

The Sorting of Suzie Sefton

by MMADfan

An old wand finds its witch at long-last as a new Muggle-born enters the wizarding world. Suzie finds more than a few diversions along the way, from her first trip to Diagon Alley to the Hogwarts Express to the Sorting Ceremony. Her first encounter with Severus Snape is particularly dramatic—and potentially traumatic.

Not DH-compliant. A “sister story” to *A Long Vernal Season*.

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Part of the *Resolving a Misunderstanding* universe.

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Suzie jumped up and down and pointed. "Oh, look, Mum! Owls! The letter said I could bring an owl!" Her black ponytail bounced with excitement.

"I think we ought to wait until your Christmas holiday to decide on anything like that," Miranda Sefton said, her brows furrowed as she tried to convert Galleons to pounds sterling in her head, and failing utterly. "We'll ask your father."

Suzie, spirits not dampened by this, skipped across the street to a shop that was being painted by a very tiny person with pale blue skin and wrapped in some kind of toga. He had just finished painting the golden "d" and "s" in the stencilled word "Wands" on a deep blue sign.

"Mum! Mum! I *have* to have a wand, the letter said so!" Suzie exclaimed, oblivious to the fact that her mother was still on the other side of the street, herself distracted by the sight of an ancient, hag-like woman haggling with an enormous bearded man about the price of the live Flobberworm larvae she was selling from her cart.

Miranda was unsure whether she was more disgusted by the thought of Flobberworm larvae...which sounded revolting even though she'd never heard of them before...more unnerved by the sight of the hag, or more amused by the jovial oversized man with the wild-looking hair and beard. When she saw her daughter in excited conversation with the tiny blue painter, however, Miranda felt slightly alarmed. Who knew what dangers lurked in this peculiar world, she thought, and she hurried over to her daughter's side.

"Mum, this is Perrit! Perrit's an elf! He says this is Ollivander's wand shop and that it's reopening today for the first time after the war. He says that Ollivanders have been making wands for thousands of years! Can we get my wand here, can we?"

Since Miranda had no idea where else they might procure such an object as a wand...a real one, anyway, not the sort that her Great-aunt Millie used to use for divining water and looking for old Roman coins...Miranda nodded. She was slightly perturbed by the mention of the word "war," however.

Her mouth somewhat dry, and wishing that her husband David could have come with them, Miranda turned to the tiny person, who didn't look anything like elves she'd seen in any books or movies. He looked a little bit like the brownies in the picture books which her grandmother used to read to her from, except not as cute. "Sir, Mr Perrit, what war was it that you mentioned?"

Perrit giggled and covered his mouth with one paint-flecked hand before replying. "The Evil Wizard Voldemort-whose-name-was-Riddle wished to purify the wizarding world. He waged long war to make everything evilly pure. Then, years and years before today, the Dark Wizard vanished from the world, defeated by the baby Mr Harry Potter. But the Evil Wizard came back from the dead, and Mr Harry Potter, great wizard of the Light, must defeat him again. Poor old Mr Ollivander was stolen by the Evil Riddle, taken away because he holds the greatest secrets of ancient wandmakers. Mr Harry Potter and his brave friends saved old Mr Ollivander from the dungeon of the Dark Riddle Wizard, then Mr Harry Potter, the great Professor Albus Dumbledore, and the most esteemed Headmistress McGonagall of Hogwarts all vanquished the Most Miserable Riddle for once and for all. He is gone. The war is over. Perrit is happily happy. All good house-elves rejoice for Mr Harry Potter and the glorious victory at Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts School?"

"Hogwarts School," Perrit said with a quick nod. He looked across the street at a wizard in a sort of bibbed robe who was walking toward them. "My master comes. Must finish sign quick-quick! Buy very good wands here for all witches and wizards." He smiled toothily at Suzie. "The young miss finds a very good wand here, indeed indeed! An old wand for Light times you will have!" Perrit returned to his painting, flicking his fingertips at the sign, transferring the beautiful liquid gold to the wood, and "Est. 382 B.C." appeared below the word "Wands."

"Come on, Mum!" Suzie tugged at her mother's hand.

Miranda blinked as they entered the shop. There was both the brand-new scent of fresh-cut lumber, recently applied paint, and something that smelled vaguely of disinfectant, and an ancient, musty scent, like that of a very old book being opened for the first time in decades, or like the trunks in her grandmother's attic when she was a girl, which had always been filled with wonderful things.

A strong, heavily tanned older man stepped out from behind a row of shelves and greeted them. Though he did not smile, his golden brown eyes sparkled, and his cheerful robes of bright turquoise blue and a soft, pale tangerine colour seemed to smile for him. For all that he was quite a bit older than she, with a few strands of white hair sprinkled through his curly, honey brown hair, Miranda didn't see him as the "poor old Ollivander" whom the blue house-elf had described.

The wizard's sharp eyes acknowledged Miranda, but then turned appraisingly upon her daughter. "A wand for the young witch? But aren't you a bit young for your first wand?"

Suzie nodded mutely, overawed by the wizard's presence. She fumbled in her little purse and pulled out a much-folded, much-read letter and held it up.

The wizard smiled, very white teeth gleaming against his tanned skin. "Your Hogwarts letter, I see. We will find you your wand...or I should say, your wand shall find you! Measurements first!" He came around the counter, his wand in hand.

"Measurements of what?" Miranda asked.

"Madam...?"

"Miranda Sefton," Miranda replied. She blushed slightly. "Just 'Ms,' not 'Madam.'" She had noticed that some witches were addressed as "Madam So-and-so," and it seemed somewhat strange to her.

The wizard smiled. "Ms Sefton." He took her hand and bowed over it briefly in an old-fashioned courtly gesture. "Ambrose Ollivander at your service, my lady!" His lips twitched in humour. "As you are aware, your lovely young daughter is a witch. Witches and wizards are not all the same. They have different strengths, different talents, different . . . levels and types of power. They come in different flavours, one might say. Wands and witches or wizards are matched up so that they may work in harmony with one another. While a trained witch can use almost any wand more or less effectively, no wand will ever work as well for her as one that has chosen her, one that matches the resonance of her magic. As we generally make them today in the west, a wand consists of a single wood and a single core. Many witches and wizards have very similar wands, and those that are similar to a witch's own wand will work more effectively than those that are not. There are sometimes familial traits passed down generation to generation, and one will see that a unicorn tail hair makes a particularly good wandcore for members of that family, and the same is true of the wand woods. Wand creation is a complex art, and the interplay between a witch's magic and her wand is even more complex. The measurements that I will take will help me to narrow down the selection of wands to have her try out."

"I see. Thank you for explaining that. What do you have to do?" Miranda asked.

"You may watch!" Ambrose said. He waved his wand and a most peculiar sort of measuring tape appeared in the air.

Miranda watched as the measuring tape, sometimes stretching in three directions at once, spun about her daughter, measuring who-knew-what, but her daughter just giggled with delight, apparently not at all uncomfortable with the process.

At the end of the process, the wizard looked almost as bemused as Miranda felt, but she thought it had to be her imagination.

The wizard began rummaging around beneath the counter. "As you have likely seen, my lady, we are only recently reopened after the depredations of the war. Much of our stock was stolen, despoiled, or damaged. Uncle Erskine has had a long recovery, himself, but he is trying to replenish our inventory as quickly as possible." Ambrose

raised his eyes to meet Miranda's and he flashed her one of his brief but brilliant smiles. "That is why I have returned from Nepal, you see, to help him to craft wands, to rebuild the family business, and to serve lovely customers such as yourselves."

"You were in Nepal? I spent several weeks there years ago...before Suzie was born. A beautiful country."

"Indeed. Very beautiful, with very lovely people," Ambrose agreed. "I was doing further study of Dendromancy there after brief sojourns in New Zealand and Madagascar." He pulled a long box from beneath the counter, opened it, and selected a long, pale wand. "Yew with phoenix tail feather. Eleven inches. Springy and strong." He handed it to Suzie, who simply took it, held it on her upturned palms, and looked at it in amazement.

"Well, wave it!" the wizard told her.

Suzie grasped the larger end of the slightly tapered wand and waved it as instructed.

Miranda let out an unladylike exclamation and jumped back from the wildly careening explosions of magic around her.

"No, no, that will not do," Ambrose said, shaking his head and taking the wand back from the startled young witch. He considered Suzie a moment, then reached back into the box and pulled out another wand. "Holly and phoenix tail feather. Ten and a half inches. A nicely flexible wand."

Suzie dutifully waved the wand. There was an explosion of orange light and one of the small window panes in the door blew out. Ollivander seemed unperturbed by the loss of a window pane, but puzzled by the failure of either wand to choose the witch.

Ambrose took out his magical measuring tape again; he took a few more measurements, then he put it in the pocket of his flowing tangerine-coloured under-robe and stared hard at Suzie, one arm crossed in front of him as he held his other elbow and scratched his chin contemplatively.

"All right, we'll try this one." He pulled out a different box, sorted through the wands in it, and handed her one. "Ebony and phoenix tail feather. Ten and two-eighths inches. A strong wand. Not bendy, but not brittle, either."

Miranda stepped back cautiously before her daughter waved this wand. This time, as soon as Suzie waved the wand, it jerked from her grasp, then rocketed toward the ceiling so fast it was only a blur.

"Huh." Ambrose gazed up at the small hole in the ceiling. "Never seen that before. Hope no one was hit by it on its way up. I think I can see daylight."

"I'm sorry, sir," Suzie said tremulously. "I didn't mean it to do that."

"No worries, little sister," Ambrose said kindly. "It will come down somewhere. Probably. You, however, are a challenge!"

He went behind the shelves whence he'd emerged earlier, and Suzie and her mother could hear him shifting boxes, sifting through wands that rattled as he stirred through them looking for the right wand for this Muggle-born witch. He came out several minutes later with three different wands in his hand.

"Now, one of these will suit, I hope. If not, I shall call Great-uncle Erskine in to help." He handed her the first one. "Rosewood and dragon heartstring. Somewhat pliable."

Miranda's mouth opened and closed. She wasn't sure how she felt about a dragon heartstring. She'd never met a dragon, but she presumed they were likely as ferocious as the myths and legends claimed, if they were anything like the crocodiles she'd encountered during a youthful trip through Africa. Nonetheless, to put the poor dead creature's heartstrings in a wand . . .

"It's warm," Suzie said as she hesitantly touched the outstretched wand. She grasped it, looked up at Ollivander, then with some determination in the set of her jaw, she waved it. The effect reminded Miranda of the final bubbles in a glass of champagne gone flat.

"No, no, that won't do, either," Ambrose said, snatching the wand back. "Good wand, too," he muttered to himself as he considered the other two wands in his hand. "A pity. I thought for sure . . . Here," he said more loudly, "this one is rosewood and phoenix tail feather. Favoured in former centuries by many of those who went in for alchemy."

"It's itchy," Suzie said as she took it. "I don't like it."

"Give it a try, dear," Miranda said.

With a pinched expression, Suzie waved the wand. Dark droplets of muddy orange magic fell from the wand and a dull, clanging sound emitted from it, like deadened cymbals.

"Your daughter was right: this one is not for her, either." Ambrose took the wand back.

Miranda wondered whether all of their purchases that day would be so difficult to make. Were witches' school robes fitted the same way? She asked the wandmaker that.

"Oh, heaven's, no!" Ambrose said with a laugh. "Not school robes. Now if she wanted something for a special occasion or for a particular purpose, perhaps then, but not school robes or any other everyday robes. Now for the last one...I hope!"

"What is it?" Suzie asked.

"*Rosa arcana*...a variety of magical rose bush...and unicorn tail hair."

Suzie gave a little shrug, her head cocked to one side, looking much like her father would just as he was about to taste some new sauce he didn't expect much from, but she accepted the wand from the wizard's hand. She waved it. By now, Miranda could tell a disappointing result. There was a faint trickle of something from the end of the wand, and to Miranda, it looked like brackish water. Her daughter, however, looked more disgusted, perhaps seeing more than Miranda could.

"Ew! That was just totally revoltastic!" Suzie said, wrinkling her nose.

Ambrose laughed. "'Revoltastic,' indeed! Ah, well, must call for Uncle. I hadn't wanted to disturb him. He was incorporating unicorn tail hair into a few new ash and yew wands today, and it's a fussy job. I'll be right back. Don't touch anything in the meantime!" He waved his wand and conjured two comfy upholstered chairs. "Do have a seat whilst you wait!" He disappeared behind some heavy midnight-blue curtains at the back of the shop.

Suzie flopped into one of the chairs as Miranda gingerly lowered herself into the other one. It seemed solid enough, and Miranda relaxed.

Miranda's thoughts turned back to what Perrit had said about the war, apparently now over. Ollivander's words had confirmed that there had, indeed, been a war. Miranda felt unsettled by that fact, particularly given the elf's mention of Hogwarts School. Miranda certainly didn't want to send her precious young daughter into a dangerous world...more dangerous, anyway, than the one she knew.

Perrit had said that the evil wizard had been defeated by some wizard named Potter, one of the Hogwarts teachers, and the Headmistress. That was difficult for Miranda to fathom. She had met the Headmistress a week or so before. Minerva McGonagall, in her sensible blue suit, carrying a matching handbag and wearing matching shoes, seemed highly unlikely to engage in some kind of battle. She had reminded Miranda of her father's prim and proper side of the family, rather than her mother's somewhat scatty and eccentric relatives. They'd had tea in the living room and the Headmistress had done nothing startling or unexpected, and she'd drunk her tea with a touch of milk like a normal woman. No strange ingredients, frog spawn or eye of newt or some such thing, were added. The short glimpse Miranda had had of the interior of the

witch's handbag when the Headmistress had first retrieved her calling card and then, later, the sheet with instructions for her and David, had revealed only a carefully ironed handkerchief, a purse, and a long polished stick that Miranda presumed was the witch's wand.

Miranda opened her own purse and unfolded the sheet of heavy paper that Headmistress McGonagall had given her when she had visited. It had two different methods of contacting her on it; one was a Muggle postal address, which the Headmistress had explained was checked daily by something called a squib, and any correspondence would be immediately forwarded to her. The other method required her to visit the Owl Post Office in Diagon Alley and have them send the letter by owl. Given that she could only enter Diagon Alley with the assistance of the peculiar barman in the Leaky Cauldron...which she had had difficulty finding, even after Suzie had pointed it out, and only seeing its door when she and Suzie were right in front of it and Suzie had already begun to open it...going to the Owl Post Office would not normally be a practical proposition, even if they did live closer to London. That day, however, Miranda thought that she might write the Headmistress a letter and ask her about the rumours she had heard regarding the war and whether her daughter would be in any danger at Hogwarts. On the way back from Gringotts, where they had exchanged pounds for wizarding money, Miranda had seen a stationery shop. She would stop in there, get some paper, and write the Headmistress a note.

Suzie was swinging her legs, her heels beating a syncopated rhythm against the over-large chair, and looking up, contemplating the small hole in the ceiling.

"Don't do that," Miranda whispered.

"Don't do what?" Suzie asked, looking over at her mother.

"Kick the chair. It's not polite...and you don't know what might happen to it." Miranda could envision the magically conjured chair suddenly disintegrating into dust after one thump too many.

Suzie giggled, but she stopped swinging her legs.

The deep blue curtains parted, and a bent, white-haired old wizard shuffled out into the shop, followed by Ambrose. Miranda rose to her feet automatically, and Suzie followed suit, though she seemed to shrink as she did.

"My uncle, Mr Ollivander," Ambrose said softly.

"So . . . you're the little Muggle-born witch who sent one of my ebony wands through the roof, are you?" the older wizard wheezed. He pushed his spectacles further up his nose and bent close to Suzie. He smelled of menthol and licorice intermingled with the scent of fresh wood shavings.

Suzie nodded shyly, her dark eyes large and round.

"Hmm, hmm, hmm. Measurements already taken . . . one more little spell might help," he muttered. He turned surprisingly quickly to his nephew. "Did you cast a *Consonare*?"

"No, Uncle," Ambrose said deferentially. "I considered it, then thought it better if you were the judge of it."

"Hmpf." Ollivander stepped back. "A little spell. May tickle a bit. Nothing more. Stand still." Suzie had begun to shift her weight back and forth, bouncing on her heels a bit, as she did when she was nervous.

The wizened old man drew his wand from one of the large pockets on his dusty khaki work-robe and twitched it at Suzie.

Suzie shivered slightly as the spell hit her, but she stood still, and Miranda swallowed her apprehension, reminding herself that this sort of thing was likely quite normal in the world her daughter was entering, and she didn't want to infect her daughter with any of her own fears and apprehensions about it. Her little girl would have to go into the new world feeling confident and equal to the adventure before her. Miranda knew that from her own days of "adventuring" when she was young, although at the time, she had been several years older than Suzie was now, and the worlds she explored were far less peculiar than this one seemed to be. But there would be teachers to look after the children, and the Headmistress had said that there were prefects and a House system, as well. Home-sickness was likely the greatest danger Suzie would face, going away from home for the first time. Unless there were often evil wizards lurking about and magical wars being waged. Miranda shivered.

"I think . . . hmm . . . no, that one was a part of the destroyed stock . . ." Old Ollivander stood in front Suzie, pondering a moment. "Let's try something a bit different with you, girl."

Ollivander beckoned to his nephew, and the two disappeared behind the curtain again. Miranda swallowed a sudden nervous laugh as she thought of the line in the *Wizard of Oz*, "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!" Whilst Miranda certainly felt she wasn't in Lancashire any longer, neither was this Oz. She thought an excursion to Diagon Alley might be even more disconcerting than a trip to Oz.

The elder Ollivander reemerged. "My nephew is retrieving our necessities. The wait should not be over long."

The wizard pointed his wand, gave it a slight flick, and conjured his own chair, this one with an ottoman.

"It is good you are doing your shopping now. In a fortnight, the Alley will be teeming with children and their parents, and your wait would be longer."

"The Headmistress suggested we do it now." She had said it would avoid the confusion of the crowds, and considering how confusing Miranda was finding this small slice of the world of witchcraft and magic, she was glad she did not also have to contend with crowds of others all intent on purchasing school supplies.

"Ah, yes, young Professor McGonagall." The old man smiled. "How did she seem when you saw her? Was she well?"

"She seemed quite well," Miranda said, confused by the description of the witch as "young"...she was well into late middle-age, Miranda had thought, perhaps fifty-five or so. But considering the apparent age of some of the folk she had seen in the Leaky Cauldron and queued up at Gringotts, it seemed that many of them lived to quite ripe old ages, and she supposed to someone like old Mr Ollivander, the Headmistress might seem quite young.

"Good, good . . ." Ollivander stretched his legs and shifted slightly in his chair, sighing. "She was poorly earlier in the summer, recovering from her wounds, you know, but as I wasn't on my feet yet, myself, I was unable to visit her. And now...well, you see how it is," he said gesturing at the wall of shelves behind him. "Stocks are low, and demand is as high as ever, or more so. Always have to have at least twenty wands in stock for every one you sell, my great-grandfather used to say, and it's as true today as it was when he told me that the first day of my apprenticeship one hundred twenty-two years ago next week."

"One . . . one hundred twenty-two years ago?" Miranda asked, astounded, and losing her opportunity to ask more about the war, so distracted was she by the man's age.

"Yes. That, of course, was my third and final apprenticeship, after Charms and Herbology, so I was already almost thirty." He snorted. "Still a young fool I was then, I now can see that, my head so filled with ideas, but no real knowledge, and less wisdom, to say nothing of experience. But Grandfather worked the fool out of me, I'll tell you that. A real apprenticeship, we had in those days, not the easy time young people have today. Up at five-thirty in the morning, my master's breakfast on the table by six, in the workshop by six-thirty, readying all the materials for that day's work, and then doing more materials preparation, not a minute wasted, no hours frittered away. Not that I didn't learn the proper theory and history, young woman! Make no mistake! Wandcraft is one of the most arcane of the magical arts, with centuries upon centuries of esoteric history, and Grandfather taught me well, and my ideas became enriched and tempered with experience and, with the passing of time, even some wisdom. And all of that goes into every wand I make. Witches and wizards use their wands from the moment they wake until they go to bed at night, little appreciating the complex art and craft that went into the creation of their most important tool."

"Have Ollivanders really been making wands since three hundred B.C.?" Miranda asked.

Ollivander snorted. "Three eighty-two, girl. Yes. We weren't called 'Ollivander' then, though, of course not, but it's been in the family for that long, a highly valued art we brought with us wherever we settled. We have been in Britain since the twelfth century, and in Diagon Alley since sixteen sixty-seven."

Miranda's father's family could trace their roots back several hundred years, and branches of her husband's family were easily traced back to the sixth and seventh centuries, but the thought of someone having a traceable family lineage going back to 382 B.C.E., and maintaining the same family business since then, that was just mind-boggling to Miranda. Coupled with the fact that wizards apparently lived at least twice as long as non-wizards, Miranda tried to imagine what effect that might have on their society, on their family traditions, on the family stories that were passed down over the generations, but her mind was awl with too many questions, and none of them would still long enough for her to articulate them.

"How was the Headmistress hurt?" Suzie asked, cutting to the heart of the matter, as she seemed at times to have an uncanny ability to do. "Perrit said that she'd helped defeat an evil wizard."

"Evil, yes . . . very evil . . ." Ollivander's gaze became unfocused.

"But..."

"Shh, Suzie, no more questions," Miranda said, remembering that the blue elf had also said that old Ollivander had been kidnapped by that evil wizard.

"It's all right, dear girl," Ollivander said, smiling faintly. "Yes, Minerva McGonagall was instrumental in defeating the evil wizard...Tom Riddle, his proper name was. I knew when I fitted her for her wand, oh, more than sixty years ago, it was, that she was destined for something, for some purpose, she and that wand of hers, the Mated Wand to Dumbledore's. For many years, I thought it was merely to serve at Hogwarts with Dumbledore, who was Headmaster before her, and when he died . . . it seemed that the opportunity for truly great deeds had passed their Mated Wands by."

Obviously, Headmistress McGonagall was a couple decades older than Miranda had thought her to be, and yet she was still young to the ancient Ollivander. But Miranda was certain that Perrit had named Dumbledore as one of those who had defeated the evil wizard.

"Died? But..." Miranda began.

"Ah, but Dumbledore did not die. He hid himself in plain sight, fooling the entire wizarding world and Tom Riddle with it. So yes, Professor McGonagall and her wand, and Professor Dumbledore with his, gave support to the boy, Harry Potter, when he defeated Tom Riddle once and for all. And the Headmistress was injured in that battle. It is good to hear that she is well." Ollivander's rheumy eyes brightened for a moment, and he looked over at Suzie. "You might be pleased or relieved to hear, child, that Minerva McGonagall had to try many, many wands before the correct wand found her. I am hopeful that the process might be somewhat shorter in your case, however."

"Did she make a hole in your roof?" Suzie asked curiously.

Ollivander twitched a smile. "No, that was a first, in my experience. She did, however, shatter a windowpane! So you are in good company."

There was a clatter of feet rushing down an unseen staircase, and a moment later, Ambrose huffed into the room, combing his fingers through his hair, and followed by several wand boxes floating behind him. One got caught in the heavy curtain, and Ambrose plucked it by hand from its predicament and set it on the counter beside the other five boxes.

"Here they are, Uncle. I brought them in their boxes, just in case we may have need of any of the other wands later on."

"Given the state of our stock, we may, indeed, find these wands homes at long last," Ollivander said, standing creakily from his chair. He flicked his wand, and the chair and ottoman vanished.

"I retrieved these from storage," Ambrose explained to Miranda and Suzie. "They're not a regular part of our stock."

Old Ollivander, who had used his wand to lift the lids from all of the boxes simultaneously and then begun examining their contents, turned toward them. "Ollivanders have very high standards for their wands, and we have very particular methods for creating them. Over the years, we have found that our best work is done when using three specific cores: unicorn hair, dragon heartstring, and phoenix tail feather. Some of us use unicorn mane hair, some unicorn tail hair, some both, but that has been the only major variation amongst them for several hundred years. On occasion, we have been approached with a commission to create wands with other cores, and under the proper conditions, we might accept such a commission, but that is rare. Nonetheless, it is important for the wandmaker to understand the nature of wand cores, their interactions with different wood types, and how to incorporate various kinds of wand cores into wands. It makes the work with our primary core types that much stronger and more precise. To develop the wandcrafter's skills, apprentices work with a variety of cores, obtaining practice, so to speak, and also often choose more unusual woods to work in. These wands..." Ollivander gestured at the boxes behind him "...are the products of Ollivander apprentices over the last few hundred years. Not a part of our usual stock, but all considered good enough wands to keep on hand. Not that I've taken them out, myself, not until today. Great-grandfather once sold a banana wood and Horklump tentacle wand that had been made by his father. Not at all a recommended combination, but there you have it! It suited the itinerant peddler perfectly."

"Are all wandmakers men?" Suzie asked, her brow furrowed.

"Oh, heavens, no! Some of the very best wandcrafters have been witches! We Ollivanders are a bit wizard-heavy, that's true, but it's a mere oddity that signifies nothing about the art of wandmaking," Ollivander replied wheezily. He began to cough, holding onto the counter for support.

"Uncle, you should sit, allow me..."

"No, no, I'm fine, just fine." Ollivander waved his great-nephew away. He closed his eyes and waited until his breathing came easier, then he moved down the counter to a darkly aged, plain wooden wand box. In it were four wands. He plucked one of them out and gazed at it a moment. He turned to Suzie. "Here, try this one. Hornbeam and hippogriff feather. Eleven and a half inches."

"And point it away from us when you try it," Ambrose interjected just as Suzie was about to wave it.

Suzie turned and waved the wand. The ensuing ball of purple flame that came from the wand was apparently not a sought-after result, either. Ambrose waved his own wand and stopped the fireball before it reached the shelving on the other side of the shop.

Ollivander calmly took the wand from Suzie and replaced it in its box. He poked through the other boxes, muttering and humming to himself, shaking his head. Finally, he pulled out two more wands from two separate boxes.

"My uncle made this one for his Wandmasters' Guild examination. Rather nice, if a bit unusual for an Ollivander wand. Rosewood and Augurey tail feather. Fourteen and a half inches. Good for Charms and Divination, in particular, and also somewhat favouring artists."

Suzie smiled when she took it, and Miranda was hopeful, but when Suzie waved it and a few little sparks fizzled from the end of the wand, both Ollivanders shook their heads.

"Lacklustre," Ambrose said.

"Unsuitable," old Ollivander agreed.

Ollivander snatched the disappointing wand from Suzie's hand and thrust another into it. "My great-grandfather's wand, made when he was an apprentice. Monkey pod wood and Fwooper tail feather. Twelve and three-eighths inches. Highly unusual, both in components and in their combination. Quite a vibrant wand."

"Oh! It's warm," Suzie said, smiling, "and it feels . . . nice." She waved the wand, and beautiful, starry sparkles swam from its tip, whirling and circling in a beautiful kaleidoscope of colour. She turned toward the old wandmaker. "Is it mine? I hope it's mine!"

"Yes, girl, it's yours," Ollivander said. "Ambrose, note that down, get the young lady's particulars, and take the fee . . . eight Galleons for this one. Time for my lunch."

"Eight?" Ambrose questioned softly.

Miranda had wondered about the price, as well, since the Headmistress had said that a wand purchased in Diagon Alley would probably cost somewhere from fifteen to twenty-five Galleons, quite a tidy sum of money for a stick. But Miranda supposed it was on the order of buying Suzie a new computer for school, if somewhat cheaper, and, unlike the latest PC or Mac, it was also something that she would likely use for the rest of her life.

"Mm. They have amused me." Ollivander looked up at the small hole in the ceiling and the distant daylight above. "Add another ten Sickles for repairs, and I'm a happy old wizard."

NEXT

Chapter Two: The Train and the Trolley

Monday, 31 August 1998

Suzie takes the Hogwarts Express and discovers wizarding sweets.

Characters: Severus Snape, Rubeus Hagrid, Suzie Sefton, others

Author's Note: The "Mated Wands" mentioned in this chapter were introduced in *Resolving a Misunderstanding* and alluded to obliquely in *Death's Dominion*.

Chapter Two: The Train and the Trolley

Chapter 2 of 4

Suzie takes the Hogwarts Express, meets some new friends, and discovers wizarding sweets.



Chapter Two: The Train and the Trolley

Monday, 31 August 1998

Suzie disengaged herself from her father's bear hug, kissed her mother for about the tenth time in an hour, said a final good-bye, and grabbed her trolley. The older boy who had been wheeling his own trolley toward Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was waiting patiently for her to catch up with him. They waited by the barrier on the Muggle King's Cross platform and watched as a girl with long blond hair showed another first-year student how to go through the barrier. Get a good start, run, and . . . the blonde witch disappeared right through the brick pillar. Suzie's eyes widened.

"We'll let him go next," the bored young wizard said, gesturing toward the trembling boy who was preparing to follow the blonde girl, "then you go, and I'll follow."

"Thanks! I'm Suzie, by the way. What's your name?"

"I'm Raffles. Stan Raffles. Okay, he's through...don't close your eyes like he did, though, or you might run into someone on the other side. Happened to me a couple years ago. Some little kid knocked me right over."

Suzie nodded. She would rather close her eyes, but . . . she took a deep breath and pushed her trolley, trying to work up some speed. It was a very heavy trolley.

"Wait, you won't make it through like that," Stan said trotting up and grabbing her arm. He looked at her, taking in her size. "How old are you, anyway?"

"Eleven. Today's my birthday!" Suzie said brightly.

"I don't think you can push the trolley through by yourself. You'll never get enough speed. Here, we'll put your stuff on my trolley and go through together."

The two shifted Suzie's bags and her new, bright green trunk onto Stan's trolley.

"Just hold on and keep up!" Stan said after he'd put her last bag on top of everything else.

A sudden wave of nervousness passed over Suzie. Swallowing hard and trying not to cry, and giving one last wave to her parents, she took hold of the trolley's handlebar, waited for Stan's nod, and then she pushed, running along side the older boy. As the brick barrier rushed toward her, Suzie almost closed her eyes...Stan was steering, after all, and they wouldn't hit anyone on the other side...but then she thought it might be cool to see what the inside of a brick wall looked like.

Suzie thought the sensation was like pushing through a cloud of steel wool floating in liquid rubber, though not quite as scratchy, but other than an instant of darkness, there was nothing to see. One moment, they were on Muggle platform ten, and the next, they were surrounded by other witches and wizards, a glorious, gleaming old train in front of them, its engine belching white clouds of steam through its squat chimney, and parents rushing their children to board and get settled.

"All aboard!" a skinny young wizard called. "All aboard! Hogwarts Express departing in two minutes!"

"Everyone onto the train! Everyone, now! Come on, no dawdling!" called an older boy wearing his school robes and a large badge on his chest. "Come on, you prefects! Lend a hand here! Help the younger ones!"

Suzie saw a red-haired girl holding her mother's robes, burying her face in them, and crying. Suzie was glad she'd kept from crying when she'd said good-bye to her parents. And now everything was too exciting for her to feel like crying. She turned her attention from the distressed girl to her luggage, handing Stan the smaller bags, then helping him to hoist their trunks aboard the train.

"Just leave them here, unless there's something you need with you. It'll get stowed for you." Stan said. "First-years' luggage is brought up for them, so don't worry about retrieving it yourself." He grinned and waved to someone further down the corridor. "Just grab what you need and find a place to sit. Be sure you have your school robe! I'm meeting some mates. Gotta plan the Quidditch try-outs!"

Suzie didn't have a chance to thank Stan for his help before he was off, shouting greetings to some of the other older students and dragging his trunk behind him.

The train began to pull forward smoothly, leaving the station. Some students hung out the windows, waving good-byes to their families, and although Suzie stood at the side of one window and peeked out, she knew she wouldn't see her family...or anyone else whom she knew...and she got a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach. She remembered her mother's advice to get busy and find something to do if she ever felt homesick, and so she pulled herself away from the window and, lugging a knapsack over one shoulder and a shopping bag in one hand, she started down the corridor in search of a seat.

Each compartment she looked into was already full, even over-full in a couple cases, and she thought she'd have to cross over into the next car, but then in the last compartment, there were only two other students, both also apparently first-years. They were also both boys, but Suzie didn't let that stop her.

"This seat's not taken, is it?" she asked, setting her shopping bag on the seat she was claiming and letting the door slide shut behind her.

"It is now," the taller of the two boys said, standing politely. The shorter boy followed suit.

Suzie slipped her knapsack off her shoulder and stood on her seat in an attempt to hoist her knapsack up on the rack above. She had a hard time even lifting it over her head.

"Here, allow me," the taller wizard said, taking the knapsack from her. He put one foot on the seat, and with a little hop, slung the knapsack up onto the rack.

"Andrew Campbell," he said as he stepped back. He thrust his hand toward Suzie.

Suzie quickly put her hand out to be shaken. She and her friends never shook hands, except in school programmes, but she didn't want to seem uncouth. Her mother had told her to be sure to mind her manners and not act like she'd been raised in a barn.

"This is my cousin, Cyrus Sprangle," he said, gesturing toward the shorter, brown-haired wizard in the opposite seat.

Cyrus nodded and grinned at her, but didn't shake hands.

"I'm Suzie Sefton," she replied. "Are you two new, too?"

"Yes," Andrew replied. "We're both first-years. But I'm older than Cy. My parents didn't want me to go to Hogwarts last year. My father tutored me, but the Headmistress wants us all to start as first-years." He shrugged. "If you want any help with your spells, let me know. I'm pretty good with Charms."

"Why didn't your parents want you to go to Hogwarts?" Suzie asked curiously, sliding back into her seat next to Andrew. "I think it's really exciting!"

Cyrus spoke up. "It's because he's a half-blood. My aunt and uncle thought that with the war and everything, and old Dumbledore not there to protect Hogwarts, it just wouldn't be safe for him. But the war's over and Dumbledore's still there, so when Headmistress McGonagall visited this summer and said that some other twelve-year-olds were going to be starting this year, they decided it was okay."

When she and her mother had purchased her school books in Flourish and Blotts, Suzie had seen a display of *Hogwarts: a History* and had immediately grabbed one of the fat books. She had also picked up copies of *World's Most Famous and Infamous Witches and Wizards, Two Millennia of History in Two Volumes* and *The Riddle War: How the Light Side Won*, though she hadn't managed to begin the latter book yet.

Suzie had spent hours reading, beginning with the book on famous witches and wizards, which provided her with an overview of wizarding history, though a superficial one. She paid particular attention to the pages on Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter, and Tom Riddle. Tom Riddle sounded very scary, and although the entry on him was only four pages long, she had to stop reading after the first page. The entries on Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter were each five pages long, and featured moving pictures of each wizard. Albus Dumbledore had looked kind, but to Suzie, his smile seemed sad. Harry Potter was very cute, and Suzie loved his green eyes, which had a lively sparkle in them even in the photograph. There was a card in the back of the book promising the purchaser an update with biographies of Minerva Morag McGonagall, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Severus Snape, and Arthur Weasley, "anticipated to be ready in October 1998." She had torn out the card and filled in the form, but she hadn't been able to post the card yet, since she didn't have her own owl and her mother didn't want to go all the way to London again just so that Suzie could visit the Owl Post Office. She knew from reading *Hogwarts: a History* that the school had an Owlery and that there were school owls that students could use if they didn't have their own owl, so she'd tucked the card back into the book and waited impatiently to send it off to the publisher.

Suzie was pleased that the boys' mention of the war and Dumbledore didn't leave her confused, as it had when she and her mother had been shopping in Diagon Alley. "Professor Dumbledore sounds impressive," Suzie said.

"The most powerful wizard since Merlin, my Grandfather Campbell always says," Cyrus replied.

Andrew grinned. "Don't forget how he always adds, 'And a bloody good thing he wasn't a snake like You-Know-Who! Knows how they think, though.'"

"Yeah, and then Grandma always shushes him!" Cyrus snickered.

Suzie was on the verge of asking Andrew what he'd meant by Dumbledore not being a snake, when the door was pushed open and a redheaded girl almost fell into the compartment as the train rounded a bend. Andrew caught her arm, steadying her, but she barely noticed.

"I thought I'd *never* find somewhere to sit! Don't tell me this seat's taken," she said in an almost warning tone. "I don't know what I'd do. Probably scream for a week!" She left her bag on the floor and collapsed into the seat next to Cyrus, flipping her red braids over her shoulders. "Not very organized, are they? I'll have to speak with Mum about having a word with the Headmistress."

"Cy and I arrived early enough to find our seats," Andrew said somewhat stuffily.

"It's stupid," the girl continued, not paying any attention to Andrew. "We had to come *all* the way from Leeds this morning, and Mum has to go *all* the way back. We Flooed from the Wand and Staff, and it was *dreadful*! People should be required to keep up their part of the Floo Network! Or else the Ministry should do it, but Mum says that wouldn't be practical. A good thing Mum was carrying my shrunken luggage in her Charmed valise, or I'm *sure* it would be infested with all sorts of things. Mum had to do a *dozen* cleaning charms on my clothes, and I had to wash my face in the loo at the Leaky Cauldron. You *do not* want to use the public loo there!"

"You could have Apparated," Cyrus said when it appeared the girl had stopped for a breath.

"I do not Side-Along," the girl said. She gave a crooked grin. "I guess being a bit sooty is better than being a lot queasy. Besides, it's a long way for Mum to Apparate, even on her own. She is Apparating home, though. Anyway, it seems silly not to let us get to Hogwarts on our own if we live closer to Hogwarts than to London."

"Father said it's an important ritual," Andrew said, "everyone beginning the year with the trip from London together. I'm Andrew Campbell, by the way." Suzie noticed he did not offer the new girl his hand to shake.

"And I'm Cyrus," Cyrus piped up before Andrew could introduce him again. "Cyrus Sprangle."

"Are you related to Septimus Sprangle?" the witch asked.

Cyrus smiled proudly. "He's my grandfather."

The girl sniffed as if she did not think much of that news. "I am Antonia Blackwell."

"I'm Suzie Sefton...Suzanne, but everyone calls me 'Suzie.'"

"Well, everyone calls *me* 'Antonia,'" Antonia said. "Except . . . my dad." She suddenly became very quiet.

"What does he call you?" Suzie asked curiously.

"Nothing anymore. He's dead. Killed. In the spring." Antonia blinked rapidly and took a ragged breath. "But, um, he used to call me 'Antoinette.'" She cleared her throat and looked out the window.

"Sorry," Suzie said softly.

The four sat in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes, then the door slid open again. This time it was the sweets trolley.

"Sweets?" the witch asked, poking her head in.

Suzie's eyes widened. The other three all reached into pockets and bags and pulled out a few coins.

"Acid Pop, please," Antonia said, rattling a few Knuts in her hand. "And . . . a couple Sugar Quills."

As the witch was plucking an Acid Pop and the Sugar Quills from their receptacles, Cyrus said, "Two Chocolate Frogs for me. And a small box of Cockroach Clusters for later."

"Cockroach Clusters?" Suzie asked. She looked slightly ill.

"No real cockroaches. At least, I don't think so. They're great...crunchy, chewy, and . . . a little gooey," Cyrus said, handing over his shiny silver Sickles and getting a few Knuts back in change.

"Acid Pops are great," Antonia said. "They last a long time and they make your tongue pucker."

"Are they like acid drops?" Suzie asked. She'd had acid drops.

The other three shrugged.

"I'm getting two boxes of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans and some Peppermint Imps . . . and . . ." Andrew considered the contents of the sweets trolley carefully. "Three Chocolate Frogs, two boxes of Chocoballs, and two boxes of Ice Mice."

Suzie hadn't heard of any of them. "You're eating all that?"

"No. It's for later. Don't want to rely on any older kids to get stuff for me on Hogsmeade weekends...first-years don't get to go into Hogsmeade," Andrew said with a sigh, handing over his money to the witch. "I asked, since I'm older, but I can't, either, not even next year. So, I'm stocking up. It won't last till Christmas, but Dad will send more if I ask."

"And what would you like, dear?" the witch asked.

"I don't know . . ." Suzie was overwhelmed. "A Chocolate Frog...two Chocolate Frogs . . . Chocoballs . . . those bean things, yeah, Every Flavour Beans . . . a box of Peppermint Imps, and . . . that, that, that, and . . . that," she said, pointing. "Oh, and two Acid Pops and a few of those Sugar Quills, too." She pulled out some coins and held them out to the witch, who took the right ones from her hand.

"Stocking up, too?" Andrew asked as the door slid closed and the witch proceeded into the next car.

"I've never had any of these," Suzie said. "I want to try them all."

"Are you Muggle-born, then? Yeah? Huh . . . I don't know . . ." Cyrus looked at the pile of sweets in Suzie's lap. "Some of that stuff just doesn't go together very well. Imps and Ice Mice are good together, but some of the others . . ."

"Ah, you just have a weak stomach, Cy," Andrew said. "Let the girl have some fun."

Suzie sorted through the sweets until she found an Acid Pop. She held it out to Antonia, who was sucking her Acid Pop. "Here, for later. I got two."

Antonia looked at the Pop, an expression of surprise on her face. "Oh . . . thanks!" She smiled. "I can have this next weekend."

Suzie, determined to start on her pile of sweets and have a little of everything, opened the box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans. She held it out politely to Cyrus, who had opened his first Chocolate Frog and was amusing himself by holding it down and plucking off one wiggling limb at a time and popping them in his mouth.

"Is that alive?" Suzie asked, appalled.

"Oh, no, of course not!" Cyrus said around a hind leg. He swallowed. "It's just charmed. It'll hop once or twice after you let it out of its box, but if you hold onto it like this, the legs just wiggle around. It's fun to pull them off." He grinned, and Suzie shuddered.

"Cyrus! Sorry, Suzie...Cy might seem a bit of a barbarian, but he wouldn't do that to a real frog." Andrew rolled his eyes.

"Want a bean, Andrew?" Suzie said.

"Um, not now," Andrew replied, considering the proffered box. "I'm enjoying my Peppermint Imps and don't want to wreck the experience with earwax or burnt hair or something like that."

"Burnt hair?"

Andrew sucked on his Peppermint Imp and nodded.

"They're really disgusting," Antonia said. "There are some nice flavours...I once got a box that had only six that I had to spit out...but 'Every Flavour' means every flavour. And the bigger the box, the more chance you'll get one that's actually vomit flavoured. That's why I don't get them anymore. The vomit-flavoured one."

"Oh." Suzie considered the box in her hand and shrugged. She popped a bean in her mouth and chewed. "I think this one is some kind of meat."

"What kind?" Antonia asked.

"I don't know, but it tastes like meat smells when it's being cooked," Suzie said. "My parents have a macrobiotic vegetarian restaurant, and we don't eat meat at home. Well, sometimes I have fish and chips when I stay with my aunt and uncle. It always runs right through me." She wrinkled her nose.

"You don't eat meat? Is that some kind of Muggle thing?" Cyrus asked.

"Don't be silly," Antonia cut in. "There's lots of vegetarians. My Great-aunt Agatha is a vegetarian." She licked her Pop. "She used to be a fruitarian once, a long time ago, but Mum always said it made her too fruity. So she quit. Now she's just a vegetarian."

Andrew laughed and Cyrus snickered.

"Don't worry, Suzanne," Antonia said. "Don't pay any attention to the boys. They're just ignorant."

Suzie shrugged. The bean she just popped into her mouth tasted like charcoal. She swallowed it whole, not wanting to be uncouth and spit it out. "That's okay. A lot of people think it's funny. But please call me 'Suzie.' No one calls me 'Suzanne' except this one awful teacher at my old school." Suzie cleared her throat. "*Suzanne Caroline Sefton! Suzanne Caroline Sefton! What do you have in your hand? Passing notes again, Suzanne Caroline Sefton!*" Suzie said in a high, creaky voice. *I shall have to inform your parents if this behaviour continues, Miss Suzanne Sefton!* I hope we don't have any teachers like her at Hogwarts."

"I don't know, there's a lot of new teachers this year," Andrew said. "Some of them could be pretty bad, I suppose, and we wouldn't have any warning before they hit us with a hex for passing notes in class."

"Don't be ridiculous, Andrew!" Antonia said. "Teachers aren't allowed to hex students!"

"They are in Defence against the Dark Arts," Cyrus chimed in.

"That's different. That's demonstration," Antonia said with a long-suffering sigh. "And I doubt they'd cast very strong ones, or hurt a student."

"My grandfather said that in his day, the caretaker put students in stocks and would hang them upside down by their ankles."

"That was ages ago," Andrew said. "That hasn't been allowed in years." He turned to Suzie. "I don't think it was usual even back then, but that was back at the turn of the century or something. You won't need to worry about that. But some of the teachers are pretty short-tempered and really strict, I've heard, and if you breathe wrong in their class, you lose points and get detention."

"We're lucky," Antonia said. "This year, Professor Dumbledore's teaching Defence. He's really nice. He . . . he visited us after, um, after my father was killed. My father was a Gryffindor," Antonia added, turning to Suzie. "That's Dumbledore's House, and Headmistress McGonagall's. And Harry Potter's."

"I know," Suzie said with a nod after swallowing a particularly vile-tasting bean. She couldn't even identify it. But she'd gotten raspberry, chocolate, carrot, and peanut butter, too, so they weren't all bad. "I have *World's Most Famous and Infamous Witches and Wizards* and I read about Professor Dumbledore and Harry Potter. I also have *Hogwarts: a History*. The Headmistress used to be Head of Gryffindor."

Antonia looked out the window. "I wish we were there already. I want to find out what House I'll be in. I hope it's Gryffindor."

"I want to be in Ravenclaw," Cyrus said, "like my parents and grandparents."

"They were all Ravenclaws?" Antonia asked. "My mother's a Ravenclaw. Not a bad House."

"All but Grandmother Campbell. She was a Hufflepuff. And Grandpa Stanley. But the rest were all Ravenclaw."

"That's a good House, too, I suppose," Antonia said, "but I want to be a Gryffindor."

"Doesn't matter what you want," Cyrus slurred around the Ice Mouse he'd accepted from Suzie, who had moved on to the next box of sweets.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Cyrus," Andrew said. "He's right. The Sorting Hat knows where you belong and that's where it puts you, like it or not."

"That's not true," Antonia said firmly. "If you really want a House, the Sorting Hat knows that. Or if you really *don't* want to be in a House or something. Of course, even if you're utterly dying to be in Ravenclaw," she added, glancing at Cyrus, "the Hat won't put you in it if you're an ignorant dunce."

"Mmmm . . ." Suzie said. "These Fudge Flies are megadelicious! Want one, anybody?" She held the box.

Antonia pulled her Pop from her mouth and carefully wrapped it back up in its Charmed waxed paper. "I'll have one, thanks."

After she'd taken one, each of the boys helped himself.

"Want to go for a walk?" Suzie asked Antonia. "I want to see if my luggage was really stored, and I want to see some of the other kids."

"Okay," Antonia said. She stood and picked up her small bag.

"Great! I just can't sit here for HOURS and HOURS! This trip is taking FOREVER!" Suzie said, popping up and opening the door, using both hands to slide it back in its track.

"Watch our stuff," Antonia told the boys before following Suzie out into the corridor.

"I left my bags down there," Suzie said, "near the loo."

"Yeah, I tripped over them going in. They weren't there when I came out, though, so you don't need to check...unless you want to."

"Nah, that's okay," Suzie said cheerfully. "I just wanted to get out of there."

"The boys can be full of themselves, can't they?"

Suzie laughed at that, but she just grabbed Antonia's hand and said, "Let's go this way. Stan, the boy who helped me figure out how to get to the platform, went into the next car, I think. We could say 'hi' to him and maybe meet some of his friends."

"Was he cute?"

"A little, I guess. I didn't really notice," Suzie said.

"Not cute, then," Antonia said with a grin and helping Suzie pull open the door into the gangway between the cars, "or you would have noticed."

Suzie laughed again. "Do you feel better now?" she asked, stepping into the swaying, accordian-like space between the cars.

"Acid Pops always cheer me up," Antonia said.

"You know, Toni...can I call you 'Toni'? I mean, if we're going to be friends, I'd like to call you something fun like 'Toni'...not that 'Antonia' isn't a beautiful name, but it's very formal, don't you think?"

Antonia shrugged. "I suppose. Yeah, okay. But don't introduce me that way."

"All right. So, are you feeling better? I saw you on the platform with your mother."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Antonia said breezily. "I'm fine." She paused. "But yes, I'm okay. . . . Thanks."

"Sure. Let's go find Stan, and I'll introduce you as Antonia! Then we can go back and I'll open the Peppermint Imps and we can try some of those together."

An hour and a half later, both girls burst back into their compartment, giggling and breathless. There was another boy there now, as well as Andrew and Cyrus.

"Lunch trolley's on the way!" Suzie announced. "I brought mine, but I want to try something from the trolley, too." She grinned at Antonia and the two girls burst into silly laughter again.

The boys, not having a clue what the two girls found so funny about lunch, all rolled their eyes at each other.

"This is Abdul," Andrew said. "Abdul Khalil, this is Suzie Sefton and Antonia Blackwell."

Antonia smiled at the dark-eyed boy with the smooth black hair and charming smile. "Now, *he's* one you'd notice," she whispered to Suzie, setting her off into peals of laughter.

"Hi, Abdul," Antonia said, suppressing her own giggles.

"Abdul was looking for a chess partner," Cyrus said, pointing to the small chess set sitting on one of the boys' trunks.

"He only had foolish girls in his compartment who didn't know anything about chess and just wanted to talk about hair and make-up charms," Andrew said with a look that indicated he thought that the girls in his compartment were hardly much better.

"Oh! I love chess! My dad and I play all the time!" Suzie said, looking at the board. "Checkmate in . . . four moves."

"Five," Abdul said.

"No, four. Look again. He's got you good, Andrew!" Suzie sounded delighted and Abdul looked puzzled. "You're looking at it wrong, Abdul. Not the bishop first, the knight. See?"

Abdul's face lit up. He laughed. "That is better! I could have him two different ways and I didn't even see it!"

"Show me," Andrew said, his brow furrowed as he looked over the board.

Abdul played out the moves, and Suzie was impressed and excited by the Charmed animated chessmen. Andrew groaned as, after two moves, he saw the inevitable.

"Can I play next?" Suzie asked.

"I have to get back," Abdul said. "My lunch..."

"Stay! There's plenty of room and we have enough to share! I've got a few really great sandwiches...I think my mum thought I'd die of starvation between London and Scotland...and the trolley's coming," Suzie said.

"Well . . ." Abdul hesitated. "I don't eat everything . . ."

"It's not kosher, or whatever you call it when you're Muslim, but the lunch Mum packed is all vegetarian, if that makes a difference," Suzie said. "A lot of Muslims and Jews eat in their vegetarian restaurant, too."

"Our family's not very strict, or anything, but I don't eat pork or certain other kinds of meat, and it's supposed to be slaughtered the right way. I'm not so careful about the meat I eat when I'm out, but I try. And it's called halal, not kosher," Abdul explained.

"So you'll stay for lunch and a game of chess?"

"Yes, all right. But after, I'll go get my sweets from home...better than anything on the trolley," he said.

"Would you teach me?" Antonia asked Abdul as he set up the chess set again

"Sure, if you want," he said.

Cyrus got up and leaned out the door. "Lunch trolley's almost here! I'm starving!"

Antonia and Suzie pulled out their lunches from their bags, and Cyrus and Andrew got out their small leather moneybags. Abdul reached into his pocket and sorted out a few Sickles. Ten minutes later, there was a feast set out where the chessboard had been...at least it looked that way to Suzie. She shared out her sandwiches with Abdul and Antonia, and Antonia gave Suzie half of her fishpaste and relish sandwich. Suzie had also bought pumpkin pasties and parsnip crisps from the trolley, and all four had purchased their drinks, pumpkin juice, dandelion juice, pumpkin fizz, and cherry fizz. Suzie got one bottle of pumpkin fizz and one of cherry, unsure which she'd like better.

Suzie ate a little bit of everything, and when Abdul went out and fetched his sweets from home...homemade chocolate-covered halvah with pistachios in it and a box of rosewater-flavoured macaroons...she was happy to try them. Suzie thought the halvah was delicious...and certainly better than the Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans she'd had that morning. She wasn't as fond of the macaroons, but she ate two in order to be polite.

After lunch, Suzie played a game of chess with Abdul as he explained the different pieces to Antonia. She won, then Abdul offered to play with Antonia to teach her the game. Cyrus fell asleep reading a comic book about Muggles, which Suzie found very silly, and Andrew got out his Charms textbook. Although she made an attempt to watch Abdul and Antonia's game, the motion of the train and all the food she'd eaten eventually lulled her into a half-sleep. When Abdul finally packed up his small chess set and left for his own compartment, Suzie stretched and yawned.

"I'm sure this trip is going to last forever," Suzie said with a sigh, digging through her bag and finding the box of Bertie Bott's Beans and the Chocoballs. "Want some?"

Antonia shook her head. "I couldn't eat another bite. I don't know how you have room."

"I'm just bored. Besides, it's not every day that I can eat anything I want, especially sweets. Mum and Dad don't believe in them." She popped a bean into her mouth. Orange. That was nice. "Besides, it's my birthday."

"Your birthday! Why didn't you say something?" Antonia asked.

"I didn't think it would be very couth," Suzie said, using one of her current favourite words.

"Happy Birthday!"

"Yes, Happy Birthday, Suzie," Andrew said seriously, putting down his book and holding out his hand for her to shake.

Suzie laughed, but took his hand. "Thanks, Andrew."

He poked his cousin in the ribs. "Hey, Cy! Wake up!"

"Mmph, what?" Cyrus blinked at his cousin.

"It's Suzie's birthday."

"Oh! Happy Birthday, Suzie. So you're just eleven today?" Cyrus asked.

"Yes, in a few hours, actually, if you wanted to be technical about it," Suzie said, shaking a Chocoball out of the box.

"You're lucky," Cyrus said. "My birthday's in a couple weeks. I had to wait almost a whole year to go to Hogwarts after turning eleven. And my parents wouldn't let me get my wand until June, and then Dad locked it in his study. Didn't want any accidents, he said." He sighed and shook his head.

"I got my wand a few weeks ago, at the beginning of August. That was fun, and I liked the two Ollivanders. I've only practised using it a little bit, though. Just a few charms that seemed like they'd be easy."

"Which charms?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Well, I got the *Accio* to work right after a few tries. And I did a levitating spell, and I banished something, but I don't know where it got to, so I only did that once. It was my favourite pen, too. I was a little nervous about trying any Transfiguration, but that looks really fun."

"Those are the best to start with," Andrew said with a nod. "And it's a good thing you waited to do any Transfiguration. It's a very tricky art."

"Everything's going to be easy for you," Suzie said with a sigh. "I didn't even know about magic until about a month and a half ago, and you've been tutored in it for a whole year."

"There's lots of Muggle-borns," Andrew said. "My own mother is a Muggle-born, and she's a fine witch. She works for the Ministry in their Muggle-worthy Excuse Department."

Suzie giggled. "There's no such thing."

"Yes, there is," Antonia said. "The wizarding world has to hide itself from the Muggles, but sometimes something unexpected happens, a hippogriff gets loose or something, and they have to find a way of covering it up or explaining it. And during the war, there were attacks on Muggles, and they had to be disguised as things like gas leaks, carbon monoxide poisoning, bridge faults, and things like that."

"Oh . . . I don't think I like that," Suzie said soberly. "I understand, I guess, but . . . if my family was killed by some wizard, I think I'd want to know that and not think that they'd killed themselves accidentally from faulty heating or something."

"They try to be sensitive," Andrew replied. "Mum says it's actually a service to the Muggles. They have enough to worry about without having magical beasts and evil wizards scare them, too. And it could endanger us as well as them."

"I don't think this is birthday party talk," Antonia said firmly. "I think we should open the last bottles of fizz and toast Suzie's birthday."

Suzie passed around the boxes of Chocoballs and Bertie Bott's Beans, Andrew cast cooling charms on the bottles of cherry fizz, and Cyrus gave Suzie the card from his Chocolate Frog.

"It's Harry Potter," he explained. "I've already got a few of them. They're in about half the Chocolate Frogs these days."

"But I don't have any at all," Suzie said, smiling and waving at the grinning wizard in the Chocolate Frog card. "This is great! Thanks, Cy!"

They drank their sodas...which Suzie thought were only a little colder than they'd been before Andrew's charm, but she didn't say so...ate more sweets, and talked about which subjects they were looking forward to.

Suzie was just finishing the last of the Bertie Bott's Beans...burnt hair, as it turned out...when the sound of voices reached them from the corridor.

"We'll be arriving soon, I think," Andrew said. "That sounds like the prefects making an announcement. We have to put on our school robes before we arrive. I hope you have yours with you, Suzie."

Suzie nodded. "It's in the shopping bag."

Someone pounded on their door and shouted, "Five minutes!" then left and went into the next car.

The four pulled out their bags and donned their robes. Suzie felt nervous and a little sick to her stomach. Probably that last Bertie Bott's Bean, she thought as the train swayed slightly. She'd be fine once she was in the fresh air.

Once in the fresh air, Suzie did not feel much better, but she put it down to nerves and excitement. With all the other first-years, she crowded around the huge man with the enormous, bushy hair and beard to match, and, as he instructed her and two others, she made sure she had her wand in the wand pocket of her school robe, then she left her shopping bag and knapsack on the Hogsmeade station platform to be brought up to the castle by the carriages...which were drawn by some of the ugliest horses she'd ever seen, though since they had wings, she supposed that made up for them being so ugly. She had no time to ask Toni what kind of horses they were before the group moved down along the platform away from the carriages.

The first-years all trooped along behind the massive wizard, who had introduced himself as "Professor Rubeus Hagrid," and Suzie wasn't the only one whose gaze rose, spellbound, it seemed, by the sight of Hogwarts castle high on the other side of the lake.

They reached a kind of small pier jutting out into the lake, several small boats lined up along either side of it, and Professor Hagrid explained that they'd all be taking the

boats across to the castle.

"Nice calm eve'nin' for it, too," he said jovially. "Won't be fishin' any of you out of the lake this year! Hope not, any road! In you go, now, everybody into the boats!"

Andrew took Suzie's hand and helped her into the boat, practically lifting her in when she slipped on the wet dock, and Cyrus offered Antonia his hand, but she shook it off, lowering herself rather inelegantly but effectively into the same boat with the other three. Suzie wondered if they'd all be in the same House together. She thought that would be fun, but they'd probably have classes together even if they weren't. Andrew could be kind of a stuffed shirt, as her Great-aunt Sadie might say, but he was a good guy, and Cyrus wasn't bad, either, even if he did like silly comic books. Toni had a lot of potential; she just needed to laugh more...and more at herself, too.

The bouncing, rocking, and swaying of the boat before they even left the pier bothered Suzie's stomach more, but she swallowed, took a deep breath, and told herself it was just mind over matter. She didn't want to be uncouth and embarrass herself by being sick in the boat. Everyone else looked excited or nervous, but no one else seemed sick. Besides, she liked boats...and although it was a little alarming when the boat began moving on its own, no oars or sail or engine to move it, it was also megacool. She'd have to write and tell her mum all about it. Still, she could taste the last of the Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans seeming to come up again, and she told herself once again that it was just mind over matter.

Suzie closed her eyes and tried to tune out Andrew and Cyrus as they explained to Antonia that they went out on boats all of the time, nothing to it. Andrew's Muggle grandfather was a fisherman, apparently, and he took the boys out with him. Normally, Suzie liked boats, and she was an avid swimmer, but at that moment, she wished she could have just walked up to the castle, even if it took her all night. She'd miss the Sorting, though. Suzie didn't know what House she wanted to be in, though Gryffindor sounded cool, with all the famous wizards in it, and she really liked the name of Ravenclaw. She loved badgers, but "Hufflepuff" reminded her too much of what the Big Bad Wolf said to the Three Little Pigs when he wanted to blow their houses down, and she didn't think she'd ever stop giggling if she had to introduce herself as a Hufflepuff. "Slytherin" had a nice ring to it, and she'd always been fascinated by snakes.

The boat bumped up against the dock, and Suzie let out a sigh of relief. She still felt nauseous, but the journey was over and she'd succeeded in getting across without vomiting. Andrew and Cyrus, both seeming to have noticed that she was looking a bit green, helped her out of the boat first, then as Antonia scrambled out on her own, they leapt to assist others from their boats.

"You okay?" Toni whispered. "You don't look very good."

"I'm fine, I think. Andrew was right about the burnt hair beans, though." Suzie swallowed. "Not very good with all the other sweets."

"Come on, we want to get a good spot," Toni said, pulling Suzie by the hand toward the back of the dock, where a forbidding-looking wizard dressed in black stood motionless watching the students clamber from the boats.

They got a good spot up in front of the wizard as the other students gathered around them. Suddenly, Suzie felt an overwhelming sense of nausea. Mind over matter wasn't working.

"I feel sick," she whispered to Toni, desperation sweeping over her as rapidly as the nausea.

Toni looked alarmed.

"I think I'm going to throw up," Suzie whispered urgently.

The black-clad wizard glowered at her, but before she could run to the edge of the dock, say anything to the wizard, or even just take a step back, all her willpower was for naught, and she vomited. It seemed that everything she'd eaten that day disgorged itself rapidly and violently. And all over the wizard's black robes.

Suzie was unsure whether she was more afraid of vomiting again or more frightened of the wizard standing in front of her. He must have been a very powerful wizard, too, since even as an expression of disgusted disbelief swept across his face, the mess vanished from his robes. Toni thrust a handkerchief in her hand, and Suzie gratefully, though belatedly, held it in front of her mouth. What an awful...and very uncouth...way to begin her new year at school, Suzie thought miserably. She'd probably be sent home in disgrace. But she wouldn't cry.

"What is your name?" the wizard demanded.

Suzie could keep from crying, but she didn't know if she could keep from vomiting again.

"Never mind. Go with Professor Hagrid. He will see that you..." The wizard took in a long breath and let it out slowly, and Suzie held her own breath, waiting to learn what her fate would be. "He will see that you are taken good care of and brought to the Great Hall."

"Thank you, sir," Suzie said from behind her handkerchief.

He whispered something to Professor Hagrid, then she scurried after the big wizard, who put a large, kind hand on her head and led her to a doorway and some narrow stairs leading up into the castle.

"Come along, little witch," Professor Hagrid said. "I'm bringin' ya to see Madam Pomfrey. A wonderful witch, that one, and she'll fix you up proper. You'll make it to the Sorting, never fear."

"Thanks, Professor," Suzie mumbled, still holding the handkerchief in front of her mouth.

She would have to apologise to the other wizard later, Suzie thought, relieved that she hadn't been sent back home, or even scolded. It was not an auspicious start to the year, though, that was certain.

Chapter Three: Suzie, Sorted!

Chapter 3 of 4

Suzie is dosed with potions, then makes it to the Great Hall, where Severus Snape presides over the Sorting.



Chapter Three: Suzie, Sorted!

Monday, 31 August 1998

"A great wizard, that one is," Hagrid said, his deep voice resonating in the stairwell.

"The one I threw up on?" Suzie asked, feeling a bit better in the depths of the castle, surrounded by cool stone and flickering torches.

Hagrid chuckled. "Yeah, that's the one. Severus Snape, his name is. A great hero of the wizarding world. One of the greatest in history. Ever hear of Harry Potter?"

Suzie nodded. "I have his Chocolate Frog card."

"Well, without Severus Snape, Harry Potter couldn't've done any of it...or he'd've had a harder time of it, any road. Professor Snape walked straight into the jaws o' death last May, sure never to live and see another day, but he did it for the wizarding world...for you and me...and we're all the luckier for it that Professor Dumbledore and Miss Hermione Granger was there to snatch him back and save his life. But a braver wizard you're not likely to meet than Severus Snape. A bit stiff, sometimes, and not very . . . fun-lovin', but sometimes the heroes o' the world don't have much time for fun. But a great wizard, no doubt about it. Head of Slytherin House, too."

Wonderful: she'd thrown up all over a Head of House and one of the greatest heroes of the wizarding world on her very first day of school, Suzie thought. And she hadn't received her biography of him from the *Famous and Infamous Witches and Wizards* update, either. Clearly, she'd have to read more of *Hogwarts: a History*, too. "He's Head of Slytherin?"

"That he is. The greatest Head of Slytherin since Slytherin himself. Greater, some say. 'Wizard without Peer,' they named him at the Merlin awards. He's a bit scary to some, but a lot of heroes can be scary, I expect."

Suzie thought about that. Greater than Slytherin himself . . . "What's Slytherin House like?" Andrew, Cy, and Toni had all talked about the other three Houses, but they hadn't mentioned Slytherin.

"Oh, now, Slytherin House . . . The House dormitories and common room are located in the dungeons...which we just passed through...beneath the lake. Professor Snape teaches Potions, and that classroom's in the dungeons, too. Safer that way, what with explosions and such. Slytherins themselves, they're a mite hard for me to describe . . . ambitious, clever wizards and witches, some of 'em for the worse, some for the better. And in the big battle in May...you know about that?"

Suzie nodded again.

"Well, in the big battle in May, when everyone thought that Professor Snape was dead, the older Slytherin students all rallied 'round the Headmistress and Harry, and they all faced down You-Know-Who together, and Blaise Zabini...that's the Slytherin student who led them...he said that they were all fighting in the name of Severus Snape." Hagrid sniffed and wiped his eyes with a big purple handkerchief. "It was a brave and wonderful sight to see. Go down in wizarding history, for sure. A great moment for Hogwarts. 'We're Snape's Slytherins,' he says to him, bold as brass and as brave as they come." Hagrid blew his nose.

"Wow." Suzie was awed. Maybe Slytherin House would be the right House for her. Professor Snape sounded like a storybook hero, and he hadn't even yelled at her when she'd thrown up on him.

"And what's yer name, little witch? I'm rattlin' on so, and we've not even been introduced proper yet!"

"Suzie Sefton. Suzanne, really, but no one calls me that."

"All right, then, Miss Suzie Sefton! One more flight and we'll be to the Hospital Wing. We'll likely have to call for Madam Pomfrey, though, since she's probably already down in the Great Hall waiting for the Welcoming Feast."

They approached the large doors leading to the infirmary, and Hagrid knocked. The door opened immediately, and a house-elf in a set of fresh blue tea towels popped into visibility.

"Lo there, Perlie! We've got a sick new first-year here. Needs to see Madam Pomfrey double-quick. The Deputy Headmaster wants her at the Sorting!"

Perlie smiled at Suzie, nodded, then Disapparated with a short, sharp crack.

"We'll just wait in here. Madam Pomfrey will fix ya right up!"

Hagrid led Suzie over to a bed near them and motioned to her. "Up ya go. Set yerself down there, Miss Suzie. How're ya feelin'? Ya still look a mite peaky."

"My stomach's still queasy, but better, I think," Suzie said, sitting on the edge of the bed and swinging her legs.

"Better out than in, sometimes," Hagrid said with a nod.

At the far end of the ward, the fireplace suddenly flared green, and a witch seemed to drop in through the chimney. Suzie giggled. It reminded her of Mary Poppins. She half-expected a crew of chimney-sweeps to follow the witch and begin singing "Step in Time." A light went on for her: this must be what Toni had meant when she said she'd "flooded" from Leeds to London that morning in a flue network. They went through people's chimney flues somehow. Very odd. Suzie couldn't imagine how that could be accomplished, but magic was something brand new to her, and she supposed that there must be some kind of magical conduits connecting different flues, since they were obviously not physically connected.

The witch bustled toward them, not a smudge on her...they must keep up the network at Hogwarts, which would please Toni, Suzie thought.

"What have we here?" the matron asked, drawing her wand as she approached.

"Miss Suzie Sefton, Madam Pomfrey," Hagrid said. "She was a tetch sick to her stomach after the boat ride."

"I threw up on Professor Snape," Suzie said.

The witch's eyebrows rose. "Did you, indeed?" She cast a spell, and funny symbols floated around Suzie. "Whatev'did you eat on that train?"

"Um, I had . . ." Suzie thought a moment. "Some Bertie Bott's Beans, Ice Mice, Peppermint Imps, Fudge Flies, Chocoballs, cherry fizz, pumpkin fizz, half a pumpkin pasty, some parsnip crisps . . . half a fish paste sandwich with relish, a tiny bit of a coronation chicken sandwich, a few bites of a sandwich called 'Express Surprise,' some of a hummus and tomato pita, half a lebnah and aubergine pita, and part of a kidney bean puree and sultana sandwich...that's my favourite at home. And Abdul gave me some halvah and a couple macaroons. Oh, and then after lunch, I had more sweets from the trolley and some fizz." She paused, taking in Hagrid's and Madam Pomfrey's

expressions. "I didn't eat it all by myself. I shared everything. And I still have a lot of the sweets left. I just tried them all. I did eat most of the Every Flavoured Beans myself, though. The others didn't want any."

"Did you spit out the bad beans?" Hagrid asked curiously.

"Oh, no, that would be uncouth" Suzie replied, all seriousness. "I just swallowed them."

Madam Pomfrey clucked and shook her head. "Well, Miss Sefton, it is no wonder you were sick. And you should spit out the really bad-tasting beans. It's expected."

"I wanted to try everything, and I didn't want to be rude."

"You're Muggle-born?" Madam Pomfrey asked. "Well, you'll have the rest of your life to try new wizarding sweets. You needn't try everything all at once. I'll fetch some potions for you."

"Potions?" Suzie said brightly. "My first potions!"

"Mm, indeed," Madam Pomfrey said drily.

"I'll walk ya down to the Great Hall after you take the potions," Hagrid said as the matron went over to a cupboard to fetch them.

"Oh, we can't use the fireplace?" Suzie asked, disappointed.

Hagrid chuckled. "No, that's the internal Floo-Network for staff...and they only use it when they're in a hurry. Students don't normally use it. I don't either."

Suzie looked him up and down. "Do you fit?"

Hagrid laughed. "Yeah, Miss Sefton, I fit!" He was still chuckling when Madam Pomfrey returned with two potions.

"So . . . the wizard whom you vomited on actually brewed one of these potions, Miss Sefton," Madam Pomfrey said as she measured out a spoonful of a dark, sticky-looking potion. "He's one of the best Potions masters in Britain...probably in Europe. You are very lucky to be learning Potions from him. Open!" Madam Pomfrey put the spoon in Suzie's mouth. "He's strict, though...but you need to be strict when teaching something that can be as dangerous as Potions can be."

Suzie made a face. "That was horrible. Sorry," she amended quickly, remembering her manners. "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey." An expression of surprise flitted across her features. "I feel perfect! The queasiness is all gone!"

"I should hope so! Now, this one is to keep you feeling that way and hopefully to avoid any problems on the ~~other~~ end of your digestive system. There you go."

Suzie swallowed down the potion. "Licorice. I don't like licorice much, but not bad."

"As Professor Snape would tell you, we do not take potions for how they taste, but for what they can do for us," Madam Pomfrey said briskly as she recapped the potion bottle. "Did you actually vomit *on* Professor Snape?"

"She sure did, Madam Pomfrey! All over his robes and boots," Hagrid said. "But it vanished quick as anything," he added with a wink.

"Lived to tell the tale, too, I see," Madam Pomfrey said, suppressing a smile at Suzie's expression of alarm at her words. "Professor Snape is a great wizard, brave, honourable, and powerful, an excellent Potions master, and one of the finest wizards of my acquaintance, but as I said, he's *very* strict, and he doesn't suffer fools gladly. Still, he also knows what it is to be ill, so I'm sure that he was understanding. You two had better get down to the Great Hall, though, or his patience will be tested again, and twice in one night is probably one time too many! And don't eat too much tonight, Miss Sefton! They're potions, not miracles!"

"Four flights down, and the Great Hall's on our left on the ground floor," Hagrid said conversationally. "Ya might want to remember where the infirmary is for the future."

"Infirmary, fourth floor," Suzie repeated, looking around her at the hanging lamps, wall torches, and the many portraits, all of which seemed as animated as the wizarding photographs, or even more so. "The castle's really big."

"Oh, yeah, real big, and it's not hard to get lost when yer new to Hogwarts. Even if ya've been here for years, the rooms sometimes shift, and the stairways, too, so ya have to keep yer wits about ya! Ever lost, ask a portrait for help, is what I do," Hagrid said heartily.

"Portraits can help?" Suzie asked.

"Sure can! Some o' them more than other, o' course. But address them polite enough, and they'll be happy to help. Keeps 'em busy."

The sound of voices reached them, a happy, excited buzzing rising from the Great Hall.

"Here we are, now, Miss Suzie!" Hagrid said as they reached the entry hall. "I'm going up t' staff table, but you wait here in back with Mr Rath. The Sorting will begin soon! Best o' luck to ya!"

There was now no question in Suzie's mind: she wanted to be in Slytherin. Professor Snape sounded wonderful, and Slytherins were heroes in the war, and it sounded cool to live in dungeons under the lake. She assumed they weren't like the drafty, damp, and dark dungeons she'd seen in historical tours. Almost nothing about this castle seemed like the castles she'd visited with her parents, except the stonework.

Trying not to be distracted by the amazing sight of the Great Hall and its Charmed ceiling...which she had read about in *Hogwarts: a History*...Suzie found Toni, and the other girl looked relieved to see her.

"Are you feeling better?" Toni asked. "The Headmistress already welcomed us all. I was worried you wouldn't be here."

Suzie nodded. "I'm feeling grand! The infirmary witch gave me potions!" she whispered excitedly.

"The Sorting's starting," Andrew whispered as Professor Snape walked toward the stool on which a large black hat was sitting. "Shhh! I don't want to miss my name!"

"The Sorting of students into Houses is a tradition reaching back to the very beginnings of Hogwarts School," Professor Snape said. "The four Houses, established and named for the Four Founders of Hogwarts, are Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. The Sorting Hat shall examine each of the new students and Sort them into their appropriate Houses."

Suzie thought that Professor Snape looked very commanding, standing up front there in his long black robes. She'd have to get some black robes to wear under her school robes. The school robes were black, too, but she thought the layers of black were megacool, and she and her mother had only purchased two sets of everyday robes, and neither set was black. The witch at Madam Malkin's had said that a lot of students just continued to wear whatever they normally wore at home, and simply put their school robes on over it all. She recommended only purchasing two sets of everyday robes, one a bit nicer in case she went to a party. One set was a long-sleeved robe of bright turquoise blue with silvery insets and a paler turquoise shift-like under-robe, and the other was a sleeveless grass green over-robe with green brocade accents and a heavy, darker green under-robe. She'd felt like a princess when she'd tried them on.

The Great Hall went quiet as suddenly the Sorting Hat began to speak...or sing, actually. In her excitement, Suzie didn't follow the entire thing, which seemed slightly

nonsensical to her, but it was clear that each of the first-years would be Sorted into one of the four Houses, but that regardless of House membership, the students all belonged first to Hogwarts, "mother of them all."

Professor Snape read the first-years' names in alphabetical order, and Toni's was the third one called.

"Antonia Blackwell," Professor Snape read.

Toni, whose long red braids seemed to quiver with excitement, trotted up to the front of the Hall.

The first two students had been sorted into Gryffindor, so Suzie crossed her fingers for her friend, knowing how much she wanted to be Sorted into her father's House. The Sorting Hat sat on Toni's head for quite a long time, and Toni's expression grew serious.

Finally, the Sorting Hat called out, "Ravenclaw!"

Smiling, Toni ran down to join her new Housemates, who were all cheering and clapping at the new addition to their ranks. Suzie smiled, too. Ravenclaw sounded like a good House, and Toni's mother had been a Ravenclaw, so that was all right.

"You'll probably be in Hufflepuff," whispered Cyrus, who had sidled up closer to Suzie and his cousin. "Muggle-borns are usually in Hufflepuff."

"Shhh!" Andrew whispered.

Suzie really hoped that Cyrus wasn't right about that. Besides, what could be more boring than hanging around a bunch of other Muggle-borns? She wouldn't learn anything new! It would be okay to have other Muggle-born friends, of course, and they could puzzle things out together, but she didn't want to be stuck only being with other Muggle-borns. Cyrus wasn't always right about everything, Suzie reminded herself.

Professor Snape read off, "Andrew Campbell!" and Andrew practically ran up the centre aisle, afraid of being skipped over.

The Hat didn't take as long with Andrew as it had with Toni, and Gryffindor had a new wizard at its long tables.

The next student whose name Suzie recognised was Abdul. His eyes shone as the Hat declared him a Hufflepuff. Suzie clapped for him, since he seemed very happy with his new House.

Suzie felt as though it was taking forever to get to the end of the alphabet, but as she quickly calculated the numbers of Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, and Slytherins in her head, she noted with pleasure that fewer students were being Sorted into Slytherins. She thought that was a good sign for her own chances: there'd still be room for her by the time Professor Snape got to her name. She hoped that he wouldn't call her "Suzanne." She didn't want to start the year in her new school with everyone thinking of her as "Suzanne."

After Gerald Sands had been Sorted into Hufflepuff, Professor Snape read her name.

"Suzie Sefton."

Suzie grinned in delight. He'd known she was "Suzie"! He was wonderful! She *just had* to be in his House! She bounded up onto the raised dais and smiled up at Professor Snape with shining eyes. She whispered, "Hi, Professor!" as she plopped down onto the Sorting stool.

Professor Snape's eyebrow twitched slightly. Suzie took that as a smile from him; after all, Professor Hagrid had said he wasn't very fun-loving...he probably hadn't had much time for fun, being a hero...and so that was probably the way he smiled.

The Sorting Hat approached her head slowly, and Suzie, with all her might and all the earnestness she could muster, thought, "Slytherin! Slytherin! Slytherin!" Oh, she just *had* to be in Professor Snape's House!

The Sorting Hat brushed the top of her head, she heard a sort of chuckle, and the Hat whispered to her, "*A Muggle-born witch in Slytherin, eh? Why not? Ambitious enough!*"

"Slytherin!" the Hat shouted loudly before Professor Snape had even let go of it.

Suzie couldn't help her squeal of delight. She grinned happily at Professor Snape, then ran down to join her new House. Slytherin House! And they had green flags. Green was her favourite colour!

Everyone at the long set of Slytherin House tables was clapping, and Suzie took a seat beside one of the other newly Sorted first-years, Asghar Ershadi...she hadn't met Asghar yet, but she had taken careful note of the names of each of the students sorted into Slytherin. There were only a half dozen first-years remaining to be sorted, including Cyrus, and when he was Sorted into Ravenclaw, Suzie clapped enthusiastically. She hoped that, now that they were in the same House, Toni and Cyrus would get along a little better than they seemed to on the train. On the other hand, maybe that was the way Ravenclaws were...always trying to know more than the other.

The final first-year student, Marion West, was Sorted into Slytherin, and Suzie shoved over closer to Asghar, making room for the skinny blond wizard between her and the prefect on her other side. It would be wise to get to know the prefects, of course, but she wanted to get to know her own classmates first, find out more about them and make new friends as soon as possible. She was gradually becoming aware that being a Muggle-born meant more than that she would find the wizarding world confusing at first; being a Muggle-born meant that she could be perceived as an outsider by others. She didn't want to spend seven years feeling like an outsider. She smiled at Marion as he took his seat beside her. He looked more nervous than she did, and his smile didn't reach his eyes.

The Headmistress stood as Professor Snape took his seat beside her.

"First-years, acquaint yourselves with the prefects in your Houses; they all wear badges identifying themselves as such. They will escort you to your new homes...after, of course, the feast!" Headmistress McGonagall raised her wand, and suddenly, a true feast appeared before Suzie's eyes. She was very, very glad that Madam Pomfrey had given her the potions.

Suzie dug in, helping herself to mashed potatoes, carrots, green beans, Yorkshire pudding, and lentil pie, and then, not wanting to stand out amongst her new classmates, who, like Cyrus, might think that not eating meat was something Muggle, she also helped herself to a little of the roast beef, trying not to think of the pretty cows she enjoyed watching as they peacefully chewed their cud in the deep green fields near her home. Happily, though, it seemed no one noticed what she was or wasn't eating, so she only ate a few bites of the beef, which didn't taste good to her, anyway, and had a funny texture.

Suzie joined in the conversation about what classes she was looking forward to...Transfiguration and Potions...and soon, dessert was served, puddings, cakes, pies, and biscuits in funny shapes. Trying to remember what Madam Pomfrey said about not having to taste everything new at once, she only took some trifle, which was covered with berries she'd never seen before, and a large piece of dark chocolate cake with fudge icing between its several layers. She loved chocolate and it was something she only ever got on special occasions, but it was her birthday, after all, and her first day at Hogwarts, and it was a Welcoming Feast, which only came once a year, too, so Suzie decided it was all right to have a largish piece of cake.

As she was beginning to wonder whether the largish piece of cake had been a very good idea, or perhaps she should have avoided the trifle, the prefect next to Marion, Kevin Harper, stood and said it was time to go down to the Slytherin dormitory for the first House meeting of the year. All around the House tables, other prefects were making the same announcement. Not wanting to miss her very first House meeting, Suzie decided that mind over matter would have to work this time. Besides, Madam Pomfrey had given her those potions. She wouldn't get sick again. At least, not until after the meeting . . .

Suzie was thrilled with the Slytherin common room. It was gorgeous and mysterious, and one large, darkened window apparently looked right out into the lake, though since it was nighttime, it only showed inky blackness. She put her hand against the window and was puzzled by what she felt.

"It's not glass," an older girl explained. "It's the stone wall, just charmed to be transparent."

"I'm Suzie Sefton," Suzie said, holding out her hand as Andrew had.

The older girl laughed, but shook Suzie's hand. "Letitia Pepper. Lettie."

"Lettitia, that's a really pretty name," Suzie said. She'd never known anyone with that name before.

"Thanks. I was named after my grandmother, Letitia Rosier."

"I like your ring," Suzie said, noticing the gold and silver double-snake ring that Lettie was turning on her right ring finger.

Lettie smiled. "I'm a Snape's Slytherin," she said proudly, holding out her hand so that Suzie could see the ring more closely.

"Aren't we all Snape's Slytherins?" Suzie asked, puzzled, though she admired the ring and the two tiny emeralds that made up the single eyes of the silver and gold snakes.

Lettie laughed. "I suppose so. But these rings are for Slytherins who fought in the Battle of Hogwarts." She sobered. "Anyway, if you see someone with a gold and silver ring like this, it means they were in the battle."

"Professor Hagrid told me about that. Everyone thought Professor Snape was dead, and the Slytherins fought in his name," Suzie said as the girl dropped her hand.

"Yeah, some of us did, the right ones, anyway. Of course, the young kids stayed in the Hospital Wing, but Zabini gave them all silver rings, anyway."

"Wow," Suzie breathed, in awe. She'd be living with heroes from the war.

"We got Orders of Merlin, too, but you can't wear those around every day without looking like a pompous fool," chimed in an older boy whose wrinkly smile reminded Suzie of her Great-aunt Sadie's old bulldog.

"Aw, go jump in the lake, Hatrack!" Letitia said.

"Still the master of the zippy rejoinder, I see, Lettuce," the wizard teased. He grinned at Suzie. "Charles Thackeray. Chip...or 'Hatrack,' to some." He offered her his hand, and Suzie saw another gold and silver double-snake ring on his ring finger.

"I'm Suzie Sefton."

"Yeah, we saw you Sorted," Chip said, smiling one of his funny grins. "I'm one of the seventh-year prefects. Ursula Kent is the other one. Have any problems or questions, we're the ones you can come to, us or any of the other Slytherin prefects."

"Speaking of prefects, did you see that Malfoy's back?" Ursula asked.

"Yeah . . . he's not a prefect any longer, though," Chip replied.

"Running away and hiding kind of loses you a lot of privileges," Lettie said.

"He did what he had to," Chip said. "Put the past where it belongs, Lettie."

"Mmph. As long as he doesn't bring it up, I won't."

Chip nodded, apparently satisfied. "Professor Snape will be here soon. Give us a hand rounding everyone together, Lettuce. You know he doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"If you can stop calling me 'Lettuce'...at least for the next twenty-four hours...I'll give you a hand."

Chip just laughed, but Lettie told Suzie to go find a place to sit, and then she began to go around and help the prefects gather everyone for Professor Snape's annual speech to Slytherin.

Suzie sat in nervous anticipation of Professor Snape's arrival. Although she hadn't made a very good impression on him on their initial meeting, she was going to change that. She was going to swallow her nerves...and her nausea...and sit and listen respectfully to Professor Snape, and she was going to make a note of everything he said, and follow it to the letter. She was going to be the best Slytherin she could be. If she did that, everything else would follow, she was certain, and she would find her place in the wizarding world.

Sitting on the long leather sofa with four other first-years, Suzie felt in her robe for her wand. Still there. She couldn't wait for classes to begin tomorrow so that she could really begin using it. Right now, she felt as though everything in this new world was there just beyond her reach. Once she learned to use her wand, she thought, that would all change.

The door opened, and Professor Snape strode in, his black teaching robe billowing about him. Immediately, everyone was silent, and the two students who had put their feet up on the table in front of them took them off and sat up straight. Professor Snape looked them all over, and Suzie could feel his gaze lingering on her. No doubt he was remembering her arrival on the dock earlier that evening. Her heart beat faster, but she didn't look away, and his eyes moved on to the next student.

"Our House has a long and noble history," Professor Snape began softly, "and although the actions of some might have tarnished the House image in the past, the actions of others have polished it. 'Do not mistake image for reality,' Salazar Slytherin reminds us. Polish does not a sharp blade make, only honing. Our Founder said, 'Hone your edge, but do not weaken the blade.'" Professor Snape looked around him at all of the silent students, all listening seriously. "We have been honed; we have been forged and we have been tempered. Slytherin said, 'Purity comes through eliminating dross. Banish the unnecessary within you, and you will obtain refinement, and with refinement comes strength.' Our purity is not the illusory quality espoused by those whom we have defeated, whose false ideal brought them only weakness and failure. Our virtue lies in incorporating all of our myriad strengths into one, each of us providing a new element. A potion obtains its power through the combination of its ingredients, correctly chosen and well brewed; the exclusion of any necessary ingredient causes the potion to fail. You were all Sorted into Slytherin House, therefore you are all necessary to Slytherin House. How each of you behaves will affect the entire House. Do not bring dishonour to yourself, to your House, to Hogwarts...or to me. You shall rue that day if you do."

Professor Snape closed his eyes briefly, and Suzie thought he must be overcome with emotion, though she saw no sign as to what that emotion might be. She hadn't entirely understood her Head of House's speech, but she would write it down as soon as she could before she could forget it.

"Thackeray, Kent, get on with it. I will speak with you and the other prefects tomorrow." Snape turned abruptly on his heel and left the common room.

As soon as the door was closed, the room buzzed with voices, but Chip stood on the short, round table in the centre of the room and shushed everyone.

"Okay, you all heard Professor Snape. We have to hold our heads high and remember who we are. Don't let anything that anyone in another House says provoke you. Image isn't everything, but we can do something to polish ours up. And the best way to do that is to do well."

"Start by getting rid of Malfoy," someone in the back muttered, and a few people snickered.

"You just don't get it, do you, Patterson?" Chip said. "We are ALL Slytherins here...and we are going to make Professor Snape proud of us by remembering that and working together. More than that, we need to work together to get what any of us might want: success, achievement, power, position...not to mention House points. And without power over ourselves individually, there is no power at all. So next time you think you want to say something like that, bite your tongue."

Suzie looked around, trying to figure out who this Malfoy was. She'd heard his name a few times, and none of them had been in a positive context. She wondered what the wizard had done that so many people in his own House didn't like him. But Professor Snape had said they were all Slytherins there...and that meant her, too...and so she wouldn't hold it against him, whatever it was. She did want to find out what it was, though. There was so much that she didn't understand, and she thought that at least some of it had to do with the war and the Battle of Hogwarts, but she didn't know what. The first chance she had, she was going to read her new book, *How the Light Side Won*. That would at least give her a place to start, and she'd know what questions to ask without sounding like a completely ignorant outsider.

Ursula Kent, a stocky, blonde witch, stood next to Chip. "Okay, the prefects will show the first-years where the dormitories are. The rest of you, do whatever you want...but don't break curfew...and don't cause any trouble our first night back."

"Harper, Stratton, you're with me," Chip said. "Cavanaugh and Gleason, give Kent a hand."

Suzie sidled up to Lettie. "I feel sick," she whispered. *Really* sick."

"You're the first-year who threw up on Professor Snape, then?" the witch asked. She didn't wait for an answer, though, and tugged on Suzie's elbow, dragging her over to Ursula, who was giving instructions to the other prefects. "Suzie's going to be sick again."

"Well, get her to the toilet, then," Ursula said impatiently. She looked down at Suzie. "Yeah, you look green. After you're settled, someone will have to bring you to the infirmary."

Suzie nodded. She really was going to be sick, soon.

"Go on, Lettie, get her to the loo. I don't want to be covered with her dinner. I'm not as quick at clean-up as Professor Snape," Ursula said, backing away from Suzie.

Fortunately, Suzie and Lettie made it to the loo before her dinner came back up.

"Are you sick?" Lettie asked as Suzie rinsed her mouth out. "That is to say, do you have some disease, or are you just nervous?"

"I'm not nervous," Suzie said. "Not very. I think it's the food." She shouldn't have eaten the trifle, she thought, and skipping the beef would probably have been a good idea, too. She felt sick just thinking about it.

Lettie led her down to the girls' dormitory, which was down a sloping corridor lit by beautiful bubble-like lanterns set at intervals, its translucent-seeming green walls gleaming in their cool light. It felt to Suzie as though they were in a glass submarine deep beneath the ocean.

"I'll show you where the first-years' room is, since they're probably all there already," Lettie said.

The other four first-year witches were already there with Ursula Kent, Elizabeth Cavanaugh, and Perpetua Gleason. The room was round, not simply circular, looking like half a globe or, to Suzie, like half an orange cut across its segments, the beds arrayed like spokes against the encircling wall, each four-poster surrounded by Slytherin-green curtains tied back with silver cords. On either side of each bed, there were thick patterned rugs of green and silver, and for each bed, there was a dark wardrobe. She recognised her own green trunk at the foot of one of the beds, and the rest of her bags piled next to it. The centre of the room was bare of furniture or carpeting, and coloured stone created circular pattern on the floor. Light came from a large globe hanging from the centre of the vaulted ceiling and from several candles set in tall candlesticks.

"The candles are all Automagical," Ursula was saying, "and you can light them or put them out whenever you want, but the ceiling lamp is Charmed to light at seven a.m. every morning and to go off at the bedtime curfew. By the end of the week, you'll have learned enough to know how to extinguish it or light it using your wands and the charm will be removed." She smirked. "Of course, whether you manage to learn it or not, the charm will still be removed, so that should provide you a little incentive." Ursula turned to Lettie and Suzie. "How's she doing?"

"She vomited," Lettie said, "but she seems better."

Ursula looked down at Suzie and frowned. "I think she should still see Madam Pomfrey. Do you think you can make it to the infirmary without throwing up again?"

Suzie nodded. "I feel better." Very embarrassed, but better. Apparently everyone in Slytherin had heard about her throwing up on Professor Snape, and now everyone was looking at her curiously, no doubt wondering if she was going to projectile vomit again.

"Perpetua, bring Suzie up to the infirmary...you'll have to find out where it is this year, in case they've moved it."

"Fourth floor," Suzie said. "Professor Hagrid brought me there earlier."

"Okay, come on," Perpetua said with a sigh, stepping out into the corridor. "I was going to meet with Harper and the rest to discuss the Quidditch team this year, but I'll catch up with them all later, I guess."

"Sorry," Suzie said. "I can go by myself." She thought she could find it again.

"You cannot. It's past curfew. You can't be out on your own or you'll get us all in trouble."

"When's curfew?" Suzie asked.

"Unless they've changed it since last year, ten o'clock on weekdays and eleven on weekends...that's Friday and Saturday...midnight for the seventh-years. But you really have to be back in Slytherin by quarter to. Lights-out curfew is eleven on weekdays and midnight on weekends, and Professor Snape checks us without warning, so you don't want to be found out of bed after lights-out unless you're on your way to the loo, and better not even then."

"Eleven?" Her bedtime at home had been nine on school nights, nine-thirty if she begged to stay up and read in bed.

"Eleven. Most of the little kids fall asleep before that, at least after the first couple weeks." Perpetua laughed. "It sounds fun to stay up so late, but you'll be tired out after a full day, believe me!"

Madam Pomfrey opened the infirmary door to them. In one hand, she had basket with three potions bottles in it. "Miss Sefton? Miss Gleason?"

"She's sick again, Madam Pomfrey," Perpetua said. "She made it through Professor Snape's speech, but then she vomited."

Madam Pomfrey looked at the watch pinned to the front of her starched white pinny. "All right, come in."

She set her basket down on the tall table beside the door, then cast a few spells on Suzie. "I did mention that you shouldn't overdo it, didn't I, Miss Sefton?" She sighed. "Sit, both of you."

She hurried across the open ward to a large cabinet and waved her wand. The cabinet glowed for a moment, and Madam Pomfrey opened the doors and pulled out a bottle. She closed the doors, waved her wand, and strode back over to the two students, who were sitting in straight-backed wooden chairs waiting for her.

"Miss Sefton, I really need to examine you more thoroughly, but for the moment, this treatment will have to do. Please do try to moderate your eating in the meantime, however. Now, open and swallow."

Suzie obediently took the nasty-tasting potion, this time not making a face or complaining. It was the effect of the potion she was interested in, she reminded herself as she suppressed a shudder, not its flavour. She didn't want Professor Snape to think she was frivolous or uncouth.

"I am going down to the dungeons, myself, so as it is past curfew, I will accompany you." Madam Pomfrey picked up the basket of potions. After they left the infirmary, she waved her wand, and the doors glowed and there was a light click.

"Did you have a pleasant summer, Miss Gleason?" the matron asked as they started down the stairs.

"I did, thank you, Madam Pomfrey. I helped my parents in their pub, and we took a holiday in Brighton this year."

"Lovely," Madam Pomfrey said with a smile.

"My parents have a restaurant," Suzie said. "Sometimes I help. They have their own gardens, and I pick vegetables and herbs and stuff."

"My parents' pub is in the middle of Dublin, so we don't have a vegetable garden," Perpetua said, "but Mum grows herbs for cooking and potions."

"My parents like to have all their produce fresh and local, if they can," Suzie said, glad to have found something in common with someone in the wizarding world.

They reached the ground floor and went down a narrow corridor leading to the stairs to the dungeons.

"You're going all the way down with us?" Perpetua asked as they reached the first level of the dungeons.

"As I said, I was on my way to the dungeons, myself, when you arrived," Madam Pomfrey replied. "I will leave you here, though," she said as they stepped into the dark corridor at the bottom of the second flight of stairs.

Perpetua looked worried. "Is Professor Snape after being sick?"

"Didn't he meet with you all this evening?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

"He did, but..."

"Then I expect he is fine. Good night...don't dawdle! Lights-out soon, and classes bright and early!"

Suzie could almost feel Madam Pomfrey's gaze following them as they walked away toward the hallway that held the entrance to the Slytherin common room. Perpetua still looked worried, despite Madam Pomfrey's words.

"What's the matter?" Suzie whispered. "Is Professor Snape sick?"

"Shh," Perpetua whispered, looking over her shoulder.

Suzie went quiet until they were in the common room.

"The walls have ears...or the portraits do, anyway, and the portraits also have mouths," Perpetua said. "Don't forget that."

"There weren't any portraits there," Suzie pointed out.

Perpetua rolled her eyes, then sighed. "You're Muggle-born, aren't you?" She didn't wait for an answer. "You can't possibly understand, but . . . like Chip said, we're all Slytherins now." She quirked a crooked grin, and added, "Not to mention that you threw up on Snape and didn't get hexed for it, or even given detention."

"So is Professor Snape sick?"

"I don't know, obviously, or I wouldn't have asked Pomfrey. I didn't think she'd be so closed-mouthed about it, though...she's a Hufflepuff, and they all seem to blurt out everything that passes through their minds. Still . . . she didn't exactly say that he *wasn't* sick. Her answer was worthy of a Slytherin. Almost." Perpetua flopped down into a chair near the fireplace.

"So why did you ask if he was sick?" Suzie persisted.

"He was really, really sick after the Hogwarts Battle. Do you know anything about that?"

"Yeah, a little," Suzie said. "I know that Professor Snape was a hero, and that he almost died."

"He was almost killed by Nagini, Riddle's familiar. Nagini was a giant snake. Her venom was very potent. I saw Professor Snape at the Merlin awards dinner, and he didn't look very good then, but I thought . . . well, I thought he looked worse tonight. Not as bony and underweight, but still . . . and his speech to the House is usually a lot longer than it was tonight. I think Pomfrey was bringing him potions. The new caretaker and the assistant groundskeeper both have quarters on the first level of the dungeons, I think, and I suppose she could have turned around and gone back up to see one of them, so." Perpetua shrugged. "Anyway, don't say anything to anyone, Sefton. If Pomfrey can try to be discreet about it, we can succeed in being discreet. He's our Head of House. Don't forget that."

"I won't," Suzie said fervently.

"Okay. Get to bed. The other girls will have already claimed their beds, but you'll want to unpack your schoolbooks for tomorrow, at least, and get out something to wear in the morning. You don't want to be after worrying about that before breakfast. Ursula, Cavanaugh, and I will be by to bring you up to the Great Hall for the first morning. I don't want to be late because we have to wait for you."

"Thanks for bringing me to the infirmary, Perpetua."

"Well, I hope you don't make it a habit, but I'm glad you're feeling better. Good night, Suzie. And remember, discretion!"

"I won't say a word," Suzie promised. She might say a little prayer before she went to sleep, though. It would be terrible if anything happened to Professor Snape. . . .

Author's Note:

Thanks for all your reviews! I appreciate them!

NEXT

Chapter Four: Buzzing Humbugs

1 September 1998

Suzie meets more members of Slytherin House and has new reason to worry about Professor Snape.

Characters: Suzie Sefton, Draco Malfoy, and others

Chapter Four: Buzzing Humbugs

Chapter 4 of 4

Suzie hears more Slytherin gossip, gets to know more members of Slytherin House, and has reason to worry about her Head of House.

Warning: Spoilers for *Death's Dominion* and *A Long Vernal Season*.



Chapter Four: Buzzing Humbugs

Tuesday, 1 September 1998

The next morning, Suzie woke before the Charmed globe lit itself. She still wasn't sure how the Automagical candles worked, so she lay there in the near pitch-black darkness, the only light coming from the crack at the bottom of the door. She hadn't slept well. First, one of the other girls...Beryl Burbage, Suzie thought...had cried into her pillow behind her curtains until she fell asleep. Suzie felt sorry for her, but it made her think about her own home, her own bed, her own toys, dolls, music, bicycle, and everything else she was missing, especially her mother and father. She lay awake trying to think instead about the adventures ahead of her and not about the pit in her stomach, caused this time not by nausea, but by homesickness. Then sometime in the middle of the night, after she had finally fallen asleep, one of the other girls had gotten up and stumbled around in the dark, gone to the loo, leaving the bedroom door open so she could easily find the right door again, and then come back a few minutes later to climb back into bed. The light from the corridor had succeeded in thoroughly waking Suzie, though, and she could see the advantage to pulling her curtains around her bed as three of the other girls had.

The minutes and seconds seemed to creep by, and then the globe began to glow gently, gradually becoming brighter. Suzie swung her legs out of bed, grabbed the clothes that she had set out the night before, and shuffled off to the bathroom. She didn't want to wait in a queue to wash her face and brush her teeth. She hadn't had a shower the night before, but she decided that would have to wait until that night, since she didn't know when the prefects would be by to bring them up to breakfast.

It was chilly in the dungeons in the morning, and as soon as she'd washed her face, Suzie quickly pulled on the clothes she'd selected: black jeans, a green blouse with ruffles at the cuffs, and a grey zippered sweatshirt. She made sure that her green ruffles were neatly pulled out from the grey sweatshirt's sleeves. It wasn't layers of black, but it would do. Back in the bedroom, she pulled the bedclothes up, straightened the pillow, and then sat on the edge of her bed to pull on her black trainers. They were new and had cool velcro tabs instead of laces. She had a pair of white ones with cute, colourful little bugs on them, but she thought the black ones were more grown-up and Slytherin-looking.

Beryl, Xenia, Lida, and Mary were all moving around, rummaging through their bags and trunks, finding clothes to wear. They seemed still half-asleep, so Suzie picked up her knapsack, which she'd readied the night before on Perpetua's advice, and looked through it to make sure she had everything she needed. Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology, Potions, and History of Magic textbooks, and the first two Defence textbooks; dragonhide gloves for Herbology; three pens, a fat notebook, several sheets of parchment in a neat folder, and two quills and a bottle of ink. At home, she'd practised writing with a quill, but it gave her writer's cramp, and she still preferred her pens. Since everyone else would be using quills, she'd try using them, too. There might be other Muggle-borns in her classes, though, and they might use pens. She assumed that she wouldn't need anything for Astronomy, which everyone at the feast had confirmed was only taught after dark. Her wand was on her bedside table, and she'd put it in her wand pocket after she put on her school robe.

Suzie opened the drawer to her bedside table and considered the contents...the sweets remaining from the train ride the day before...but decided to save them for later and not put any in her book bag.

She was just pulling on her school robe...now with a Slytherin patch on it, somehow magically appearing overnight...when Ursula, Elizabeth, and Perpetua came in, knocking as they opened the door.

"Okay, you lot! Breakfast! Come on! Don't want to be late! You get your schedules this morning, too, so you need to be prepared to go straight to class from the Great Hall," Ursula said. "Got your wands? Come on, Beryl, get your shoes on!"

"I haven't been to the loo yet," Lida whined, her hairbrush in one hand and her left shoe in the other. Her pleated tartan skirt was askew, too.

"Well, hurry up! Elizabeth, you stay here with the slowcoaches. Anyone who's ready, come with me and Perpetua now, all right!"

Suzie shoved her wand into her wand pocket, smiling again at its warmth, and followed Mary and Xenia out with Ursula and Perpetua. They met the first-year boys in the company of the other wizards. Suzie smiled at Asghar and noted that Marion seemed to be having the same trouble getting started that Lida and Beryl were having, since he and Kevin Harper were both missing. Together, the eleven students trooped up to the ground floor and the Great Hall, where students were already eating and talking noisily.

As Suzie waved across the Hall at Toni, who smiled and waved back, she saw Professor Snape walking along the edge of the room, heading toward the back of the Hall. Remembering what Perpetua had said to her the night before, Suzie watched him carefully. She didn't know what Professor Snape usually looked like, but he looked fine to her now, standing tall and walking with purpose, his black robe sweeping behind him dramatically. Perhaps he was a bit pale, and there were dark circles under his

eyes, but he no doubt had cares and worries that weighed him down. He didn't proceed to the staff table, as Suzie had expected he would, though, but opened a small door, disappearing behind it.

Suzie shrugged to herself and settled down to eat. She reached for the box of cereal making its way down the table, deciding to be careful of what she ate that morning, as Madam Pomfrey had recommended. There was a pitcher of pumpkin juice making the rounds, but she'd tried it last night and thought it was pretty gruesome. Instead, she poured herself a mug of tea and put a lot of milk in it. A breakfast like she had every day at home couldn't be bad for her, she thought, missing with a sudden twinge the sound of her mother's singing as she juiced some fresh fruit or pulled some homemade muffins from the oven. Suzie swallowed hard and ate her corn flakes.

Suzie was just finishing her breakfast when Professor Snape reappeared, stared out across the room, then strode toward the main doors and left the Hall. Suzie hoped he'd had breakfast. Her mother always said it was a mistake to go without breakfast, though her father only ever had coffee, waiting a couple hours before he had something to eat. Maybe Professor Snape was like her father that way, and he'd have an egg and cheese sandwich halfway through the morning.

The morning went by more quickly than Suzie could have thought possible, with Charms and Double Transfiguration taking the entire morning. In the afternoon, she would have Herbology, History of Magic, and Potions; the next morning, it would be Charms and Transfiguration again, with Defence added, but only Potions and Herbology in the afternoon. She was really looking forward to Potions. She knew she could make a better impression on Professor Snape. Of course, anything would be an improvement after having thrown up on him the evening before.

Slytherin first-years took Charms with Ravenclaw, and Suzie had immediately run over and given Toni a hug, feeling as though she was seeing an old friend. Toni was too surprised to reciprocate, but she grinned happily and the two girls had sat next to each other. They would also have Astronomy and History together, and they each promised to save the other a place, whoever arrived first.

At lunch, the Slytherin table was full of whispered rumours. It seemed that half the staff was missing from the Great Hall that noon, and someone said that Professor Snape was dying. Suzie was alarmed. Perpetua had been right: Professor Snape was ill.

"He's *not* dying," Kevin Harper said authoritatively. "He was taken sick during our class, but a house-elf appeared and Disapparated with him. I fetched Professor Dumbledore...he had me take over his third-year class...and Dumbledore said he was going straight to the infirmary. That must be where the house-elf brought him."

"But why are so many other teachers missing, then?" Lettie Pepper asked, gesturing toward the staff table. The only Head of House present was Sharon Carter, the new Head of Gryffindor. "I was there, remember?! I saw him...it was dreadful." She blinked hard, trying not to cry.

"Pull yourself together, Lettie," Perpetua said. "I was there, too. He wasn't dead. He was having a seizure of some sort. I'm sure the teachers are all doing whatever they need to in order to help Madam Pomfrey and the Headmistress with their work. It's not exactly routine to have the Deputy Headmaster collapse on the first day of school."

Suzie swallowed hard and nibbled at her cheese sandwich, listening to the older students debate what might have been wrong with their Head of House. She noticed that even in this discussion, Perpetua didn't mention that they'd seen the school matron in the dungeons with a basket of potions the night before. She guessed that was Slytherin discretion. Knowing that Professor Snape had likely been sick the night before, as well, only increased Suzie's worry rather than lessening it. She didn't understand what he was doing, teaching when he was sick, especially if the matron knew he was ill. It was probably because he was a hero, she decided, and he simply did his duty no matter how he felt. She would have to take him as her example. After all, Professor Hagrid did say that he was the greatest Head of Slytherin in history. On the other hand, Professor Hagrid had also implied that Professor Snape didn't have much fun. Suzie didn't think she'd emulate him in that way. Maybe once he was feeling better, he could have more fun. She really *had* to read *How the Light Side Won* and find out what Professor Snape had done that made him such a great hero...besides almost dying.

Suzie had time before her next class, and she didn't feel like listening to more speculation about Professor Snape's condition and whether he had been the victim of a new curse or whether he'd just never completely recovered from his injuries of the previous May. She picked up her book bag and slung it over her shoulder. Lida, a few seats down, got up and followed her out to the entry hall.

"Want to sit on the front steps?" Suzie asked. "We've seen hardly anything of the grounds."

Lida nodded. "Okay. That's a good idea. Herbology should be fun. It's out in the greenhouses. And now that Potions was cancelled, we have some time free after History of Magic. We could take a walk before Herbology."

Suzie nodded, grabbing one of the door handles and pulling with both hands.

"Allow me."

Suzie turned her head. A tall, slim, blond-haired Slytherin stood behind them with his wand drawn. Suzie let go of the door handle, then jumped out of the way when the door opened. The slim wizard's grey eyes sparkled for a moment as he took in Suzie's delight.

"Thanks! That was great!" Suzie said.

"No problem."

"This is Lida Shelby, and I'm Suzie Sefton."

"I know. I believe that everyone has heard of Suzie Sefton, the witch who lost her lunch all over Severus Snape." The grey eyes glinted with a touch of humour for a moment, then it was gone again.

"And you are . . .?"

"Draco."

"Wow! Draco! That's gotta be the coolest name ever!"

Draco followed Lida and Suzie out the front doors and leaned against one of the large stone dragons that flanked the steps.

"You're Draco Malfoy," Lida said.

Draco twitched his shoulder.

"So, is 'Draco' like dragon?" Suzie asked, pointing at the dragon. "Like in *Draco dormiens numquam titillandus*?" She had carefully memorised the school's motto, which had been at the top of her Hogwarts letter.

"Yeah, it is. These dragons are new, though," he said, slapping the side of one. "Guess the steps were damaged, so they put these in when they fixed them." The wizard's grey eyes clouded over for a moment. "There's another new one over the gates, with that motto you just quoted."

"You must know Professor Snape really well," Suzie said, having noted that this must be the Malfoy everyone had spoken of, and wanting to get to know him better but without sounding like she was being nosy.

"He wasn't at school last year," Lida interrupted.

"But you're older, right?" Suzie asked, ignoring Lida. She didn't want Draco to become annoyed and leave. "I mean, you were a student here before that?"

"Yes. I returned for my seventh year." He paused, considering the little dark-haired witch in front of him. "I had to leave before the end of my sixth year. Family business."

Suzie nodded. "I see. It's good you could come back and finish school!"

Draco twitched a slight smile and looked out across the grounds to where some other students were throwing around a funny looking ball. Suzie thought he looked sad.

"Do you think Potions will be cancelled tomorrow, too?" Lida asked.

Draco shook his head. "They'll find someone else to take it if Professor Snape is still ill. A couple years ago, when Professor Dumbledore was still Headmaster, he taught Transfiguration when Professor McGonagall was sick. I don't think the Headmistress could teach Potions, but she could probably get someone else to. I think her brother's a Potions master."

"Yeah, he is," Lida said importantly, obviously glad to show off some of her own knowledge. "My brother is doing his apprenticeship with him. He told me how Mr McGonagall blew up his own apothecary to fool Riddle. Lawrence didn't know he was going to do it, but Mr McGonagall sent him to visit us for the weekend, and that's when he exploded the shop, and with him and his wife in it, too. They weren't hurt very much, but the apothecary was a complete wreck."

"He blew up his own business?" Suzie asked. What kind of war was this?

"Yeah, Riddle was going to do all these attacks in Diagon Alley and McTavish Street, and of course, the Order of the Phoenix couldn't let everyone know they knew about it, but they did, probably because of Professor Snape...the *Daily Prophet* didn't say so, and my brother didn't know, but you know it had to be Professor Snape who gave the warning...anyway, the Order of the Phoenix did what they could to close businesses and stuff so that fewer people would get hurt when the Death Eaters attacked. Mr McGonagall is the Headmistress's brother, and since she was practically running the Order of the Phoenix...they say it was Arthur Weasley, but really, a Weasley?"

"The Weasleys are an old wizarding family," Draco interrupted. "They have always been in the Order of the Phoenix. I wasn't in the Order, but from what I understand from the papers, the Headmistress ran everything here at Hogwarts and was in charge of, well, the spy operation, and Arthur Weasley was the Head of the Order after Dumbledore . . . supposedly died. Weasley was one of the first out those doors during the final battle...well, not *those* doors, those are new."

"You weren't even here, Malfoy," a voice came from behind them. It was Patterson, the one who had made the crack the night before in the common room.

"I wasn't either," Suzie said, turning to look up at Patterson. She didn't see any reason not to like Draco, but Patterson annoyed her. She looked at his hands. No ring. Maybe he just wasn't wearing his. But maybe he didn't have one. "Did you actually see the battle? Were you there?"

"Well . . ." Patterson blushed and looked away.

Draco smirked and gave Suzie an appraising glance.

"Do you think that Professor Snape will be okay?" Lida asked no one in particular.

"I do. He's got to be," Suzie said fervently. "Madam Pomfrey's probably giving him potions and he'll be at dinner tonight."

"I wouldn't count on that," Patterson said, coming down to sit beside the girls and leaning back on his elbows, stretching his long legs. "You don't fall down in a fit because you have a cold...or an upset stomach."

"I think he'll recover," Draco said, still leaning against the dragon, "but he didn't look well last night. I hadn't seen him in over a year, and I've never seen him looking like that."

"He looked even worse at the end of last year, Malfoy," Patterson said. "And I mean, that was *before* he was almost killed by the Dark Lord."

"Riddle," Draco said softly. "Call him by his right name, Patterson."

"Yeah, well . . . I guess you're right," Patterson said, sounding subdued. "Professor Snape didn't look very good last night, either."

"He didn't eat dinner, I noticed, or breakfast," Draco said. "But I still think he'll be all right. I've known him my whole life. He's Snape. He's Slytherin. He's strong. He's made it through everything else. He'll make it through this, too."

"And he's being taken good care of, right?" Suzie asked. "I mean, it's not like he collapsed when he was all by himself somewhere."

"Right, here's the best place to be sick, outside of St. Mungo's," Patterson said with a nod. He pulled a small white bag from his robe pocket and took a sweet from it. He popped it in his mouth. "Want one? Droobleberry-flavoured buzzing humbugs." He held the bag out to the others, and Lida took one. She giggled as it buzzed in her mouth.

"Malfoy?"

Draco took one and put it in his cheek. Suzie laughed as his cheek vibrated, and Draco winked at her. Patterson offered her the bag. Suzie shrugged. She'd hardly had any lunch, and she'd been good at breakfast. Regular Muggle mint humbugs had never made her sick. Her stomach felt fine. Just one wouldn't hurt. She took out one of the stripy green and purple humbugs and put it in her mouth. As soon as it touched her tongue, it began to buzz, and she burst into giggles.

"They buzz till you get to the centre, unless you bite them. It's better to suck them," Lida explained.

"You're a Muggle-born?" Patterson asked.

Suzie nodded, sucking on the humbug. She'd have to get more of these somehow.

"I thought there was something . . . um, different, about you," Patterson said, one eyebrow raised.

"Her excitement at an opened door was my first clue," Draco said with a good-natured grin. Suzie liked Draco.

Patterson laughed. "Oh, yeah, that's some amazing spell. Have to be careful how you use your wand in the beginning, Sefton, or it'll explode on you, and they don't let you get another one for a whole year. Don't go trying anything dangerous with it, like opening doors...or bottles of butterbeer!"

Lida giggled, but Suzie's eyes widened. Her wand could explode?

"Don't listen to Patterson. He's just an old gas basket. Always has been," Draco said. "It'd be really hard to blow up your own wand just by using it. Probably impossible."

"Oh, good," Suzie said, clearly relieved. She couldn't imagine trying to find another wand if hers exploded. It had taken long enough to find one the first time.

"Time to get back in...Defence next," Patterson said, standing. "Are you taking Defence, Malfoy?"

Draco shook his head. "I'll make sure these two find their next class. What's your next class?" he asked, turning to the girls.

"History of Magic," Lida said.

"The book looked really interesting," Suzie said. Her humbug wasn't buzzing as much. She must be almost to the centre.

Draco and Patterson exchanged looks.

"You want to tell them the bad news about Cahill, Malfoy? Or should we let them discover the grisly truth on their own?"

"They'll discover it two seconds after class starts," Draco said, flicking his wand and opening the front doors.

"He's not very good?" Lida asked.

"Let me put it this way," Draco said. "Our last History teacher was dead; this one makes you wish you were. Binns was a ghostly bore; Cahill's a ghastly one."

Suzie giggled, and Draco shot her a quick grin.

"I'm dropping it," Patterson said as they stepped back into the castle. "You two don't have that luxury, though. You have to take it through your OWLs. With any luck, he won't last that long."

Suzie had reached the centre of her humbug, and the Droobleberry flavour was intense, like a combination of elderberry and under-ripe plum. It was nice, but . . .

"I think I'm going to be sick!" That seemed to be her embarrassing new mantra, she thought desperately.

"The nearest girls' loo is..." Draco began. "Well, it's moot now, I suppose." He swished his wand, cleaning up the entry hall floor.

"I'm so sorry," Suzie said, tears rising in her eyes. She blinked them back. This was getting beyond embarrassing.

"Can you get to History on your own, Lida?" Draco asked.

"I'll drop her on my way to Defence," Patterson said.

"Come on, Suzie Sefton...or should I call you 'Suzie Sickly'?" Draco asked. "We'll go up to the infirmary, get you something."

"Thanks," Suzie mumbled. She'd been so careful at breakfast and lunch, too. How could she have been sick three times already? "I can go on my own, though. It's on the fourth floor." She'd already been there twice, after all.

"I want to see you get there all right without being sick again," Draco said, starting up the stairs with her. "Was it the humbug, do you think?"

"I don't know. I suppose so," Suzie said miserably. It seemed she couldn't eat anything new and fun.

"Some people are allergic to Droobleberries," Draco said. "My mother is." He looked around as if about to impart a deep, dark secret, then he whispered, "She doesn't just get sick to her stomach, though: she turns purple!"

Suzie giggled, and Draco smiled.

"There's other good flavours of buzzing humbugs," Draco continued. "You can try them and see how they are. If it was the buzzing that bothered you, you would have been sick sooner."

Draco knocked on the infirmary door and pulled it open. It seemed deserted. A house-elf popped into view.

"Can Strilpa help?"

"We're looking for Madam Pomfrey," Draco said.

"Madam Pomfrey be's busy." Strilpa looked over at Suzie. "Is an emergency?"

"Not really," Draco said. He put his hand on Suzie's shoulder and turned her around. "Let's go find someone else. You just need a tummy potion. Any of the teachers can probably help you there."

They walked down the corridor, then took a left into another broad hallway. At the end of the hall, Suzie could see a sign above a set of double doors.

"The library!" She had wondered where that was.

"You like libraries, too? This one's great, and we have a new librarian. Laura Walker Manning. She seems decent," Draco said.

He pushed on one of the doors, and it swung open easily.

"Madam Walker Manning?" Draco said politely.

The witch at the desk turned around and smiled. "Just 'Ms Walker Manning' is fine. Can I help you find something?"

"This is Suzie Sefton. She was sick. Again, that is," Draco said, obviously assuming that everyone in the school had heard that she'd thrown up all over the Deputy Headmaster. "Madam Pomfrey is busy. I thought perhaps..."

"Of course!" She looked around. "I can leave for a few minutes."

The three stepped out into the hall.

"You can leave her with me," Ms Manning said.

"That's okay. I can get her to her class after," Draco said. "I think it was the Droobleberry-flavoured buzzing humbug Patterson gave her. She seemed fine till she got to the centre."

"Just a buzzing humbug? Not something from the Weasleys' shop?" Ms Manning asked.

"Yes, just a buzzing humbug. I had one, too," Draco replied.

They returned to the infirmary, where Strilpa reappeared and again offered her help. This time, Ms Walker Manning asked her to open the Potions cabinet for her, which the little elf did with alacrity.

"Everybody's going to hear about this, I know it," Suzie said miserably, slouching into a chair. "I'll spend as much time in the infirmary as in the Great Hall. Everybody will talk about it, how Suzie Sefton came to Hogwarts and threw up everywhere she went, including on Professor Snape." She blinked hard, trying not to cry. She hoped she hadn't made Professor Snape sicker than he already was.

Draco sat down next to Suzie and patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Don't worry about that. I'm sure that they'll find other things to talk about. It'll be okay."

In a moment, Laura Walker Manning returned to Draco and Suzie with a bottle of potion and a spoon.

"This is the same potion that I used to give my own daughter when she was small," Laura said. "It should fix you right up!"

Suzie obediently opened her mouth for the potion. She swallowed it, and nausea swept over her again. Before she could give any warning, she threw up, losing the rest of her lunch all over Draco. It was purple.

"I'm so sorry," Suzie wailed.

Draco lifted his arms slightly, looking down at the mess, but before he could draw his wand, Ms Walker Manning had hers out, and she cast two charms, one to Vanish the vomit and one to freshen him up.

"Let's try this again," the witch said, pouring out another dose of potion. "That sometimes happens. A second dose should do the trick."

Suzie swallowed the potion, and this time, she nodded. "Better," she said.

"Good. Now I have to get back to the library. Could you sit with Miss Sefton for a while, Mr...?"

"Draco Malfoy," Draco said. "Yeah, I can. Then I'll get her to class, like I said. I'll explain to Professor Cahill why she's late."

"Oh . . . History of Magic, is it? Well, take your time," Ms Walker Manning said. "I'm sure you can get the notes from someone else in class, Miss Sefton...and remember, just because an older student offers you a sweet doesn't mean you have to take one!"

When the witch had left, Suzie looked up at Draco, who was staring across the empty infirmary.

"Thanks, Draco."

He blinked and looked down at her. "What? Oh, yes. You're welcome."

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm just wondering where everyone is." He gestured at the empty infirmary. "Even if they had Professor Snape in a private room with an Imperturbable on it . . . there'd be some kind of activity. People in and out of the room. Lamps lit in the ward. They must have taken him somewhere else. St. Mungo's, maybe."

"What's St. Mungo's?"

"Wizarding hospital in London. There are a few other wizarding clinics, but St. Mungo's is the big hospital."

"Is that where they took him after he was bitten by that snake, Nagini?" Suzie asked.

Draco shook his head. "I don't think so. I wasn't in the country at the time, but I think they treated him here."

"Where were you? You said you were away for a year?"

"A little more than a year . . . my mother and I were in Sweden."

Suzie thought about that, and she remembered what Lettie had said about him having "run away." "Can I ask . . . why were you and your mother in Sweden?"

"Lucius Malfoy...my father...made some ill-advised decisions. Tom Riddle . . . it would have been bad for us. I wasn't as worried for myself, understand, but my mother . . ."

Draco averted his eyes.

"Your father was in the Order of the Phoenix?" Suzie asked.

Draco flushed. He shook his head shortly. "He, um, he was one of Riddle's followers," Draco said softly. He looked over at her. "You'll hear about it anyway, one way or the other. He was in Azkaban prison. He was a Death Eater. I was supposed to become one, too. Riddle blamed him for something that went wrong, a raid on the Ministry, and then when Riddle wanted a job done, he wanted me to do it. A kind of . . . payment for my father's failure. He had my mother prisoner, too, you see, or virtually one."

"So of course you'd want to save your mother!" Suzie cried sympathetically.

"Yeah . . . I did." Draco let out a light sigh. "Anyway, after they'd faked Dumbledore's death, the Headmistress came to me. Had me brought to her, actually. By Snape. She helped my mother and me leave the country. They set us up in a house in Sweden until it was safe to return."

Suzie had the sense there was a lot more that Draco wasn't saying, but he was clearly uncomfortable talking about it at all.

"I'm glad the Headmistress could help you and your mother," Suzie said.

Draco nodded curtly. "So you see, Sefton, Slytherin House has far more interesting things to gossip about than your stomach and its tendency to turn at inconvenient moments." He smirked. "Not that I suppose there are *convenient* moments for such things."

Suzie giggled.

Draco stood. "Okay, c'mon little snakeling, let's get you down to Cahill's class. We've delayed as long as we can. And whilst you're sitting there being bored in the extreme, remember: what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."

"Did Nagini make Professor Snape stronger?" Suzie asked as they stepped out into the deserted corridor.

Draco paused and looked down at her, his grey eyes unreadable. "I suppose she must have," he said softly. "We'll certainly see, won't we?"

~End~

Author's Note: I hope you enjoyed this little "sister story" to *A Long Vernal Season* and the additional glimpse of Suzie Sefton, her introduction to the wizarding world, and her first encounter with Severus Snape. Thanks!

(And yes, to those wondering, Draco paraphrases the Muggle philosopher Nietzsche there, but naturally, he doesn't know it.)