischievously.

The girls grinned despite their foul mood. It was set, then; they were going to help save the stone. They’d try their best to overcome whatever tasks that had been set on the spot. It would all be worth it if it stopped Voldemort from coming back.



18. DOWN THE DOG HOLE

Down the dog hole

It was a few minutes to midnight. Saloni had stayed out in the common room, pretending to do her homework. Almost everyone had gone to bed by now, and Saloni was packing up her books quietly, waiting to leave the common room any moment. She was about to close her ink box, when an owl came swooping into the room out of nowhere, sitting on the table and knocking the ink box over. Cursing under her breath, Saloni pulled out her wand and muttered a quick *Evanesco*, watching the puddle of ink disappear. Sighing softly, she turned to the owl and was immediately shocked. This was Sameer Bhagwat's owl! She recognized it from the owl emporium where she and Sameer had first met; he had named the bird after her!

'Hello, Salo,' she cooed, and then stopped short, laughing slightly. It felt weird to say hello to someone with the same name as yourself. 'What are you doing here?'

The owl hooted, and gently pecked her hair, gesturing to the small lumpy package it was carrying. Frowning slightly, she took it from the bird's claws and gave a yelp when it gave another hoot and promptly flew out of the window, its soft wings brushing across her forehead as she took off. Unwrapping the package slowly, she wondered what Sameer would have sent her. Once she was sure it wasn't a letter bomb, she opened the lumpy box which looked as if it had been hurriedly packed. Inside the box, there was a small maraca.

Now, she was even more confused. Why in merlin's name would he send her a musical instrument? A maraca, amongst all others. She examined the rattle carefully, looking for some sort of message engraved on it, but there was nothing at all. It was simply a wooden maraca, with nothing out of the ordinary on it. She quickly glanced at the box the instrument had arrived in and saw a small note inside it. Pulling it out in confusion, she read it:

Dear Saloni, (Don't take the 'Dear' seriously)

I overheard your little conversation this afternoon with Hermione. I'm not about to apologize for eavesdropping, so I hope you don't expect that of me. However, you will find that this Maraca may come in useful during your little adventure.

Sameer

Saloni felt even more confused after reading the letter, so she threw it aside in frustration. Placing the Maraca aside hurriedly, she tried to worry over the fact that Sameer knew about their plan. She really wanted to believe that he would tell on them to some Professor, but she couldn't. She actually trusted him to keep their secret; It was a bit alarming, really. Maybe she felt their secret was safe with him because he had his fair share of crimes in the school too – he was constantly causing trouble and going off into restricted places along with his mates. It gave her hope that he wouldn't tell on them. Even if he did, she had plenty of dirt on him too, which she would love to tell the teachers.

Taking a look at the Maraca lying on the couch beside her, she got up and stretched, getting some of the feelings back in her tired muscles. Checking her watch, she suddenly jumped in shock. She had been so busy thinking about the package and the letter that she hadn't noticed she had been sitting there for over ten minutes! It was five minutes to midnight! Racing towards her dorm, she quickly grabbed a cloak, trying not to wake up the other girls. She ran back downstairs and was just about to leave the comm-

on room with Maraca, when a drawing voice stopped her.

‘Where are you going at this time of the night?’

Turning around slowly, she faced Malfoy who was frowning at her. He had apparently been in the common room all along because he was still in his school robes sitting in the shadows by the fire.

‘Er ... nothing. What are *you* doing up so late?’ she countered, hoping he would go back to bed.

‘Homework,’ he answered dismissively. ‘Why were you leaving the common room? It’s past curfew.’

Spluttering slightly, she looked around desperately, hoping to find an excuse. ‘I – Um ... well, you see – It’s Professor McGonagall.’

Malfoy quirked an eyebrow at her. ‘What about her?’

‘Er ... she’s asked me to meet her in her office at midnight. Umm ... I’ve got detention.’ Saloni lied, crossing her fingers behind her back. Malfoy sneered at her nastily.

‘Right. Of course ... hanging around with Gryffindors, what else do you expect? It’s disgraceful,’ he spat.

‘Uh huh – I know right,’ she muttered, not really hearing a word he said, because she was too busy glancing at the wall clock, and seeing that it was two minutes to midnight. She had to get out of there. Fast.

Malfoy looked offended at her reply, and before he could open his mouth to say anything else, she stuffed the Maraca back in her cloak and ran out of the common room at top speed. She assumed Malfoy must have been rather stunned by her sudden departure because he didn’t try to call her back. Saloni kept running until she reached the corridor on the third floor. She vaguely remembered how terrifying her first visit here had been. She felt just as scared right now – if not, more, but she had a lot of other emotions running through her as well this time. Anticipation, adrenaline, excitement, and most of all the pleasant feeling of relief she was going to feel after preventing Voldemort from destroying their lives. Panting

harshly, she looked around for the others, fearing that they had gone off without her because she was too late. But she immediately smiled when she heard soft whispers in the shadows right beside her.

‘Hi guys!’ She whispered, and all the voices suddenly stopped.

‘Salo? Is that you?’ Pallavi’s voice spoke softly, as her hand roamed the air. It caught Saloni’s sleeve and she pulled her in the shadows as well.

‘Yeah, it’s me. Is everyone there?’ she whispered back.

Hermione breathless chuckle echoed through the corridor. ‘Everyone’s here. You’re the last one. Erm ... Harry, Ron, this is the surprise I was telling you about.’

There was a small grumble, which she assumed came from Potter. ‘I thought surprises were supposed to be fun!’

‘They are!’ Ashwini chirped. ‘That’s *exactly* why we’re the surprises!’

Weasley groaned and then spoke up. ‘Bloody hell – let’s just go.’

They all tiptoed towards the door behind which Fluffy was resting. They could hear its growls even outside the door and it made them shiver slightly. Opening the door with a creak and though they all still hadn’t entered the room, the dog stood up and sniffed madly in their direction. Saloni looked around the room and spotted something strange at the dog’s feet.

‘Is that a harp?’ she asked, wondering why absurd musical instruments kept popping out of nowhere today. Ashwini nodded, as she squinted at the harp strangely.

‘Snape must have left it there – the dog must wake up the moment it stops playing.’ Weasley whispered, and flinched back when Fluffy growled loudly. Suddenly, the Maraca which Sameer send her made so much sense. She pulled it out excitedly and saw Potter doing the same with a flute. They both stared at the instruments for a moment,

trying to figure out which one would be the most convenient to use.

‘Use the Maraca. We won’t be able to play the flute and get down the trapdoor at the same time. The Maraca should be easy enough to jiggle while climbing down.’ Hermione said thoughtfully. In the end, they all agreed with her and Saloni got to work, jiggling a tune with rattle. They observed the dog as it yawned widely at the third rattling tune, and then promptly dropped its huge head in his front paws and started snoring. His breath blew over all of them, making their hair get all disheveled. Pallavi giggled as Fluffy gave a small yawn and nuzzled its nose deeper into his paws.

‘You know – he’s kind of cute. When he’s not barking and growling or drooling.’

All of them stared at her strangely, most of them fearing she had turned into Hagrid, to find a monster like that cute. Shaking that disturbing thought away, she continued shaking the instrument while gesturing for them to go through the trapdoor. Thankfully, the dog wasn’t covering the trapdoor completely; only by his left paw. With a bit of effort, they all heaved and pushed the paw which was almost as big as a desk itself, and opened the creaky trapdoor.

‘So, er ... who’s going first?’ Weasley asked nervously, looking into the dark ditch inside the trapdoor. They had no idea how deep it was or if there was something down there or not. Saloni supposed they were just going to have to play Gryffindors for this.

‘I’ll go first.’ Potter offered, looking a bit scared but equally determined. Taking a deep breath, he jumped into the ditch without anyone could stop him. They all held their breath for a few seconds, and when Saloni feared that he might never come back, a voice yelled from deep inside. ‘It’s okay! It’s a soft landing – you can jump!’

Weasley sighed in relief, and then he jumped inside too. One by one, all of them hopped inside, and then Saloni

who was still jiggling the Maraca jumped in. As soon as she got inside, all she heard was chaos.

‘Look at you all!’ Hermione was screaming. She was standing in a far corner, next to a damp wall all alone. Before she could wonder why she heard a shrill shriek and tried to turn around. She soon found out she couldn’t though because the ‘soft landing’ Potter was talking about was actually the long stems of a plant. Stems, which were starting to wind up against Saloni’s legs, trapping her in place. One of the long stems crawled up her waist and tightly bound her arms in place and some of the others began creeping up her neck. Yelling madly, she looked around vaguely to see that all the others were in a similar situation. The entire room was covered by snake-like plants, except for the small part of the floor Hermione was standing on. She had managed to free herself before she was completely tangled in the plants. Worse of all, the plants seemed to be pulling them in deeper as they struggled. Much like quicksand.

‘Stop moving!’ Hermione shouted. ‘I know what this is – it’s Devil’s Snare!’

Suddenly Saloni remembered what she had heard about the creepy plant in Herbology, and stood still as stone.

‘Oh, I’m so glad we know what it’s called, that’s a great help,’ Weasley snarled, moving even more against the bonds.

‘Shut it, Weasley!’ Pallavi shouted, trying to wrestle back the plant which was trying to choke her.

‘I’m trying to remember how to kill it!’ Hermione said frantically.

‘It ... h-hates ... light!’ Saloni wheezed, turning purple from lack of breath because the plant was now bound tightly around her neck. Hermione’s eyes lit up, but soon the light turned to panic.

‘I was going to light a fire, but – there’s no wood!’

Saloni would have laughed if she wasn't busy being strangled.

'God, this girl – YOU DON'T NEED WOOD! YOU'RE A WITCH!' Ashwini screamed, wriggling away from a wild stem. Hermione blushed red and with a small nod, she pulled out her wand. As soon as she muttered something inaudible, a bright blue flame came out of her wand, just like the one in the jar they had seen, but much bigger. In a few seconds, Saloni felt the bounds on her loosening rapidly, and within a minute she could stand up. Gasping for breath, she crawled towards the floor where Hermione was standing, and she quickly helped her up. The others were released by the plant too, and they all were walking or crawling toward the dry patch of floor.

'Lucky you two pay attention in Herbology,' Potter said and gave Saloni a small smile. She grinned back because after that incident, not even Potter seemed that horrible.

'And lucky we all don't lose our head in a crisis – "there's no wood", *honestly*.' Weasley said grimly. This made Hermione blush again, and all of them laughed.

'Let's go that way,' Pallavi said when they all calmed down. She was pointing at a stone passageway. 'It's the only way out anyways.'

They all set off in that direction in complete silence, except for the soft drips of water echoing around the passage. Wondering what was lying for them at the other end, Saloni pulled her now-tattered cloak closer to her body, shivering slightly.

'Hey!' Ashwini suddenly spoke. 'Can you guys hear something?'

Weasley nodded eagerly and leaned forward. 'I was going to ask the same thing.'

They all listened quietly, and as they walked closer to the other end the sound was unmistakable. A quiet clinking sound was coming from that direction. It sounded like house keys tinkling all together.

‘Do you think it’s a ghost?’ Potter asked.

‘Don’t be an idiot, Potter. Ghosts can’t make that much noise when they aren’t talking. They can just go through stuff,’ Pallavi snapped back, looking terribly anxious. They all screwed their eyes together, trying to guess the sound, but in vain.

‘Sounds like wings to me,’ Weasley remarked.

‘Maybe it’s a pixie,’ Hermione suggested.

Saloni huffed and shot them a look. ‘Are we just going to stand here and play charades the whole night, or are we actually going to go forward?’

All of them shrugged and murmured something inaudible but started walking again. They reached the end of the passageway soon enough and came into a brightly lit chamber, with a high glittery ceiling. Saloni took a minute to appreciate the architecture. Although the rooms were filled with gruesome horrors, she couldn’t help but think they were very nicely decorated indeed. Maybe it was if a person died in there, they would at least die in a very pretty-looking place. Saloni still shuddered at the thought.

When she finally tore her eyes of the décor, she looked around to see everyone gawking at the ceiling. Following their gaze, she looked up and to her surprise, saw lots of small bright birds flying all around the room. They were sparkling under the low light coming from some candles, and they gave her a feel of standing under lots of shooting stars that were flying haywire. There was also a heavy wooden door on the other side of the room.

‘Do you think they’ll attack us if we cross the room?’ Weasley asked.

Ashwini looked away from the birds for a second and threw him an exasperated look. ‘Oh no, absolutely not. They’re just here because they really add to the décor. Don’t you think so, Hermione?’

Hermione shook her head warily at their bickering and eyed the bright birds again. Weasley was now glaring at

Ashwini.

‘They don’t look too threatening, but they could injure us if they all come swooping on us together.’ Saloni said.

Potter sighed in defeat, but from the look on his face, whatever he was going to say wouldn’t have been good. ‘She’s right. Well – there’s nothing for it, I guess. I’ll run,’

And there it was.

‘Don’t be stupid!’ Saloni said angrily. ‘You can’t do that – you’ll get hurt! Did it ever come to your mind that these might not be regular birds? What if their pecks burn? What if their beaks are poisonous? What if –’

‘Ok, I get your point!’ he said, looking rather frightened. Pallavi suddenly gasped and grabbed Weasley’s shoulder distractedly, making him look startled.

‘They’re not birds at all, though! They’re keys!’

Shocked, they all looked up at the glittering things again, and sure enough, instead of birds, there were winged keys! Why were they winged, though? Pallavi tugged at Weasley’s sleeve sharply again, and he hissed.

‘What is it?’

‘Look! Brooms!’ she said, and they all looked in the corner where she was pointing. There were dozens of brooms placed neatly in the corner. It was like a Quidditch game! The keys were the snitches and they had to catch it while flying on a broom. Cautiously walking towards the other side of the room, Ashwini tried to tug on the door, and sure enough, it was locked.

‘We have to find the right key for this lock,’ she called back, peeking through the keyhole carefully. They all joined her on the other side of the room and stared at the keyhole unblinkingly.

‘Which one could it be? There are tons!’ Hermione said, glancing up at the fluttering keys again.

Weasley squinted at the keyhole. ‘We’re looking for a

big, old-fashioned one – probably silver, like the handle.’

He stood up again and they all threw him impressed looks. No matter how much of a prat he was, he was a very observant prat. Potter clapped his hands together and started walking towards the brooms.

‘Oh, what do you think you’re doing?’ Ashwini said bossily. He turned around and stared at her as if she had just asked him what two-plus-two was.

‘Um ... going to fetch the key?’

She scowled back, and it was a quite scornful one. ‘Who said *you’re* going to do that?’

‘Who else would? I’m the youngest seeker in a century, remember?’ Potter taunted. Ashwini glowered at him, and he looked back just as defiantly. Saloni groaned as Weasley started chanting ‘Fight, fight!’, and Hermione began chastising him.

‘Stop it, all of you!’ she yelled, and they quietened for a second before erupting into chaos again. Pallavi was fighting with Potter too now, saying how someone else deserved the seeker position just as much as him, and that it wasn’t a fair trial. Ashwini looked close to breaking down when Potter kept pressing the matter. Hermione was still scolding Weasley, who had the grace to look slightly ashamed.

‘Guys! Look, why don’t you both try? The faster we get that key, the better,’ Saloni suggested loudly, and both of them stopped fighting for a moment to consider her compromise. Finally, they nodded grudgingly because Hermione persisted that she rather liked the idea. Weasley just looked disappointed.

Both of them picked a broom and climbed up on it quickly. After throwing each other a challenging look, Ashwini and Potter sped up into the clouds of glistening keys. After a minute or two of hovering about uselessly, and trying to grab unneeded keys, Potter yelled loudly.

‘Hey! That one – there, the bright one with blue wings!

Some of the feathers are broken!

‘We’ve got to close in on it!’ Pallavi yelled.

‘We’ll corner in from down and you two corner it from up! Pallavi, you stay near the door to open it!’ Saloni shouted over the loud buzzing of the keys. Pallavi immediately nodded and ran towards the door, while Hermione, Saloni and Weasley stood below it. Ashwini and Potter were gaining on it, and at first, Saloni thought they were going to crash against each other when both of them leaped on the key. There was a loud crash and a lot of dust, but when she looked again properly, both the wings of the key were clutched in Potter’s hand. Then was a shocked silence after which Potter gave a loud whoop of laughter and raced towards the door.

Pallavi took the still struggling key from him and opened the door hurriedly. They all stepped inside the dark room, but Saloni could not ignore Ashwini’s look of utter dejection at losing the little match. Her shoulders were humped and even though she was trying to put on a normal face, her eyes were shining with disappointment. Pallavi noticed it too because she walked up to her and flung a comforting arm over her shoulder. Saloni walked towards her and grabbed her hand, and she gave them both sad smiles. Taking a deep breath, they followed Hermione through the door, looking around slowly. The room was very dark at first, but then a bright light flooded the room out of nowhere. It was as if someone had suddenly flashed a torch right in their eyes while they were standing in a dark room. Shielding her eyes slightly, Saloni looked at the room. They were standing near a giant chessboard with black and white chess pieces all in their respective positions. The chess pieces were almost as huge as a cupboard.

‘What do we do know?’ Pallavi asked softly, gazing at the chessboard in wonder.

‘We have to play out way across the room, of course,’ Weasley said.

Ashwini shivered slightly. ‘What if we get hurt in the

process?’

Potter turned around and looked at her incredulously. ‘Of course, we’re going to get hurt! Look at the size of these pieces.’

Hermione huffed and whacked Potter in the arm. ‘Hush, Harry! That’s no way to give a pep talk! And we won’t get hurt as long as we’re careful and plan our every move properly.’

They all agreed to be as careful as possible, and then Weasley walked up to a horse and cautiously touched it. The statue at once came to life, stamping its feet and throwing its stone head about.

‘Er, are we supposed to ride you?’

The chess piece stared at Weasley for a second before nodding surely. Weasley turned back to them nervously and then started thinking.

‘Alright – no offence, but neither of you is that good at chess,’

At this, Saloni quickly looked towards Ashwini, who hadn’t said a word. She might boast a tiny bit about her quidditch talents, but her talent at chess was all true. She was a brilliant chess player and had often badly defeated not only Saloni and Ashwini but also Sameer and many of their other friends. But this time, she was just standing there and not saying a word. Saloni could tell that she wasn’t really sad about her previous defeat anymore, but she just didn’t want to take Weasleys’ moment away. She was a quite good sport, and Saloni felt a surge of pride at her friend’s kind intentions.

She turned back to Weasley as he started talking again. ‘Ok, Harry, you take the place of that bishop. Hermione and Pallavi, you guys take the rooks. Saloni, you be the other bishop and Ashwini can be one of the knights. I’m the knight, too.’

Ashwini pursed her lips at this arrangement, and Saloni could tell she had a different and probably better plan, but she still took her place as one of the knights. Once they all

took their places, all the stone pieces seemed to come to life and move to their commands. They all were the black pieces and they had to play against white, so they all patiently waited till the white pieces took their turn.

A white bishop had moved forward.

Weasley easily sent Pallavi forward and killed it. There was a huge echoing smash, as Pallavi's rook used its sword to break the bishop to pieces. They all winced at the sudden crash; they weren't expecting that. The game went on for a long time, as Weasley guided all of them and the pawns to different directions. They lost many of their empty pawns but Weasley was careful not to put any chess piece which was occupied by any of them, in any danger. There were a lot of crashes and screams, as more pieces from the white side were smashed by them. This was getting rather fun after a while.

'We're nearly there,' Weasley announced after a while. 'Let me think – let me think.'

Ashwini suddenly paled horribly. She was also examining everyone's positions and had apparently noticed something neither of them had yet. By now, Weasley noticed it too, because he swallowed sharply.

'No! You aren't actually thinking about it, are you?' Ashwini called out fearfully, from where she was standing. Weasley whitened even more at this question but nodded at her resolutely.

The white rook suddenly turned his face to him.

'It's the only way ... I've got to be taken. I'll make my move and then Ashwini can checkmate the king,' he whispered, and that's when everyone caught on.

'NO! Are you insane, Ronald!' Hermione yelled. Potter was shouting something too, but it was drowned by Hermione's shouts. 'We'll find another way, and –'

'There's no other way!' Weasley snapped back. 'This is chess. You've got to make sacrifices.'

‘Does it have to be human sacrifices?’ Pallavi asked weakly.

‘In this case ... yes,’ he replied firmly.

‘But we could play for some more time – maybe we’ll find another way,’ Pallavi kept arguing desperately. Weasley shook his head, looking irritated.

‘We don’t have time! Do you want to stop Snape or not?’

Potter opened his mouth to argue again, but the red-head cut him off.

‘Look, if you don’t hurry, he’ll already take the stone. He’ll give it to you-know-who and it will all be over. For us ... for everyone.’

‘He’s right,’ Saloni murmured dejectedly, not afraid that her declaration could meet with angry judgments as well. ‘There’s no other way, is there? I’m sure he’ll be fine. We’ll take him back with us as soon as we’re done.’

Weasley gave her a thankful nod. The others all looked at each other miserably, but no one was arguing with them anymore. They knew it had to be done. Hermione looked close to tears when she nodded stoutly.

‘Ready?’ Weasley called, looking just as frightened as them. ‘Here I go – now, don’t hang around once you’ve won.’

‘Oh, of course, we won’t,’ Ashwini said in mock disbelief, though she sounded shaky. ‘It’s not like we are going to stay and check if you’re dead or not – we have to celebrate our victory, after all.’

He huffed at Ashwini and managed a weak eye-roll, before stepping forward slowly. At once, the rook raised its club and struck Weasley straight across the head. He crashed to the floor with an audible crack dictating a broken bone. Hermione screamed as the rook dragged him to one side and threw him out of the big chessboard. She was surely going to run out of her place to see if he was alright.

‘Don’t move!’ Potter shouted when she saw Hermione take a step forward. ‘There’s nothing we can do for him – and we have to finish this game!’

Hermione sniffled wetly, but didn’t move from her place again, watching Weasley’s motionless form instead. Shaking violently, Ashwini moved forward three spaces, and the white king took off his crown and threw it at her feet. They had won; not so surprisingly, there was none of the usual cheers which were heard after a victory. The chessman parted and bowed, giving them a clear way to the next door. With a few worried looks at Weasley, they all sprinted through the door and up the next passageway.

Pallavi kept looking back at the room from which they had just exited. ‘Guys? Are you sure he’s not –’

‘He’ll be fine,’ Potter replied as if trying to convince himself, and he looked extremely sick at his best friend’s fate. They were halfway through the passage when Pallavi suddenly stopped, causing Hermione to run into her with an ‘*Ooff!*’

‘What is it?’ she asked, rubbing her forehead which had collided with Pallavi’s head.

‘I’m going to go back and help Weasley,’ Pallavi said suddenly. They all stared at her for a moment in shock.

‘Wait – are you serious?’ Hermione asked, a little hope lacing her voice. It was obvious that she had wanted to check if Weasley was alright herself, but had no time.

Pallavi nodded surely. ‘Yeah, you all go on. I’ll take him back to the hospital wing. Er ... mind lending me your Maraca?’ she asked Saloni, who smiled gently and handed it to her.

With a shaky smile, the Hufflepuff turned around and ran back to the passageway. Potter stared gratefully at her retreating figure once, as they started crossing the rest of the passage again. ‘Thank god – now at least he won’t be dead,’

They reached the end of the passage quickly and

reached another door.

‘We’ve had Professor Sprout’s challenge, which was the Devil’s Snare, Professor Flitwick’s too, which was the charms on those keys. McGonagall must have transfigured those chessmen to make them alive – so, that leaves Quirell’s challenge and Snape’s.’ Hermione recited, ticking off imaginary boxes on her palm.

Opening the door cautiously, they were suddenly met with a disgusting smell. Coughing and pinching their noses, they walked into the room. There, in front of them, was an unconscious troll. It was even bigger than the one they had faced in the bathroom and even smellier than it. Eyes watering due to the putrid scent, they all stepped over it carefully and walked to the other door. Ashwini pulled the door open and all of them gathered in the other room away from the knocked-out troll. This chamber looked exceedingly harmless. There was just a small table with seven differently-shaped bottles on it. They all walked forwards and as soon as they closed the door, huge flames erupted along the corners of the chamber. The door they had just come in through was also covered in flames. They were trapped!

‘Oh no! We should have known this was a trap,’ Ashwini whimpered.

They all walked towards the little table and spotted a roll of parchment on it too. Hermione quickly seized it.

‘What is it?’ Potter asked, peeking over her shoulder to look at it.

‘It’s a riddle! Must be from Snape,’ Hermione mumbled and then began reading loudly.

*‘Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,
Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,
One among us seven will let you move ahead,
Another will transport the drinker back instead,
Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in line,*

*Choose, unless you wish to stay here for evermore,
To help you in your choice, we give you these clues
four:*

*First, however slyly the poison tried to hide
You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;
Second, different are those who stand at either end,
But if you would move onwards, neither is your friend;
Third, as you see clearly, are all different size,
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;
Fourth, the second left and the second on the right
Are twins once you taste them, though different at first
sight.'*

Hermione gave a joyous laugh, and Saloni knew that they were safe at once. Potter, on the other hand, looked confused.

Hermione sighed as she read the paper quickly again. 'Brilliant! This isn't magic – it's logic – a puzzle. A lot of great wizards haven't got an ounce of logic. They'd be stuck here forever,'

'Erm ... we won't?' Ashwini asked weakly.

'Of course, we won't!' Hermione said cheerily. 'Everything we need is here on this paper.'

'Hmm ... you're right!' Saloni said. She had taken the paper from Hermione and had read it through again. 'Seven bottles: three are poison; two are wine; one will get us back through the door behind us if we want to go back, and one will take us forward.'

Ashwini frowned. 'But how do we know which one to drink? What if we drink the wrong one?'

Hermione shook her head and snatched the paper

back from Saloni. 'We won't. Just give me a minute -'

She read the riddle through a few more times, muttering something under her breath as she pointed at each of the seven bottles. After a while, she clapped her hands together.

'Got it!' she exclaimed. 'The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire - to the stone.'

They all looked at the tiny bottle. It was barely the size of a doll's mug.

'It's too small. There's hardly a sip in there,' Saloni said.

'Which one will let you go back?' Potter asked quietly. Hermione pointed at a rounded bottle and the end of the table. It was quite big - the size of an actual mug.

'You all drink that,' Potter began, but they all burst in arguments immediately. 'No! Listen - get back and see if Pallavi and Ron are safe - grab brooms from the flying key room, they'll get you out the trapdoor and past Fluffy. Pallavi already has the Maraca - she shouldn't have gotten too far.'

Ashwini and Hermione looked ready to protest, but Saloni interrupted them. 'Fine - we'll go to the owlery and send Dumbledore a letter. You try to hold Snape off for as long as you can ... we'll get help as fast as we can.'

Hermione whimpered softly. 'But Harry - what if you-know-who's with him?'

Saloni suddenly jerked. She hadn't thought about that!

'Well, I got lucky once - I might get lucky again.' Potter replied nervously.

'That's utter nonsense!' Ashwini complained, but Hermione abruptly shot past them and enveloped Potter in a hug.

'Harry - you're a great wizard, you know,' she sobbed. Potter looked very embarrassed when she let go of him.

‘Er ... I’m not as good as you,’ he replied modestly. Ashwini and Saloni exchanged exasperated glances at this sudden, time-consuming display.

‘Me!’ said Hermione. ‘Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery and – oh Harry – be *careful!*’

Ashwini chuckled as those two continued talking to each other, Hermione wiping away her tears now. Potter looked rather touched too.

‘Mental, those two,’ she whispered to Saloni. ‘What do you think? Will they end up together?’

Saloni considered this question for a second, looking at them as the two friends now talked about the potions in the bottles and how much each would take. ‘Nah, I don’t suppose so. Seems like it, though, doesn’t it?’

Ashwini laughed and nodded, before turning towards them again. ‘Ok, you two! Have you decided who’s going to take how much of the potion?’

Hermione swiftly turned towards them and held out the bottle of potion which would take them back. ‘Yes. Alright take one sip each – only one – and pass it on.’

Each of the girls took a sip of the potion. Saloni shivered as soon as she drank it because it left an icy feeling in her stomach and throat. After all of them drank the potion, they turned toward the direction they were going to go. Saloni felt rather disappointed that she couldn’t go till the very end like Potter was, but she felt satisfied that she did her part.

So now she was sweaty and hungry, and all she wanted was a nice hot bath and food. With a last goodbye to Potter, they ran through the flames and into the troll room. Covering their noses, they exited it and the chess room easily, because the chess pieces were still fixing themselves and were in no state to play. Walking through the room fool of Devil’s Snare cautiously, and by Hermione using her blue flame spell to push them off again, they safely reached the trapdoor. There, they saw Pallavi who was still

struggling to get Weasley to float to the trapdoor with a '*Wingardium Leviosa*'.

To say she was shocked to see them was an understatement. When they tapped her on the shoulder, she shrieked and dropped her wand, causing an unconscious Weasley who was halfway in the air to come falling down again. They all caught him at the last minute though.

'What in Merlin's name are you all doing here?' Pallavi gasped, picking up her wand. They all explained the rest of the challenges to her, and how they had gotten out of there and Potter had insisted that he go alone. By the end of their little tirade, she looked completely wondrous.

'Whoa - I just - whoa,' she breathed. 'I can't believe you solved such a riddle, Hermione. And I'm really sorry I didn't come along ... I just couldn't bear to leave him there like that.'

'It's alright. You did the right thing,' Saloni consoled.

'Shall we go then?' Hermione asked and raised her wand. '*Wingardium Leviosa*.'

At once, Weasley was gracefully lifted off the floor and was taken upwards till he was just near the trapdoor.

'I'll go with him. I have Salo's Maraca - it'll make Fluffy go to sleep again.' Pallavi said, holding up the instrument.

Hermione nodded and with another floating charm, she took Pallavi right beside Weasley. Pallavi quietly opened the trapdoor and at once started playing a tune with the Maraca. They could almost hear Fluffy's yawns echo around the chamber.

'Ugh! I can't hold up both of them with one wand! Help, you two!' Hermione hissed, waving her arm gently, trying to get some feeling in them. The girls nodded and pulled out their own wands. They cast another floating charm and supported Weasley's weight together. Hermione was a master at this spell so she could easily lift Pallavi all by herself. Once the two were through the trapdoor, the girls cast the same charm upon their feet and started floati-

ng upwards, trying not to lose their balance. It was like standing on a flying skateboard. Soon, all of them were through the trapdoor, listening to Fluffy snore as Pallavi continued playing the Maraca. They walked back inside the school corridor and gently closed the door behind them, snorting as Fluffy at once woke up and started barking behind the closed door.

The sun was starting to shine through the windows, showing the Hogwarts grounds under the bright morning sky. Ashwini gave a great yawn and rubbed her eyes tiredly.

‘What time is it?’

Hermione checked her elegant pink wristwatch and her eyes widened. ‘Goodness! It’s almost five ‘o’ clock in the morning. We’ve been under the school all night – imagine that. Didn’t you love our little adventure?’

Pallavi gave a hollow laugh. ‘I think we’ve had enough adventures for one year, thank you.’

They all laughed as they started marching towards the owlery with Weasley still floating behind them. Ashwini suddenly stopped walking.

‘I really hope Potter’s okay, though.’

This put everyone in the right state. They shouldn’t be lazing around laughing and checking the time, for god’s sake! They had a boy, who was still stuck under the school with the most feared dark wizard of all times, to save. And an injured comrade to take to the hospital wing. They all finally decided that Hermione would go to the owlery and write Dumbledore a letter as soon as possible while the others would take Weasley to the hospital wing.

As soon as they got there, Madam Pomphrey stared at them as if they had just sprouted out of the underground. Which they sort of had, truly.

After a lot of fussing, scolding, and bandaging, all of them were strapped to the hospital beds, being force-fed chocolate by Madam Pomphrey. She insisted that it had a potion in it that was good for getting over big shocks, and

they insisted that they weren't suffering from a big shock in the first place. After about ten minutes or so, Hermione stumbled in too and was given the same treatment.

Finally, after healing every single scratch and wound, Pomphrey left them to get some more potion for the huge bleeding wound on Weasley's head. Pallavi had patched it up as well as she could at the time being, but it was a temporary cure.

'Did you send the letter?' Saloni asked Hermione while munching on a very creamy piece of chocolate. Hermione nodded and took a sip of water.

'Yes - I suppose Dumbledore should have gotten it by now. He must be on his way back. Oh, I really hope Harry is alright! I wish we could just see how he's coming along!'

Pallavi sighed and rested her head against the soft pillows, which the sweet matron had fluffed up, especially for them. 'I know. I wish Dumbledore would hurry up already!'

They spent some time talking about Potter in hushed voices, becoming more worried by the second. What if he's dead? Seeing Weasley like this was bad enough already, but at least he wasn't dead. She didn't know when, but sometimes while chatting with the girls, Saloni fell asleep.



19. HAPPILY EVER AFTER, BUT ONLY TEMPORARILY

Happily ever after, but only temporarily

The moment she woke up, she was met with a loud hustle bustle in the hospital wing. Hermione was smiling broadly while Ashwini and Pallavi with sitting on the edge of their beds, looking restlessly at the door of the hospital wing.

‘Salo! Oh, good, you’re up,’ Hermione stated happily.

‘What is going on?’ Saloni rasped back, sitting up and blinking blearily at her.

Pallavi sat back on her bed properly. ‘Dumbledore got Potter! He’s safe – he’s bringing him to the hospital wing any moment now. And also, now the whole school knows what we were up to.’

Saloni blinked in surprise. ‘Merlin’s beard – how long was I asleep exactly?’

Ashwini checked her watch. ‘Oh, not that long, but a lot has changed since you fell asleep three hours ago.’ She teased.

They all looked in a good mood as they were all grinning at her widely. It was a bit of a creepy sight, really. As if on cue, the hospital room’s door burst open and Dumbledore walked inside, carrying an unconscious and

blood-stained Potter. Saloni examined Dumbledore's long, silver beard and half-moon glasses curiously.

'I've never seen him up close before,' she thought. 'I wonder if his beard's fake. It's a bit too long to be real.'

Suddenly everyone paused, and the girls were now looking at her oddly. With a mixture of amusement and horror; then Saloni understood.

'Oh - I said that out loud, didn't I?' she asked in embarrassment, and looked up at Dumbledore, expecting him to look annoyed. Instead, he was looking amused, his blue eyes twinkling merrily.

'Indeed, you did, Ms. Mate. But I assure you that my beard is completely real. You can check if you really want to.' He said, offering his long beard. Saloni shook her head, turning red as Dumbledore chortled again. He then got up, and carefully placed Harry on the bed.

'Very well, then. If you have no wish to test if my beard is real or not, I must leave. I have to silence some of the weirdest rumors spreading in the school right now. Mostly the one that says that you all ran away from the school in the middle of the night because you were actually muggles pretending to be wizards, and now decided you couldn't take the pressure anymore. I must go correct them that you were definitely capable enough to take the pressure, even if you're not really muggles.' Dumbledore said. With a last nod, he walked out of the room leaving behind a stunned silence.

'Huh ... he really is something else, isn't he?' Ashwini said, awestruck. 'Never once mentioned how great and brave we are to have accomplished getting past all the challenges as the other idiots did.'

None of them were really listening, because as soon as Dumbledore left, they had all gathered around Potter. He was still lying motionless on the bed, while Madam Pomphrey poured various potions down his throat. He was looking deathly pale and if Dumbledore hadn't just announced he was alive, they would surely have mistaken him as dead. Saloni felt a shiver run up her spine at the thought.

A few days passes, and soon the true story of what had really happened that night leaked out. The girls, including Ron and Hermione, also got to know it too, once Potter woke up three days ago. Dumbledore visited him in the hospital wing where he told them to wait outside, but as soon as Dumbledore left, they all gathered around Potter demanding answers. Weasley had woken up a day earlier with nothing but a small bump on his forehead to remind him of his heroic deed. Hermione had been worried sick about him even after he woke up, and kept offering him water and asking if he wanted his pillows fluffed. Weasley seemed to be enjoying her attention.

Potter explained to them after a lot of blank silences and confused stares, that Quirell was the true villain all along and not Snape. Quirell was the one who was trying to kill Potter and Snape tried to save him every single time. That day at the Quidditch match, Quirell was trying to hex Harry's broom and Snape was only muttering the counter-jinx. Hermione made Quirell fall when she raced across the stand to set fire to Snape's robes, but accidentally [read: fortunately] made the jinx break because of the sudden broken eye contact. And the craziest part of this all; Lord Voldemort was hiding inside Quirell's turban! It sounded ridiculous when you said it like that, but not to them. They finally knew what had happened to Voldemort the night he failed to kill Potter.

'So, you're telling us that You-know-who never died?' Pallavi whispered. Potter shook his head, his messy hair which was now even more untidy, flying all over his face.

'No. I mean, think about it. We never really knew that he was dead, did we? We just knew that he had vanished after that night when he failed to kill me.'

Hermione nodded, her eyes looking lost in thought. 'You're right, Harry. And you're saying that You-know-who was now only a spirit? Was that a spirit you saw?'

Potter shook his head again. 'It wasn't a spirit. It was more like – a part of him. A part of his soul. That night when he tried to kill me, he somehow killed himself. But the fact is that he did not die. He did not have a body anym-

ore but he also wasn't completely dead. A part of him was still alive.'

'That makes absolutely no sense,' Weasley said.

'I think it does,' Hermione said nervously. 'Harry's saying that instead of killing him, the curse rebounded. You-know-who should have died but he did not, because there was something that was keeping a part of his soul alive. He had no body – only a soul. And that part of him was still alive. But ... how?'

Potter shrugged. 'I don't know. Dumbledore doesn't either.'

'Hey!' Ashwini suddenly exclaimed. 'You just said that he did not have a body any longer ... that was probably why he had to use somebody else's body! Someone like Quirell!'

'Exactly! So that's why he was in Quirell's turban. They were sharing a body and mind!' Hermione said.

'Ok,' Saloni said slowly. 'What about the Philosopher's Stone? Did Quirell finally get it?'

After this sentence, the tension that had built up at the first mention of Lord Voldemort diffused slightly.

'Nah', Potter grinned. 'It got destroyed.'

Ashwini frowned. 'Destroyed? But then wouldn't Nicholas Flamel die without the Elixir of life it gives?'

'He had enough of it to take care of some important business. Then he'll die,' Potter informed. They were astonished at this casual comment but decided not to push him further.

Pallavi swallowed sharply. 'Does this mean that ... he will return?'

They all felt silent at this question because they all knew the answer. Once Voldemort got his body back again, he would definitely return. Stronger than ever, and thirsty for revenge against Harry Potter.



20. SLYTHERIN FOR THE WIN

Slytherin for the win

All of them got out of the hospital wing the next day and were now on their way to the Great Hall for the end-of-the-year feast. They all stayed huddled together between the walk there, seeking solace next to each other. They'd been through so much together, that the thought of staying apart mildly frightened them.

Saloni couldn't believe she was leaving. It had been a whole year; it felt like a week compared to the tiring school year of the muggle school she used to study in before. This year had truly been magical, in the best and worst ways. But she still couldn't wait to spend a long summer holiday full of fun with her parents in the Muggle world. She had been continuously pinching herself this entire year to keep making sure this wasn't all a dream. The stinging pain lingering on her forearms assured her that it wasn't.

They all reached the Great Hall and with after sharing a small nod, went back to their own house tables. Saloni walked to the Slytherin table and sat down with a heave.

'So? Done serving detention with McGonagall?'

She quickly looked around to see Malfoy looking at her with a raised eyebrow. For a second, she didn't process what he had said until she did and blushed.

'Er ... yeah,' she said awkwardly. 'I wasn't really doing that, you know?'

‘Yes, so I’ve heard,’ Malfoy commented dryly. ‘I can’t believe you actually helped them.’

‘Why wouldn’t I?’ she asked. Malfoy looked at her disbelievingly. She noticed she had been getting a lot of looks like that from everybody, this past year.

‘Because they’re Gryffindors! They’re the enemies.’

Saloni sighed at this silly excuse. ‘They’re your enemies Malfoy, not mine. And I only did what I thought was right ... for me *and* the school.’

Malfoy glared at her furiously for a minute and then turned around to face the teachers’ table as if nothing had happened. Saloni blinked and turned around too, looking up at where Dumbledore had stood up, ready to give a speech. The entire hall had fallen silent as they looked at him. She was ready to bet anything that they were just waiting for more gossip about the Philosopher’s stone.

‘Another year has gone!’ Dumbledore said cheerily. ‘And I must trouble you with an old man’s wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast.’

Saloni found herself wishing that they could sink their teeth in the food without having to endure the wheezing waffle. Even though she did love Dumbledore’s speeches.

‘What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were ... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts –’ Dumbledore chuckled at this.

‘Now, as I understand it, the House Cup here needs awarding and the points stand thus: in fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two; Ravenclaw have four hundred and twenty-six and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy-two.’

The whole Slytherin table burst into loud cheers, Saloni laughing and cheering with them. She could honestly imagine Ashwini’s eyerolls and Pallavi’s small smile, but she was

going to enjoy this moment. It was her first year at Hogwarts and they won the house cup!

‘Yes, yes, well done, Slytherin,’ Dumbledore cut in the loud hooting. ‘However, recent events must be taken into account.’

The Slytherins stopped cheering at once, a confused frown taking over their grins.

‘Ahem’, Dumbledore cleared his throat slightly ‘I still have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes ...’

‘First – to Mr. Ronald Weasley ...’

Saloni quickly turned to look at Weasley, who was blushing heavily. His hair and his face were now almost the same shade.

‘... for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points.’

The Gryffindors cheers were so loud at this, that Saloni swore that the ground beneath them shook slightly. The Slytherins could be heard mumbling morosely and scoffing. She wasn’t too happy about this change, but she felt Weasley deserved at least this much after the incident in the chess room.

After a long moment, there was silence again.

‘Second – to Miss Hermione Granger ... for the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor house fifty points.’

Saloni looked at Hermione next, who caught her eye and beamed back at her with rather shiny eyes. She couldn’t help but smile back.

‘Third – to Mr. Harry Potter ...’ as soon as Dumbledore said this, every cheer stopped and the room went completely still. It felt as though everyone was petrified all of a sudden. ‘... for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points.’

This time, Saloni had to cover her ears to block out the hoarse screaming coming from the Gryffindor table. Honestly, they had *all* shown bravery! But maybe Potter had shown it a bit more ... just a tad. Gryffindor house was now four-hundred and seventy-two points – exact same as Slytherin. The Slytherins looked ready to jump on the teachers table and throttle Dumbledore right there.

Dumbledore raised his hand to silence the Gryffindors.

‘Many people experience failure in a particular thing. But only a rare few know how to actually accept that failure and try again, while still maintaining a good sporting spirit. For showing a brilliant example of this trait, I award forty points to Gryffindor for Ms. Ashwini Bhosale.’

As much as Saloni wanted to cheer for her friend, she knew they had lost. Gryffindor had won – as one could tell by their obnoxious cheering.

‘Ah, ah, ah!’ Dumbledore said merrily. ‘I’m not quite done yet – I wouldn’t get so excited if I were you, Gryffindors.’

The Gryffindors fell silent, looking at Dumbledore, their grins fading slightly.

‘I still have more points to give out. Such as to Ms. Pallavi, for showing us what a selfless heart really is, I award Hufflepuff forty points.’

The Hufflepuff table looked much happier for not coming in last this time, and everyone was smiling at Pallavi, who looked abashed.

‘And last, but not least, I would like to award forty points to Slytherin for Ms. Saloni Mate, for having enough patience and wit to babysit a bunch of reckless heroes single-handedly.’ Dumbledore’s eyes were looking her way, shining with mischief. Saloni hardly saw it, because the Slytherins had stood up and were flailing their arms in the air wildly, looking like they were on cloud nine. Many people hugged her while shouting in joy, but she did not catch who. She was too busy trying to keep her squealing at bay.

Still more delightful was that the Gryffindors were looking like they had been given the key to a sweet shop and then the owner had snatched it away from them right as they were about to go inside. Ashwini was still laughing though, if that was at the Gryffindor's shocked faces or that she had already seen this coming, Saloni did not know.



21. BACK TO MUMBAI

Back To Mumbai

Their exam results came out soon that day, and Saloni was shocked to find that she passed with fairly good marks. She expected a much low score because this was her first year learning magic; she shouldn't be surprised though. Hermione had received a perfect score in all her exams and was at the top of their year. Ashwini and Pallavi had received good scores as well, if not a bit more than her.

The Slytherins were now much kinder to her now that she had proven herself to be 'worthy' of their house, as they put it. Soon, they all were out of the castle and into the boats which would take them to the Hogwarts express. It was a merry ride, and Saloni was still drifting to the photos of the castle she had clicked to show her parents and sister.

The train ride went past happily, all of them chatting as they munched on chocolate frogs and licorice wands. The window showed a beautiful picture, as the trees had suddenly become greener and the muggle towns prettier than she ever remembered. She also got a quite friendly good-bye from Sameer Bhagwat as she got off the train at King's Cross station. She thanked him for the Maraca, and he congratulated her on Slytherin's victory but promised that they would definitely win the cup next year. She firmly disagreed.

Hugging Ashwini, Pallavi, and Hermione goodbye, she promised to write to them as they did to her. She was once

again not on very good terms with Potter and Weasley, because they seemed unable to accept the fact that Slytherin won the cup. And it may or may not have had a little bit to do with Saloni rubbing it in their faces at every opportunity she got.

She was delighted when she spotted her parents and sister, all looking equally happy to see her. After racing towards them and giving them each a big hug, she began telling them about the crazy events that took place this year, as they all walked to the car. It had been quite a year – terrifying, weird, and slightly mad. But as she sat in the backseat of their car, she realized that she wouldn't have had it any other way.
