

# Speaking in Tongues

*by star\_girl*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 1: More Than She Bargained For

*Chapter 1 of 38*

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### Chapter 1: More Than She Bargained For

"Fifty."

The Merman raised his eyebrow at the dark woman in front of him. The rest of his handsome face was, however, stubbornly unmoved. He knew she was trying it on.

"Seventy-five. That's my final offer."

The Merman shook his head with annoyance, his blond hair billowing back and forth through the clear blue waters of the Aegean Sea. "Do you know how hard it is to swim with gold? It will take me at least five trips if there's as much down there as you say there is!"

The woman sighed through her nose, causing bubbles to rise up and obscure her face briefly. Once they had cleared, her lips twisted into a defeated smile. They had played this game many times, and bartering was part and parcel of negotiations. For the Merpeople, it was part of their culture.

"OK, OK, a hundred. But you're killing me here; it's going to take me a day to find that many."

"You're a clever witch," he replied, folding his arms across his muscular chest. "I'm sure you'll manage."

The woman let out a laugh at this, and held out her hand. The Merman clapped his hand in hers with a tight grip, sending a shock wave through the azure waters.

"That's quite an oyster habit you have, Neptus," she said, shaking his hand firmly.

"Almost as bad as your gold habit, Rosetta." The Merman smiled in return and his perfect teeth glinted white through the dappled refracted sunlight.

"You know the drill." She fished out a clear red stone from her pocket, which was attached to a length of dark cord. "When this glows, it's dinner time."

Neptus took the gem from her and placed it around his neck. "Be quick. I'm hungry." And with one sharp flick of his tale, the Merman shot off in a cloud of bubbles back to the depths of the ocean. Rosetta watched him disappear all the way into the inky blue abyss, before kicking her legs sharply and swimming back to the surface.

oOo

Much like dock weed is to stinging nettles, the antidote to Gillyweed is another plant which is often found growing in close proximity *Rumex Spiritum*, or more commonly known as Sea-Air, when ingested can counteract the effects of Gillyweed in mere seconds. Drowning out of the water from ingesting Gillyweed was a very real danger for

those who did not have to foresight to acquire the antidote before submerging and so Rosetta always made sure she had several leaves on her at any one time.

Rosetta chewed on the bitter-tasting leaf and swallowed, her face twisting into a grimace as she gasped for breath, waiting for the Sea-Air to kick in. Within moments she could feel the gill-like slits on the side of her neck heal, her chest expanding as with one almighty inhalation the cool air once more passed through her lungs. She breathed deeply for a moment, enjoying the twin sensations of fresh air and the warmth of the Mediterranean sun on her damp skin.

After a quick drying spell, she pocketed her wand and trudged up the sloping sand dunes towards a flat, squarish rock underneath which she'd hidden her knapsack. Slinging it over her back, she then headed for the cliff, looking for the ideal spot to create a Portkey.

Travelling by Portkey was quite a fiddly process to the inexperienced, but Rosetta was so used to travelling back and forth between mainland Europe and the UK that she could practically cast the charm to bewitch inanimate objects in her sleep. Unregistered Portkeys were still frowned upon however, so much thought had to go into locations and timings.

Luckily, the Siren's Cove was the perfect place to travel from. After the Muggles began hunting Merpeople in the late 1800s, the Greek Ministry of Magic enchanted the cove for protection. Even with the booming Muggle tourist trade the site remained Muggle-free and, for the most part, wizard-free too. The Merpeople rarely interacted with the wizarding world, given they were looked upon as inferior but intelligent beings, in the same way that Muggles view dolphins. It had taken some time for Rosetta to gain their trust in order to trade.

A sun-bleached branch, lying contorted on the sand like a dusty old bone, was the perfect Portkey. It took a few minutes for Rosetta to prepare and cast the charm. Then, when she was satisfied, she took a breath and latched on to the branch, bracing herself for the sharp pull behind the navel as the world twisted and spun around her.

She arrived, stumbling, in a bracken filled heath on the outskirts of Hogsmeade Village seconds later. The fresh Highland air was cold compared to the balmy Mediterranean and she could feel her skin puckering into gooseflesh underneath the thin leather of her tabard and trousers. She quickly removed a dark cloak from her knapsack and wrapped it around her, as much to shield herself from the stiff breeze as to conceal her face. Trading on the outskirts of the wizarding world meant that she usually revelled in anonymity, so any necessary interaction in wizarding society made her feel self-conscious. Especially in a predominantly-white area such as Hogsmeade. And if the whispers and rumours were to be believed, there were troubling times ahead. All the more reason for her to keep a low profile.

But the trip to Hogsmeade was, unfortunately, necessary. The Sirens' taste for the finest freshwater oysters meant that Scotland was the only place to harvest the delicacy, and the Merpeople would not trade in anything less. Rosetta was no fisherwoman, but fortunately she knew someone who could help her out.

Rosetta pulled her cloak tighter around her as she picked her way across the scrubland and down a narrow dirt track that led into Hogsmeade, and to her ultimate destination: the Hog's Head.

oOo

The dusty old pub looked much like it always did; sparse and dingy, with dull light struggling to get through grime-leaden windows. Other than the tatty hog's head on a plaque above the hearth and the slightly grubby portrait of landlord's younger sister, there was no décor to speak of.

The few patrons that were scattered about the place did not look up from their flagons as Rosetta quietly shut the door behind her and headed for the bar. As she waited to be served, she noted idly that the pub reflected its clientele perfectly: unkempt, antisocial and unwelcoming.

She did not have to wait long before the landlord emerged from the ragged curtain that separated the bar from the living quarters. Aberforth's mouth twitched with recognition. It was the closest she would get to a smile.

"The wanderer returns." His voice was brusque.

"I like what you've done with the place," Rosetta replied drily.

Aberforth snorted and strode forwards, opening up the entry hatch and motioning for her to come through.

Wordlessly, Rosetta complied, slinking past the grizzled landlord into the back room. A quick flick of Aberforth's hand slammed and locked the old iron till. He glared around at his clientele suspiciously before following her through the threadbare curtain.

Neither of them noticed the portrait of Ariana Dumbledore, who'd been keenly watching their every move before turning and sprinting out of the painting with purpose.

Rosetta sat on a spindle-legged chair next to a worn table as Aberforth poured them each a large shot of Firewhiskey in old, chipped glasses.

"You have the gold?" he asked, handing one to Rosetta and sitting opposite.

Rosetta reached inside her cloak and pulled out a small pouch, sliding it silently across the table. She took a swig of her Firewhiskey as Aberforth grabbed the pouch stuck a grimy-nailed finger inside, quickly calculating the contents. He gave a grunt of satisfaction and tucked the pouch inside his breast pocket.

"You still don't trust me, eh?" Her dark eyes glittered over the rim of her glass.

"Business is business. Nothin' personal." Aberforth drained his glass. "The merchandise is in the sink."

Rosetta crossed the kitchen and peered into the sink. Dozens of fat, grey oysters lay inside an old tin bucket covered with water. She started to count them out on the sideboard.

"Looks like you don't trust me, either," Aberforth grumbled.

Rosetta turned and gave him a sarcastic smile. "Business is business. Nothing personal."

oOo

The sky had already started to darken when Rosetta left the Hog's Head. She drew her cloak around her as she looked furtively left and right, checking that the coast was clear before heading back up the road that led out of Hogsmeade. She had cast a perfunctory invisibility spell on the bucket so as to not arouse suspicion from patrons or meddling members of the public. She allowed herself a brief feeling of accomplishment. All she needed to do was catch another Portkey from the edge of Hogsmeade and deliver the goods, and she reckoned she'd have quadrupled her gold by nightfall. Not bad for a day's work.

She turned right, heading for the dirt track that took her to the edge of Hogsmeade village. But her path was blocked by a tall man stepping out in front of her, and she dropped her precious cargo with a loud clatter. Oysters spilled out on to the cobbled streets. Fish-smelling water splashed on her boots as the man blustered with apologies. She looked up with a scowl, about to hex the fool who had cost her a day's work, but her face fell into an expression of shocked recognition instead.

"Ah, Rosetta Stone."

Albus Dumbledore smiled down serenely at the young woman in front of him.

It took just a second for shock to transform into suspicion.

"Professor Dumbledore. What a coincidence, seeing you here. And it's not even term-time yet."

Albus continued to smile. "I have been hoping to run into you for some time. How are you keeping? Are you still working for Gringotts?"

Rosetta felt a prickle of annoyance at the well-meaning intrusion. She didn't dislike Dumbledore; he had always been good to her and had given her a glowing reference after leaving Hogwarts. It was just that she was highly attuned to the ulterior motives of others and something smelled decidedly fishy, and it wasn't just her now-sodden boots.

"I left Gringotts four years ago. Decided the corporate life wasn't for me." Rosetta withdrew her wand as she spoke, returning the now-visible spilled oysters to the bucket and casting a cleansing spell on her boots. The oysters thankfully didn't look damaged; perhaps the day wasn't a write-off after all.

"I see."

Dumbledore watched her clean up idly. With annoyance, Rosetta realised she must look like a lowly fisherwoman off to market. She could almost feel him judging her.

"Well, it's been nice seeing you, but I really must go."

Rosetta hurriedly bent to pick up her bucket, but Dumbledore laid a gentle hand on her arm.

"So soon? There is a lot I would like to talk to you about."

*I knew it, Rosetta thought to herself. He'd orchestrated this accidental meeting. But how did he know I'd be here? Has he been spying on me?*

Taking her silence for compliance, the old man continued. "Please. If you could spare an old man an hour of your time, then I'll let you be on your way. I wouldn't ask if it were not important."

Rosetta inhaled sharply through her nose and looked up at her former Headteacher. She had no doubt what he had to say was important, but part of her didn't want to hear it. She lived a simpler life now, on the edge of the magical world. Her gut told her she should just cut her losses and head back to Greece to finish the deal. But he had clearly gone to a lot of trouble to speak to her and the earnest, pleading look on the old man's face was too much to bare.

Rosetta let out a weary sigh. "OK. OK. One hour. But then I'm gone."

Dumbledore's face lit up like a small child's at Christmas. "Wonderful."

He led her through the cobbled streets towards Hogwarts castle, chatting idly about Quidditch. But Rosetta couldn't shake the feeling that she was a fish on a hook which had swallowed the bait.

*One hour, she repeated to herself. That's all.*

## Chapter 2: An Unwanted Invitation

*Chapter 2 of 38*

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### Chapter 2: An Unwanted Invitation

Dumbledore's office was just as Rosetta remembered; a grand, round room crammed full of snoozing portraits on the walls and delicate silver instruments perched precariously on spindle-legged tables. As Dumbledore busied himself with pouring them tea from a tinkling set of porcelain, Rosetta examined the ornate leg of his enormous claw-footed desk. It was inlaid with gems and what looked to be gold leaf. *Must be worth hundreds if not thousands of Galleons*, she thought to herself as the old man sent a cup and saucer flying over to her with his wand. She only just managed to catch it without spilling a drop.

Dumbledore took a sip of tea and set his cup down. He steepled his fingers and looked over the top of his crescent-shaped glasses at Rosetta. She felt like she was being x-rayed. Trying to hide her feeling of discomfort, she busied herself with drinking her tea, gazing around at the instruments and wondering if they were Goblin-wrought silver or not.

"So, Rosetta. I can see you are anxious to find out why I invited you here, and as time is short, I will spare the formalities. I have a proposition for you." He smiled, and his blue eyes crinkled. "You've worked at Gringotts and at the Merperson Liaison Office at the Ministry Of Magic. You are one of the few people I know, besides myself of course, who has a natural aptitude for magical languages. That is why I would like to offer you the position of Hogwarts' very first Magical Languages professor."

He sat back in his chair and took another sip of tea.

Rosetta let out a disbelieving laugh. "You want me to teach? Are you kidding me?"

"Absolutely not," Dumbledore replied mildly. "It has been apparent to me for some time that magical languages should be on the curriculum at Hogwarts but there has been no-one qualified to teach it. Until now, that is." His blue eyes twinkled.

"Qualified?" Rosetta scoffed. "I'm not qualified to teach! I don't even like children!" She could not believe what she was hearing. Perhaps the old man had finally gone mad after all.

"Believe it or not, one doesn't have to like children in order to instruct them." He laughed and shook his head. "And by qualified, I mean someone who has magical languages in their blood. Someone who can speak another language, a magical language, as easily as they breathe. Those people are few and far between." He held her gaze once more.

Rosetta sighed. "I'm grateful for you thinking of me, but I have no desire to teach. I left the Ministry because of the boring paperwork, and I left Gringotts because it was too corporate. I'm just not cut out for a day-to-day job."

Dumbledore studied her carefully.

"I had a feeling you'd say that." He paused to stroke his beard before continuing, weighing his words carefully. "You remember how life was when you were at school, during the reign of Voldemort."

Rosetta gave a barely imperceptible flinch at the name, but stayed quiet. She had a feeling they were coming to the real reason she'd been invited here today.

"Misinformation and mistrust were rife in our society. People didn't trust their fellow wizards or witches, let alone other magical beings. I often wonder if Voldemort could have been brought down sooner had we, the magical community as a whole, pulled together as one. If we had the support of Goblins, Merpeople and yes, even the Giants, then Voldemort certainly wouldn't have been able to divide and conquer so easily, so to speak."

Dumbledore looked down at his desk with a rueful smile.

Rosetta's brow furrowed as she took this in. "But that was years ago. Why would me teaching magical languages make any difference now?"

"As Headmaster of this school, my answer would be that it is crucial to preserve and share these languages, so they are not lost to witches and wizards in the future. Personally, however, it has become clear to me that unity through communication is becoming more important than ever." He steepled his fingers again and gazed across the desk at Rosetta. "You strike me as being a very street-wise witch, one with her ear to the ground. I am sure you have heard rumours circulating this summer."

Rosetta's pulse started to quicken. She'd heard whispers about The Boy Who Lived being attacked in his first year of Hogwarts and Voldemort not really being dead. Like most rumours, she had taken them with a pinch of salt, but deep down they had disturbed her.

"I had heard... certain things," Rosetta admitted carefully. This particular line of conversation was making her uncomfortable.

"Certain things regarding Voldemort?"

Rosetta nodded.

"Well, these rumours are not without foundation."

She paused to let this sink in, visibly shocked. She didn't doubt what he was saying was true about You-Know-Who. Dumbledore may be a meddling old soul, but she knew he would not joke about something so serious. However, something just didn't add up about the teaching job. What possible use could she be in Hogwarts teaching obscure languages?

Rosetta shook her head. "I'm sorry, Professor. I still fail to see how any of this is relevant to your job offer."

Dumbledore smiled. "As I said before, if Voldemort is back, we will need every single ally we can get to beat him. And in order to do that, we need to be able to communicate. You hold the key to passing that information on to our students. But the teaching job is just the first part of my proposition."

Rosetta sat up straight and the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She knew there was an ulterior motive; there usually was with Dumbledore. She dared to even breathe as she waited for the old man to go on.

"You're clearly very gifted with languages, Rosetta. You were never formerly taught, and yet you seem to be able to pick them up as easily as a song. It's in your very nature. Which brings me to the second part of the proposition: I need your help with another magical language. But this time, it is one we will need to learn together. An extracurricular activity, you could say. And the language in question is Parseltongue."

Rosetta couldn't help but let her jaw fall with surprise. Parseltongue was a famously rare language, tainted with an edge of darkness. There were very few Parselmouths in the wizarding world and those that could speak Parseltongue were mistrusted. It was common knowledge that You-Know-Who a Parselmouth.

"Isn't Parseltongue passed down through families?" Rosetta asked after regaining her composure. "So what makes you think that you or I would be able to speak it?"

"Being a Parselmouth is often hereditary, but not always," Dumbledore replied. "Parseltongue is a language like any other and as such, it would be subject to grammatical rules and phrases. I want us to discover the roots of this language and uncover its secrets together. I presume I don't need to tell you why it's so important." His blue eyes twinkled seriously over his half-moon glasses.

Rosetta breathed deeply through her nose. Of course she could see why it was important. You-Know-Who was back, and Dumbledore was looking at every which way to understand him and stop him. She was flattered that Dumbledore had recognised her natural ability for languages and deliberately sought her out to help. And she had to admit that teaching magical languages was a brilliant smokescreen for the real undercover work of learning Parseltongue. She'd be lying if she said her interest wasn't piqued, but she didn't live in the UK any more and wasn't sure she wanted to move back to a cold climate and the threat of impending darkness to come. As far as she was concerned, if You-Know-Who was back, she was best off out of it in the sunnier parts of Europe.

"I'm flattered you think I can help you, Professor, but I really don't think I can."

Dumbledore's lips twitched. Wordlessly, he reached inside the drawer of his desk. With an unceremonious thump, he placed a huge, bulging leather pouch between them.

"Perhaps a thousand Galleons might incentivise you."

Rosetta's dark eyes stretched wide as she gazed hungrily at the pouch; a look which did not escape Dumbledore's notice.

"That's in addition to the standard Professor's salary, of course," he added casually. "Twelve thousand Galleons for one academic year. Thirteen thousand in all. Consider this," he nudged the pouch gently towards her, "an advance."

Rosetta swallowed, fighting the urge to snatch up the pouch and count the glittering coins within.

"That's all I am asking of you, Rosetta," Dumbledore continued, sensing victory. "One academic year, from the first of September to the eighteenth of June. Your meals and board are, of course, part of the package."

Money talked and Rosetta, it had to be said, was a very keen listener. Her mind began racing as she weighed up the offer. Thirteen thousand Galleons! For teaching a bunch of stupid children and pursuing Dumbledore's fool's errand! On a particularly fruitful year of trading she would make half the amount of Galleons Dumbledore was offering, and he didn't even require her services for a full year. Ten months of her life for thirteen thousand Galleons. That seemed like a highly reasonable exchange.

Plus, she realised, she would be getting free board and food. She wouldn't have any outgoings at all. She could save all the gold and finally buy that little cottage on Rhodes she'd always dreamed of. When put like that, it was an offer she couldn't refuse.

Rosetta knew, in the back of her mind, that Dumbledore had manipulated her into this position. That he had known her weakness was money and that she would not, could not say no to the ace he held up his sleeve. But at this point, she really didn't care. She had done a lot worse than teach for gold, after all.

"I'll do it," she said quietly, her dark eyes never leaving the pouch of Galleons.

"Excellent," Dumbledore replied. "In that case, I'll see you on the first of September."

# Chapter 3: Back To Hogwarts

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A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 3: Back To Hogwarts

The first of September arrived sooner than Rosetta would have liked; she had various deals in play that could have done with more time to resolve satisfactorily, but she did not have that luxury. Neptus and her other contacts were very disappointed that she was disappearing incommunicado for a year, not to mention extremely curious about where she was going. She tried her best to placate them with discounts for their last trade to deflect from prying questions, which worked to some extent. She forfeit profits on those last deals in order to keep them sweet, for she was banking on being able to transition back to her old life after her brief secretive sojourn to Hogwarts.

There had been a lot to prepare for her stay. She had needed robes and books, as well as quills, ink and parchment, which had all been bought and meticulously packed in her trunk. It felt very much like starting Hogwarts all over again. Dumbledore had also asked her to sketch out a syllabus for the year ahead, which had taken many sleepless nights. The Headmaster had seemed happy with what she had drawn up however, which was one thing at least that she didn't have to worry about.

She arrived late in the afternoon on September first and was shown to her rooms by Dumbledore himself. Her quarters were surprisingly spacious and comfortable, but she did not have chance to relax for as soon as she had unpacked her things, it was time to join everyone for the Start-of-Term feast.

Rosetta looked anxiously around the Great Hall. Each House table was full of vital, excitable, freshly-Sorted children, and the vast tables before them seemed to be groaning under the weight of huge golden plates of food. Hundreds of candles, charmed to hover above the diners, gave the old stone hall a warm glow. The beautiful enchanted ceiling showed the autumn sky above; a clear night with stars twinkling in the inky blue. Everything about the feast was just as she remembered, except for her vantage point: she was seated at the teacher's table. Seeing rows upon rows of young, shiny faces staring back at her felt decidedly surreal.

Rows of predominantly white faces, Rosetta noted idly. There were a few dark-skinned children dotted around the hall but, like her, they were the exception. Indeed, at the teacher's table, she alone was the only black face. It was not a surprise to Rosetta, but it did not aid her discomfort about the situation.

She took a swig of red wine and tugged at her brand new teaching robe awkwardly. It did little to keep out the cold and felt heavy and ungainly. It was yet another thing that made her feel like an imposter, like she shouldn't be there at all.

She glanced around the table at her fellow teachers, trying to swallow the bubble of panic which began to rise inside her. All were listening keenly to the Headmaster's speech, but her eyes were drawn to a conspicuous empty chair opposite. The chair clearly belonged to someone who had not yet arrived. *Perhaps they've done a runner*, she mused. She wouldn't blame them; she was very tempted to do one too right now.

With a well-practised flourish of robes, Dumbledore stepped up to his ornate lectern to say his traditional speech, and the children's chattering stopped almost immediately. His voice echoing around the Hall took her back to her youth and Rosetta could not stop her mind wandering to the past. She remembered her own Sorting; the nerves and the excitement, the inner dialogue with the omniscient Sorting Hat. The hat seemed to take an absolute age to Sort her. It was excruciating, having all eyes stare at her whilst her fate was decided by a tatty piece of material. The hat at one point seemed to be having a conversation with itself. She recalled it saying things like "Yes, yes, but at what cost?" and "Ambition and hard work are nothing without planning." For one terrible moment, Rosetta imagined that the hat would not be Sort her at all, and she'd be cast out of Hogwarts as a misfit. After what felt like hours, the hat proudly announced "RAVENCLAW!" and, stumbling, she headed off to a cheering table waving blue flags and scarves feeling relieved the ordeal was over.

A polite cough from Dumbledore stirred her from her thoughts. She glanced up and noted with a cold dread that suddenly, now the whole room was staring at her.

"If you would, Professor Stone?"

For a second, she was that shy, awkward eleven-year-old girl all over again. Employing all of her composure and with a deep breath, Rosetta pushed her chair out with an almighty squeak and stood.

"Thank you, Headmaster. I am your new Magical Languages teacher and I shall be teaching Mermish and Gobbledegook. The class is open for students in year four and above, but it is compulsory for years six and seven."

At this, a huge groan and protests of unfairness rang out from the NEWT students. Rosetta paused before talking over the din.

"If you have any misgivings about this, I suggest you take it up with Professor Dumbledore personally."

She scanned the room coolly as the hubbub settled.

"Now. NEWT level students will find class information on their new timetables. Any students in year four and five who wish to sign up, please be at my classroom in the dungeons at lunchtime tomorrow. I look forward to seeing you then." And with that, she sat down abruptly.

Dumbledore led some awkward clapping after thanking her and announced the start of the Feast. The volume went up in merriment as hundreds of hungry students began talking excitedly and piling in to the mounds of food before them.

Rosetta reached for her glass of red wine and took another big swig, to calm her nerves. She hated being the centre of attention and news of her arrival seemed to go down as well as a cup of cold sick. She noticed Dumbledore take the stern Scottish woman known as Professor McGonagall to one side and, after a few urgent whispers, they hurried out of the hall together, unnoticed by the jubilant children who were ploughing through succulent chicken breasts and piles of crispy roast potatoes.

Rosetta didn't have much of an appetite, but drinking on an empty stomach was never a good idea, so she helped herself to a few potatoes and some slivers of the chicken, along with a bread roll.

"You'll need to eat more than that if you're going to survive a Scottish winter." The plump, squat lady to her left smiled broadly. "Pomona Sprout. Lovely to meet you." She held out a corpulent hand and Rosetta shook it awkwardly and introduced herself in return.

"The Elves have outdone themselves this time, although I say it every year," Professor Sprout winked, spearing a potato with her fork. "Have you tried the stuffing yet? It's amazing!"

Rosetta smiled. She was glad of a friendly face and whilst she wasn't one for small-talk, she knew how to be a receptive listener to someone who was all too happy to chatter away. She could tell Pomona was a good person, taking pity on the new girl, and it didn't hurt to have a new friend.

No sooner had they finished their last mouthfuls than their plates magically cleared, and the serving platters filled up with hot, tempting desserts. Golden custard tarts jostled for position next to steaming sticky toffee puddings and succulent apple crumbles. Rosetta took a small scoop of the sticky toffee pudding into her bowl and was just about to eat a spoonful when the sound of a chair scraping caught her attention. She looked up and saw that the empty chair opposite her had now been filled by a very stern-looking man dressed head to toe in robes the colour of coal. He had long black hair, pale skin and dark, penetrating eyes and he was glaring directly at her.

*Charming*, she thought, and glared right back.

To her surprise, the man didn't look away but kept her gaze. Rosetta dropped eye contact after a few seconds, feeling annoyed to be the first to look away. Who was this weirdo and why was he looking at her like that? Was he the sort who could barely disguise his racism? Merlin knows she'd met enough of those in her time; people who could not see beyond the colour of someone's skin. But surely, Dumbledore who not keep the company of someone with such ignorant views?

The man's hostility felt so palpable that the feeling of panic welled up again inside her. She let her spoon fall back into her bowl with a small tinkle, the scoop of pudding still uneaten, and grabbed her wine, this time draining the glass, trying to drown her anxiety, all the while avoiding looking in the strange man's direction.

She didn't belong here, that much was clear. She was like a fish out of water. She should never have been seduced by Dumbledore's golden words and golden Galleons. Her stomach felt like it was in knots.

Suddenly, Rosetta didn't want to be in the Great Hall a second longer. She made an excuse about being tired to Pomona, who sweetly invited her to afternoon tea next weekend, and left the table staring resolutely ahead. She never saw the dark man's intense eyes following her all the way out of the Hall.

## Chapter 4: Neighbours

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### Chapter 4: Neighbours

Despite retiring relatively early after the feast, Rosetta had endured a fitful night's sleep and her nerves were still on edge when she awoke at six o'clock the following morning. Today was her first day as a bona fide teacher. Although, she had to admit, she felt about as bona fide as a crooked Galleon.

She decided to take breakfast in her quarters. This was, she reasoned, so she could have an early start in order to prepare her classroom and get herself acquainted with the new timetable. In truth, that was only part of it. She still felt disgruntled and uncomfortable about the dark professor who had been glaring daggers at her for no apparent reason over dinner, and did not want to subject herself to a repeat performance in front of an audience when she was anxious enough about starting a brand new job. Plus, she didn't think she could cope with being around people for a second longer than she needed to be today, and the noise from excitable children in the Great Hall would in all likelihood tip her over the edge. Yes, it was cowardly, but the last thing she needed was a confrontation on her first day.

After a long hot shower, a cup of tea and slither of shortbread, which made her feel slightly more human, she dressed carefully in her teaching robes and ventured out along the deserted corridors. Although she had no formal lessons yet as the registration session was at lunchtime, she felt it would be a prudent use of her time to get used to her classroom and arrange it to suit her needs, and run through her curriculum notes.

Rosetta's classroom was nestled in the gloomy vaulted dungeons, location of her Potions lessons so long ago. The faint smell of myriad magical herbs that permeated the air brought back a wave of memories of being in old Slughorn's class. She was terrible at Potions. She would never forget her OWL practical examination, in which she tried to dice a Gurdy Root and half of it shot across the classroom and fell into another student's cauldron. She was mortified. How she didn't get a T she never knew. Old Slughorn must have taken pity on her.

She paused outside the heavy, dark wooden door to trace the intricate metalwork with a finger. How much had changed between then and now. How young and naïve she had been. Never in a million years did she picture that she would end up back at the old school, after everything that had happened to her. *It's only 9 months of my life* she thought as she took a deep breath and pushed the door open with a creak.

Rosetta could not prevent jolting slightly with surprise when she saw who was waiting for her inside. Standing in front of her with folded arms and an impenetrable glare was none other than the person she had been trying her hardest to avoid: the dark, scowling professor from the previous night.

Her first instinct was to presume she'd got the wrong classroom, apologise and leave, but her pride got the better of her. She had no reason to apologise; she'd done nothing wrong! And this was definitely her classroom. Instead, she bit down the rising indignation and anger and managed to say in an even tone, "Can I help you?"

The man's black eyes glittered. "That remains to be seen."

*He's toying with me.* Rosetta narrowed her eyes and folded her arms, defensively mimicking his body language. It appeared the time for pleasantries was over.

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

At this, his gaze turned to stone. She could almost feel them boring into her. He let the pause between them grow uncomfortably long before replying.

"I happen to be the Head of Slytherin House which, as you are no doubt aware, reside in these dungeons. I would have thought that a Ravenclaw such as yourself would be more astute."

Several things stuck Rosetta about this terse exchange. It appeared that the man had presumed she would have known his identity already and he appeared affronted that she did not, hence the veiled insult on her intelligence. He seemed to announce his Head of House title as badge of superiority, a clear display of one-upmanship to pull rank. He was proudly Slytherin, which figured given his aggressive demeanour. And, more disturbingly, he knew she had been in Ravenclaw House. How could he possibly know that? And what else, if anything, did he know about her?

"Do I know you?" Rosetta asked carefully, feeling on very shaky ground indeed.

"Obviously not."

"But you know me." It was a statement rather than a question.

The man neither affirmed or denied this, but maintained his eye contact all the while. Rosetta was unsure what to say next. His lack of overt denial implied that he knew her and knowledge, as they say, is power. How much did he know? Did he know her deepest secret, why she chose to leave the wizarding world in the first place? Was he going to blackmail her? This man could be very dangerous indeed. She felt out of her depth, and her heart started to pound.

Abruptly, unexpectedly, he swept towards the door in a flurry of black robes. Rosetta was acutely aware of his height as he grazed past her. For a mad moment, she feared

he would grab her as he stalked past. He stopped in the doorway with his back to her, pausing as if to say something further.

*"Let me rip you... Let me tear you..."*

It sounded urgent and lewd, like an obscene whisper, and sent chills up her spine. Was he alluding to her past? Or was he now threatening her outright?

"What was that?"

The dark man turned sharply, a puzzled glare etched on to his stern features.

"Hearing things, are we, Professor Stone? You should know that the dungeons are no place for those of a nervous disposition."

And with that he left, his polished boots clicking on the flagstones of the corridor, leaving Rosetta more confused and afraid than ever. Who was this man? How did he know her? And what did he want from her? She needed to find out, and quickly.

## Chapter 5: A Shocking Discovery

*Chapter 5 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 5: A Shocking Discovery

Rosetta supposed her first day of actual teaching hadn't been as bad as she had expected. She'd had plenty of time to prepare and had a smattering of Year 4 and 5's signing up for classes during lunch (with the interest in Gobbledegook far outweighing the interest in Mermish). Her first and only lesson in the afternoon was with some Year 6 Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, who surprisingly approached the basics of Mermish with diligence and aplomb. Secretly, she was glad not to have had to face a room full of Slytherins as the snippy exchange with their Head of House had played on her mind for the rest of the day.

Rosetta needed to find out who this man was. The most obvious solution would be to ask Dumbledore straight out, and yet for some reason she did not want to do that. She feared she would look stupid and attract some undue attention in asking about him. In truth, Rosetta ideally did not want to form any attachments during her time at the school and could have happily have spent the following months not knowing the majority of the other teacher's names and living under the radar. But recent events showed that was not to be, so she decided to talk to the only other person she thought she could safely ask questions of: Pomona Sprout.

Dinner time in the Great Hall was always a boisterous affair, which leant itself very nicely to having a discreet conversation. Thankfully, the generous Pomona initiated conversation first.

"How was your day, dear?" the older witch asked, dishing some chicken pie on to both of their plates.

"Better than I had expected, thank you. Which I'm relieved about, I was so nervous this morning I thought I'd be sick in the bin!"

Pomona chuckled kindly. "You poor thing. You did look out of sorts yesterday leaving the feast early, if you don't mind me saying. But that's to be expected. When I first started teaching I had so much nervous energy, the anxiety kept me whippet-thin. Now look at me!" And with that, she put a fork full of creamy mashed potato into her mouth with a grin.

Rosetta grinned back. She was starting to like Pomona a lot. "I suppose I'm still a bit intimidated by being here, if I'm honest. I still don't know who most of the other teachers are or what they even do. Apart from a few old faces, it's changed a lot since I was here."

At this, Pomona looked scandalised. "Dumbledore hasn't even introduced you personally to the rest of the faculty? Now that's a rum do. I know the man is busy, but even so... Goodness me, you probably don't know what I teach either! How rude of me!"

"No, that's not what I meant "

Pomona waved a hand around good-naturedly. "I know, dear. But let me start at the start. I teach Herbology, and I'm very proud to be Head of Hufflepuff House. Next to me, that's Aurora Sinistra. She teaches Astronomy. Next to her, Filius Flitwick. He's the head of Ravenclaw House and he teaches Charms."

Rosetta knew Filius, of course. He was her former Head of House. She had always got on well with him and felt ashamed for not seeking him out straight away. He gave her a little friendly wave, and she waved back with a smile that was genuine. She resolved she would make an effort to speak to Filius once she was less distracted by her current predicament. She ate a little of the delicious chicken pie as Pomona continued:

"Next to him, that's Charity Burbage, who teaches Muggle Studies. On her right is Sybil Trelawney, and she teaches Divination. Then there's Minerva McGonagall and Albus Dumbledore, who you already know, obviously. They've been here for a billion years."

Rosetta nodded and swallowed her mouthful, agonisingly waiting for Pomona to get around to the other side of the table.

"Then there's Rolanda Hooch, the Flying teacher. Then old Silvanus Kettleburn, Care of Magical Creatures. You know him, I'm sure. And there's our newest celebrity heart-throb, Gilderoy Lockheart, supposedly teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts, although what people see in him I have no idea." She shook her head disapprovingly.

Rosetta wholeheartedly agreed; the man looked like an utter fraud. A complete embarrassment to Ravenclaw House. But before she could dwell too much on that, Pomona carried on with her introductions:

"Septima Vector next to him teaches Arithmancy. And that sourpuss on the end is Severus Snape. He teaches Potions and is Head of Slytherin House."

Rosetta snorted at the sourpuss description. Typical that he'd teach Potions, her own worst subject. His name sort of rung a bell but she couldn't yet place it.

"He does look a bit stern," she agreed mildly, hoping to whittle more information about him subtly. She needn't have worried; Pomona sang like a bird.

"I'll say he's stern. One of Dumbledore's more controversial appointments, and that's saying something given the parade of charlatans we've had teaching Defence over the years."

"Oh really? How come?" Rosetta tried to make her tone sound naturally interested rather than rabidly hungry for information.

Pomona leaned in conspiratorially. "Quite the chequered past, he's had. Was a follower of You-Know-Who back in the day. Dumbledore trusts him, which is more than most would."

Rosetta felt stunned by this piece of information. A follower of You-Know-Who? Did that mean he'd been a Death Eater? Before she'd had time to fully process this, Pomona went on.

"I'm surprised you don't know him. When were you at Hogwarts? Early 70's?"

Rosetta nodded. "I started in 1973."

"Yes, that's about right then. You must be around the same age."

Well, at least that answered one question. He knew of her because they'd attended Hogwarts at the same time. And yet, his ruffled manner seemed to suggest there was more to it than that. Had she met him before? She really couldn't place him although his name was distantly familiar, like a long-forgotten memory. It was like, the more she tried to think back to knowing him at school, the more fuzzy her memory became. Almost involuntarily, Rosetta glanced up and once more, the dark man she now knew to be Severus Snape was staring straight back at her. It was almost as if he knew she had been talking about him. *Don't be ridiculous*, she thought to herself, and looked away.

She thought back to her earlier curt encounter, to something she swore Snape had said as he'd left the classroom – it sounded hungry, lascivious even – and like a very real threat. If he had indeed been a Death Eater, and she had no reason to doubt Pomona was telling the truth on that, he could definitely be capable of hurting her.

At this, a new, more disturbing thought emerged. Dumbledore had said that the rumours about You-Know-Who being back were not without foundation. If that was the case, it wouldn't be too much supposition to envisage him calling on his old cronies and former Death Eaters to rally around and support him. Surely it wouldn't take much for a former Death Eater to lapse back into their old ways at their master's beck and call.

But something still didn't make sense. Why on Earth would Dumbledore hire someone like Snape in the first place? Pomona said he trusted him, but why? What possible reason would he have to trust a previous close ally of one of the most evil wizards ever known? Especially now, when that evil wizard appeared to have returned? How could you count on the loyalty of someone like that? Had Dumbledore put her in danger, either knowingly or unknowingly?

And also, why had Snape been threatening her, of all people? What, if anything, did he know about her? The last thing she needed was to make an enemy of a former, and potentially relapsed, Death Eater. However, she conceded, there was no point thinking any more about it right now; there was no more she could add to the conversation with Pomona without looking obvious or revealing too much. She had enough information to go on to do her own research, and so she swiftly changed the subject.

The rest of the meal passed pleasantly in light chit-chat, with Rosetta determinedly not looking in Snape's direction for the duration. She was hungrier than she thought she was, and managed to put away a scoop of trifle for dessert. But she didn't linger for longer than she needed to, so after thanking Pomona for enlightening her on the staffing arrangements she decided to retire to the safety of her quarters and ponder some more on why Albus Dumbledore would possibly hire a former Death Eater to teach children and what it all meant.

## Chapter 6: Snakes and Adders

*Chapter 6 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 6: Snakes & Adders

Thoughts of Rosetta's conversation with Pomona had haunted her throughout the following day, and it did not take too long for Rosetta to corroborate Pomona's theory that she and Snape had attended Hogwarts at the same time. She had managed a brief sojourn to the library during a free lesson in the afternoon and quick look through the year books showed that Snape had enrolled as a first year in 1971. She was still struggling to place him, however. To be fair, she had rarely associated with pupils in higher years than herself from her own House, let alone the other Houses. But still, it did seem odd that she couldn't recall him at all.

Rosetta's curiosity had been piqued and it had not been difficult for her to find records of staff appointments which, she was surprised to see, went back as far as the foundation of the school itself. Her surprise didn't stop there. She discovered that Snape had joined the school as Potions Master on 1st September 1981 – only three years since he had graduated. That seemed awfully young to her, given that he didn't appear to be the type to see children's magical education as an earnest vocation. And something nagged her about the timing of it too. You-Know-Who, if she remembered correctly, was defeated around Halloween of 1981. So Snape had joined Hogwarts before You-Know-Who had been vanquished. He was potentially still one of his followers when he got the job!

Pomona had said that Dumbledore trusted Snape. But did Rosetta trust Dumbledore, and his judgement?

Shortly after her visit to the library, she had received a written invitation from Dumbledore inviting her for an end-of-first-week debrief on Sunday to see how she was getting along. That, she supposed, would be the perfect opportunity to ask the Headmaster straight out what was going on.

The rest of the week had passed by quickly and comparatively smoothly. She had managed to keep her head down and avoid Snape as much as possible, deliberately avoiding his gaze at meal times. So far, it looked like she only had one class which appeared to be troublemakers, and there were no prizes for guessing which House they belonged to. Her seventh-year Slytherins were less than interested in learning magical languages and more interested in actively mocking Goblins and Merpeople. Rosetta had taken them to task quite fiercely, but could tell that they were going to be a handful. She knew she needed to keep a tight reign on them as the last thing she wanted to do was to get their surly Head of House involved.

Rosetta was glad of a much-needed lie-in at the weekend but inevitably Sunday evening rolled around a lot quicker than she would have liked, and once more she found herself in the Headmaster's office, seated opposite the old wizard. After finding out Snape's backstory and still baffled by his appointment by Dumbledore, she couldn't help but feel guarded and slightly suspicious.

"So, Rosetta. Tell me about your first week." Dumbledore smiled and the corners of his blue eyes creased.

"Well, the voluntary uptake from Years 4 and 5 was minimal, as expected. Nine students signed up for Gobbledegook but only two for Mermish," she answered briskly.



Dumbledore inclined his head. "That's more than I expected, to be honest with you. At least smaller classes are, generally speaking, easier to teach. And how are Years 6 and 7?"

*The Year 7 Slytherins are entitled little shits*, she thought to herself, but held her tongue.

"It's fairly mixed. Some students are keen and some are completely uninterested. But I'll make sure even they know the basics." This came out snippier than she would have liked.

"I have no doubt about that." He smiled again. "What about life at the school? How are you settling in?"

*Apart from the Death Eater who seems to have taken a murderous dislike to me, you mean?* Once again, Rosetta filtered her thoughts and forced to reply in a neutral tone.

"I've eaten more in the last week than I have in the last year."

Dumbledore chuckled, sitting back in his chair. "I'm glad you have an appetite. But that's not what I meant. How are you feeling?"

Rosetta sighed. How was she feeling? Like she'd made a terrible mistake in coming back here, and that she was out of her depth and potentially in danger. But that was a thought for another time.

"I'd be lying if I said it wasn't weird coming back here," she admitted.

"I know it must be difficult for you. It's a very different lifestyle to adjust to, let alone the climate. And yes, there are a few familiar faces, but the transition from former pupil to colleague must feel very strange. And as for the job, well children can be unpredictable to say the least!"

Rosetta knew he was trying to be kind, which unnerved her. Yes, what he was saying was all true, but the true reason of her discomfort felt like the elephant in the room. She paused for a moment before replying.

"To be honest, I've heard some information which has made me rather uncomfortable."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow quizzically. "Do go on?"

"The Potions Master. Snape."

Dumbledore said nothing, but Rosetta could see his blue eyes twinkle. He knew what she was getting at and wasn't letting on; he wanted her to spell it out for him. This small passive-aggressive act enraged her, and it took all of her willpower not to scream in his face.

"You know the one. Former Death Eater, who you bizarrely think is appropriate to teach children." There. She'd said it.

Rosetta's tone was icy, and any trace of humour left Dumbledore's face.

"It is well-known that Severus was a Death Eater for a short time after leaving school," he said seriously. "I myself attended his trial and vouched for him, and he was cleared by the High Council. He has atoned for the error of his ways at great personal risk, and he is now no more a Death Eater than I am."

Rosetta's face remained impassive at this. She'd left the United Kingdom shortly after graduating, so her knowledge of the Death Eater trials was pretty much non-existence. She had just presumed they had all been rounded up and were banged up in Azkaban where they belonged. She supposed it would have taken a lot for Dumbledore to vouch for someone who, for all intents and purposes, was as guilty as sin and probably deserved a life sentence. But it still didn't explain why he testified in favour of Snape.

"Why do you trust him?" she asked, her tone now much softer.

"I'm afraid I cannot tell you that. I do have very good reasons. I have to ask you to trust me on this."

"You don't think he's dangerous?"

Dumbledore let out another chuckle at this. "I've heard his teaching methods can be somewhat Draconian, but I would hardly describe that as dangerous."

"He seems like a piece of work to me." That was less than Rosetta wanted to admit, but she didn't feel like she could say the whole truth about the depth of her misgivings just yet.

"I'm not saying he's a likeable person. One doesn't have to be likeable to have some good inside them. Or to perform good deeds." He peered over his crescent-shaped glasses at her meaningfully.

Rosetta looked down. Sitting here, listening to Dumbledore, it was easy to diminish what she felt was a very real threat. Perhaps she'd had read too much into it after all. Perhaps it was just power play, the peacocking of an insecure white man throwing his weight around in front of a black woman. It certainly wouldn't have been the first time that had happened.

"I know," she conceded eventually.

That seemed to satisfy Dumbledore that the subject was now closed, and he swiftly moved the conversation on to thoughts of Parseltongue.

"I admit I have brought you here for reasons other than to discuss your first week. But first, can I offer you a tea? Or maybe something stronger?"

With a flick of his wand he summoned two tumblers of Firewhisky and Rosetta accepted one that floated across the desk towards her. Rosetta took a sip, relishing the burning sensation that spread down into her stomach, quenching her previous anger and anxiety, as Dumbledore continued.

"It seems our little plan to study Parseltongue has come at a very opportune time. I have heard whisperings that Voldemort has been using snakes to mobilise and sustain himself. It appears he has been utilising his language skills very well. The sooner we begin our analysis the better."

Rosetta took another sip as she took this in. You-Know-Who using snakes to do his bidding? It almost made her shudder with revulsion.

"I'll be honest with you, I've really not thought about how we can approach it at all." She suddenly felt bad about this. This was her whole *raison d'être* for being at Hogwarts, after all. And all she'd been doing since she got here was wasting her energy on some creepy man.

Dumbledore shook his head, smiling. "No, no. I hadn't expected you to. You've had quite enough on your plate this week! But I have had some thoughts about how we might start, if I may?"

Rosetta nodded her assent, grateful he was taking the lead and letting her off the hook.

"I propose we could begin by comparing the phonetics, grammar and syntax of some of the basic words of the magical languages we already know, to see if there are any patterns which emerge and which could provide clues."

Rosetta drained the last of her Firewhisky. "That seems sensible. I could also check the library for mentions of Parseltongue and Parselmouths too. That could open up

some avenues of investigation."

Dumbledore beamed. "Wonderful idea. Off the top of my head, there are a few books in the Restricted Section of the library which might yield some results also."

Maybe it was just the Firewhisky, but focusing her attention back on to researching Parseltongue gave her a swell of excitement. It would do her good to put her Ravenclaw mind to better use than obsessing over some strange man.

"I've always wanted an excuse to rummage in the Restricted Section."

"Excellent. We have a plan. Shall we meet back here in a week's time, to discuss our findings?"

Before Rosetta could reply, Dumbledore downed his as-yet-untouched Firewhisky in one big gulp and burped delicately.

"Pardon me!"

The Firewhisky must have worked because Rosetta felt much less animosity towards the Headmaster and much calmer than she had in days when she left to go back to her quarters. Now all she needed to do to maintain her optimism was to focus on the task in hand and not get distracted by any dark, sinister Potion Masters.

## Chapter 7: Questions, Questions

*Chapter 7 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 7: Questions, Questions

Rosetta had a renewed sense of purpose once her research into Parseltongue began in earnest over the following week. However, it was clear that the task was going to be a lot harder than both she and Dumbledore had envisioned, not least because of resident librarian Madam Pince's looming presence in the Hogwarts Library. As a Professor, Rosetta could access whatever books she liked, but she could sense the suspicion from Madam Pince radiating off her in waves. Especially as the first port of call for Rosetta was the Restricted Section, where she thought she had the best chance of finding out specific details about the structure of the language.

In reality, there appeared to be no written records of Parseltongue anywhere to be found amongst the hundreds of books, which rather scuppered their initial plan of comparing it against the magical languages they already knew. Parseltongue could well be a spoken language rather than a written one, in the same way that Mermish and some Native American languages were, Rosetta supposed. It made sense in some ways. Parseltongue itself was very rare and given the taboo surrounding it being attributed mainly to Dark Magic, it would be unlikely that those in command of it would want to share their secrets with the world. Additionally, from what Dumbledore had told her, the sound of Parseltongue was very much like the hissing of snakes. It would therefore be very difficult for a non-speaker to recognise the phonemes, partly because they are just unable to hear the unfamiliar sounds and distinguish them as a language rather than the noise of an animal. This would also create a problem for transcribing, for how do you convey the myriad inflections of susurrations into written English or, for that matter, any other language? And how could you begin to learn a language that seemed utterly impenetrable?

These thoughts were frustrating but rather than banging against a dead end, Rosetta tried to remain optimistic and instead tried a different approach by looking back into known history of Parselmouths and recorded uses of Parseltongue. Thankfully, there was no shortage of History of Magic books to leaf through.

It was common knowledge that Paracelsus was credited with the discovery of Parseltongue in the late Middle Ages. He was so well-known because he appeared on a Chocolate Frog Card and there was also an ornate marble bust of him in a corridor at Hogwarts, which Rosetta remembered passing many times heading out towards the Owlery. But discovery of the language did not necessarily mean he was a Parselmouth himself, Rosetta reasoned. Paracelsus was a very learned man, an alchemist and physician, not a Dark wizard. It would not be unreasonable to expect he could have found a magical way to capture a spoken language had he understood the language himself. The absence of any solid evidence to support this theory could suggest he was a non-speaker. However, it was also well-known that Paracelsus was a mysterious figure and very guarded about much of his work, so there was clearly more to find out about him and his knowledge of the enigmatic language.

But even before Paracelsus, one of the four founders of Hogwarts, Salazar Slytherin, had been known to talk to snakes over a thousand years ago. This was, after all, the reason that the symbol for Slytherin House was a snake. Additionally, there was evidence for Herpo The Foul speaking to snakes as far back as the time of the Ancient Greeks and using Parseltongue to control Basilisks. Rosetta had gotten chills thinking about the similarity with Voldemort, who was supposedly using snakes to do his bidding. But the more she thought about it, the stranger it seemed to Rosetta that Paracelsus had been given credit for discovery of Parseltongue when there were two very famous historical figures who could speak to snakes already documented long before his time. Could it be that Paracelsus had been credited with the discovery of Parseltongue precisely because he had managed to capture the meaning of the language for posterity somehow using magic? And why was it so hard to find out any information about it?

One thing was for sure: after many hours, hundreds of books and plenty of suspicious glances from Madam Pince, Rosetta felt confident she had exhausted all the avenues that Hogwarts Library had afforded her and she couldn't wait to discuss her latest theory with Dumbledore at their next meeting.

## Chapter 8: Paracelsus' Puzzle

*Chapter 8 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 8: Paracelsus' Puzzle

"Quite brilliant, Rosetta. I admit to my shame I hadn't even considered researching Paracelsus as I had assumed he was the first to recognise Parseltongue as a language rather than anything more. Well, that will teach an old fool like me about making assumptions!"

Dumbledore was demonstrably impressed after Rosetta had explained her theory, and despite herself, Rosetta was pleased.

"Your notion has me intrigued," he went on, his blue eyes flashing in excitement. "If it's correct, the answer has been in plain sight all this time."

"I don't think it's going to be that easy," Rosetta answered. "I feel like I've exhausted every book in the library and whilst there are detailed writings on his alchemy and other works, there's nothing about Parseltongue apart from his credited discovery."

"Which is precisely why we need to dig a little deeper." He sat back in his high-backed chair, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "I think a chat with Cuthbert Binns might be in order. No-one knows History of Magic like our dearly departed Professor."

oOo

The pair made their way down to Classroom 4F, on the first floor near a very mossy courtyard. It didn't matter that it was a Saturday evening; Dumbledore knew Professor Binns would most probably be snoozing soundly in front of a pile of lecture notes he was diligently preparing for the following week. It was debateable of course if ghosts could actually sleep, but Cuthbert certainly gave it a good go.

Dumbledore rapped curtly three times on the classroom door.

From inside, they could hear a startled snort, a rustle of papers, and finally, a dry, reedy voice called out, "Come in!"

Professor Binns looked very surprised to have not one, but two guests as the pair entered his classroom. He clearly never had people drop in on him unexpectedly. He floated up through his desk and hovered before them.

It had been a long time since Rosetta had seen a ghost and it took a while to get used to. She hoped she didn't look alarmed.

"Good evening, Cuthbert," said Dumbledore, striding forwards. "I'm sorry for interrupting your lesson planning."

"Not at all, Headmaster. It's a pleasure to see you."

"I'd like to introduce you to our newest Magical Languages teacher, Rosetta Stone. Rosetta, I am sure you remember our History of Magic teacher, Cuthbert Binns."

Rosetta smiled politely, fighting the urge to hold out her hand for him to shake. That would surely be a faux pas to a ghost? Yes, she certainly remembered Professor Binns but his lessons, not so much. There was no doubting the old man was extremely knowledgeable about his subject but sadly that knowledge got lost in translation in his teaching style. He was afflicted with the most unfortunate monotone voice which could send even the most engaged student into a stupor. Suffice to say, History of Magic wasn't one of Rosetta's strongest subjects.

"It's lovely to see you again, Professor Binns."

The old man squinted over his small, thick glasses and his pursed lips broke into a smile. "You too, dear."

Dumbledore folded his hands across his stomach. "Cuthbert, if I may, I'd like to probe your great knowledge of history. Could you tell us what you know about Paracelsus' discovery of Parseltongue?"

At this, the old ghost raised his eyebrows. "Well, discovery is the operative word. Paracelsus was the first to acknowledge that the ability to speak to snakes was an entire language in itself, rather than a mere spell to control an animal like, say, the Imperius Curse. Parseltongue is therefore named after him."

Dumbledore nodded. "Is there any evidence that Paracelsus was a Parselmouth?"

The old man pushed his ghostly glasses up his ghostly nose. "To my knowledge, there's no written evidence from the man himself that he was. He produced many books in his short lifetime but they were all about his alchemical, philosophical or scientific works. There was no works, which we know of, specifically about the language of Parseltongue."

Rosetta thought about this for a second. "So why is he credited with the discovery if he didn't write about it?"

Professor Binns smiled. "Well, there could be several answers to that. He may have written something but all records got destroyed in the 17th Century witch hunts. Or he could have written something which remained unpublished at the time of his death and the manuscripts got lost. Or, he chose not to admit to being a Parselmouth due to the connotations with Dark Magic. Much of his philosophical writings are on morality and religion, which tends to suggest he was no Dark wizard."

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Would you say then, as a historian, there's not enough evidence to suggest either way whether he could or could not speak to snakes?"

"Yes, I would." The old man paused, hesitating about what to say next. "There is a myth associated with him, but you know my feelings on myths and legends. I teach solid, believable facts, not hearsays and half-truths."

"Your integrity is not in doubt, Cuthbert," Dumbledore replied encouragingly, without missing a beat. "But for the sake of completeness, would you do us the great favour of enlightening us on what you know of this myth?"

The hair on Rosetta's neck went up and she found she was barely breathing as she awaited her former teacher's reply.

Professor Binns peered over his spectacles. "Paracelsus was a true genius of his time. On the one hand, he was a devout man concerned with ethics and the higher purpose of mankind, and on the other he was a meticulous scientist who dedicated his life to recording his discoveries. The story goes that Paracelsus, late in his life, discovered quite by accident that he could talk to snakes, and the discovery shook him and his beliefs to the core. Supposedly, Paracelsus thought his ability to be a gift, yet he knew that admission could put him in danger due to the link with Dark Magic. But he wanted to preserve the knowledge he had gained for future scholars, and so created a set of magical scrolls with the Alphabet of the Magi and hid them somewhere so safe, that they have never been found to this day."

Rosetta's eyes nearly popped out of her head.

"But of course, that is all tittle-tattle and rumour." Professor Binns waved a hand in the air dismissively. "There is absolutely no evidence to support such outlandish claims."

Dumbledore smiled widely at the old man. "Of course. Once again, your depth of historical knowledge is nothing short of astounding. How lucky we are to have you at Hogwarts. Thank you so much, Cuthbert."

If it were possible for ghosts to blush, Professor Binns would have turned pink. It appeared he was not used to such praise. "Er... T-t-thank you, Headmaster," he muttered embarrassedly as he watched Dumbledore leave the classroom with Rosetta hurrying after.

oOo

"What do you make of that?" Rosetta asked breathlessly as they clicked up the deserted corridor together.

"I think one should approach such stories with an open mind," Dumbledore replied. "In my experience, such legends sometimes have a grain of truth to them."

"You really think the magical scrolls could exist?" Rosetta almost didn't dare believe what she was hearing.

"They certainly might. And we must make it our goal to find them if they do. Because we might not be the only people who have heard this myth, and there may well be others looking for the scrolls in order to destroy them." His blue eyes were steely. "These scrolls may well be the key to deciphering Parseltongue. I don't need to tell you how valuable they would be in the fight against Voldemort."

Rosetta certainly didn't need Dumbledore to tell her how important it was. It was the reason she had decided to come back to Hogwarts, after all. But the task ahead seemed almost Herculean. Far from the rather dry and cerebral task comparing syntax and lexicon of magical languages, it appeared she was now thrust on to a quest to find ancient mythical scrolls in an effort to defeat the return of one of the Darkest wizards of all time.

Idly, she wondered how much the scrolls would be worth to a collector of antiquities.

It all seemed rather exciting all of a sudden.

## Chapter 9: Birthday Presents

*Chapter 9 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

*Author's Note: I know it's been a terribly long time between updates. Life really does get in the way, but for those still reading, rest assured I will finish this story at some point. Rosetta has been with me a long time and I owe it to her to complete her tale.*

### Chapter 9: Birthday Presents

The myth of the hidden magical scrolls had certainly fired up Rosetta's imagination. It took her back to being a rookie eighteen-year-old Treasure Hunter for Gringotts Wizarding Bank. The cerebral challenge, decoding the clues, putting all of the pieces together... that's what excited Rosetta. And then the Curse Breakers swanned in and claimed the treasure and glory for their own, she remembered bitterly. The unfairness still stuck in her craw like a piece of unchewed bread. Well, not this time. *This* time, she had a treasure all of her own. She just needed to kick this awful flu so she could dedicate herself to finding some answers.

The end of September seemed to rush past in a blur of books and mist, with vicious colds and flu spreading around the castle. A particularly virulent form of flu had knocked Rosetta for six and she'd had to cancel two day's worth of lessons. Rosetta's birthday coincided with St Matthew's Day, and spending it in her bedroom with nothing but Pomona's home-made Welsh Cakes and a bottle of Pepper-Up Potion for company was not how she'd envisioned celebrating her thirtieth. Her ears were still steaming gently well into the late evening from the medicine, which hadn't helped make her feel that much better in all honesty, and she was about to turn in for the night when she heard a polite rap at the door. The last thing she needed right now was company, especially feeling groggy and with smoking ears, but she made herself open the door.

To her surprise, a house-elf dressed in a toga bearing the Hogwarts crest stood looking up at her with its big orb-like eyes. In its hands it was carrying a package wrapped in what looked to be black crushed velvet.

"For Professor Stone," the elf squeaked, "With fond regards from Professor Dumbledore."

The elf raised its arms for her to take the package, which she did carefully, and then it promptly ran away up the corridor giggling, the sound of its bare feet padding on the wooden floors.

Rosetta carried the package inside. The size and weight of it felt like a book. Sitting on the bed, she slowly unwrapped the velvet. Inside one corner was tucked a piece of yellow parchment with Dumbledore's familiar neat, loopy handwriting.

*Something to read, and something to keep you warm.*

The velvet turned out to be a beautiful scarf, thick and rich and sumptuous. It almost seemed to shimmer. Rosetta let her hands glide over the material. It felt expensive. And then her attention turned to the book. It looked very old indeed, but was in good condition for all that. The black leather was slightly cracked in places and there was gold leaf on the edges of the pages and inlaid in the embossed lettering on the cover, which read:

*Archidoxis magica by Paracelsus*

Rosetta took a sharp breath in as she flipped open the pages. It was a translated copy as the text was in English but this was one of Paracelsus' rarest books there wasn't even a complete copy in the Hogwarts Library, only tattered fragments. How Dumbledore had got hold of such a pristine copy she would never know. She could only speculate at the cost of such a valuable grimoire.

Indeed, this text was more than just a ostentatious gift this book described the Alphabet of the Magi, and she realised that Dumbledore must have given it to her as a keystone to unravel the myth Cuthbert Binns had revealed to them.

No sooner had she'd had that thought, there was a small tapping on the window. Rosetta certainly wasn't expecting any more birthday cards. Puzzled, she ventured to the window and saw a Tawny owl being buffeted slightly by the wind as it perched on the sill. She opened the window a crack and the owl hopped in, shaking its feathers as if to get rid of the chill and then stuck its leg out to Rosetta. Tied to its leg was a small pouch, which she hastily unfastened.

"Thank you, little owl." The owl allowed her to stroke its head a few times before climbing back on to the window sill with a screech; it was clear the owl didn't want to hang around. Rosetta let the owl go and sat on the bed again, clutching the pouch.

The pouch was made of silky dark green brocade. She prised it open and found a miniature rolled-up scroll of parchment and a small vial of milky-blue liquid. Unfurling the scroll, she read:

*This remedy is far more effective in treating influenza than Pepper-Up Potion.*

Rosetta stared at the scroll in utter shock. The writing was precise with spiky, long strokes. The colour green on the pouch, the almost superior-sounding potion expertise in the note... this had to have come from Professor Snape. But why? Was it a trick? Was he trying to poison her? She unscrewed the top of the vial and took a sniff. It smelled like menthol and just the smell alone sent a wonderful cooling sensation through her. Not poison then, she reasoned. But the motive for such a kind action from the surly Head of Slytherin was beyond her. For all intents and purposes, he seemed to dislike her intensely. Perhaps he was under orders from Dumbledore to aid her recovery so she could start researching the myth sooner. That would make sense, and certainly explained the lack of pleasantries in the curt note.

With a swift action, she downed the liquid and straight away the cooling sensation trickled down into every part of her, which was soon to be replaced by a soothing warmth. It made her feel very cosy, and she immediately had the urge to sleep. She climbed into bed fully clothed, and by the time the covers were over her and her head hit the pillow she had fallen into a deep and dreamless slumber.

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When she awoke the following morning, she felt like a new woman. Mercifully, she didn't have any lessons until after lunch so had some time to get her head together, but still she rose early: she had people to thank for unexpected birthday gifts. She wrote little thank you notes to Albus and Pomona, and left them in their staff pigeon holes. But Snape was someone she wanted to speak to face-to-face. She was genuinely grateful for the miraculous potion and wanted to let her feelings be known. Perhaps it would clear the air between them, get rid of all that strange atmosphere whenever they were in each other's presence. Maybe she would get the measure of the man and glimpse the reason for Dumbledore's unwavering trust in him.

She made her way down to the Dungeons and hovered outside his classroom. She knew from previous experience and avoidance tactics that sometimes in the mornings he would come down early to check Potion supplies, finish off his marking and prepare the classroom, and she hoped she had chosen the right day for his diligence. Taking a deep breath, she raised her fist and rapped smartly on the old wooden door.

"Enter."

Rosetta did as she was bade, and slipped into the room. Snape did not look up from his parchment as he was enthusiastically scribbling away, apparently deep in concentration. *Probably grading some poor fool with a T* she thought to herself as she watched him dip his quill into the inkwell and continue his frantic scrawls.

After a few moments, when it became clear he wasn't in any hurry to greet his guest, Rosetta ventured, "Good morning, Professor."

At this, Snape raised his head, but did not put down his quill. If he was surprised to see her, he hid it very well.

"Professor Stone. May I assist you in some way?"

Rosetta hesitated. "No. Well, you already have. I came to thank you, for the Flu Potion last night."

"There is no need to thank me," he replied, expertly brushing off her gratitude. "One of my duties as Potions Master is to ensure the school is fully stocked with appropriate medicines. Professor Dumbledore has to make sure his staff are fit and healthy."

*Perhaps the instruction for the medicine came from Dumbledore after all,* Rosetta thought. "Well it worked brilliantly. I feel so much better."

"I wouldn't be much of a Potions Master if it didn't work, would I? Is there anything else you wanted?" His tone was all bored sarcasm as he dipped his quill once more and continued to write.

This was going all wrong. Why was he so prickly? All she wanted to do was express her thanks and she couldn't even do that without him sniping at her. Rosetta felt her gratitude twisting into indignation and she couldn't stop what came out of her mouth next.

"Do you always have to be such a prick? I only came in here to thank you for making me feel better."

Snape's face remained impassive, but this time he put down the quill. "I'd have thought such insults were below you, Professor."

Rosetta sighed in frustration. "I'm sorry. It's just... It's clear that you don't like me, and haven't from the very moment I started teaching here. And I don't know why! I don't know what I've done to make you hate me so much."

Snape stood and walked slowly around his desk, his black teaching robes flaring out behind him, until he was standing directly in front of Rosetta, towering over her.

"I think it's time for you to leave."

His voice was dangerously low in volume, but Rosetta stood her ground.

"Just tell me what I've done, and I'll go."

Without warning, Snape grabbed Rosetta's wrist and pulled her towards him, bending his head towards her and fixing his eyes on hers. She was too shocked to scream, suddenly transfixed by the sheer blackness of his eyes. It was like staring into the abyss. It took a moment before she realised he was performing Legilimency on her; it felt like deft fingers were rooting through her mind, searching for something. It wasn't painful, but it was an odd sensation. It took all her mental strength to propel him from her mind. He flinched and let her go as if burned.

Rosetta's heart was hammering in her chest and the fury spilled out of her. The ends of her hair started to crackle with rage. "How dare you touch me? Do that again and it'll be the last thing you ever do."

"I think it's time for you to leave," he said once more after a moment, but this time more softly.

She glared at him, breathing heavily for a few moments, adrenaline coming from every pore, before spinning on her heel and slamming the door behind her. She never got to see the look of sorrow in the Potion Master's eyes.

## Chapter 10: Face-Off Fallout

*Chapter 10 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 10: Face-Off Fallout

Rosetta was still furious when she returned to her quarters a few minutes later, her mind racing. How dare he touch her? And how dare he invade her mind like that? Sure, he didn't hurt her – his grip on her wrist was firm but was not violent enough to leave marks or bruises, and the Legilimency itself was an odd sensation but not at all painful – but that was beside the point. The point was that he touched her, both physically and mentally, without her permission. She cursed herself for not struggling, for not fighting back, but in truth she had been so shocked by the swiftness of it all that she had been rooted to the spot.

He hadn't even answered her question, so she was still none the wiser as to the reasons why he seemed to take such a dislike of her. The whole incident had just led to Rosetta having even more questions. Like, why was he so reluctant to answer her? Was he just an old-fashioned racist after all, as she had initially suspected? And why had he performed Legilimency on her anyway? What memory was he looking for, and did he find it? There was always a bit of a blind spot when she tried to remember Snape during her time as a pupil of the school. She must have seen him around, must have at the very least known his name, but the more she tried to recall him, the hazier her memories became. It felt like looking through frosted glass. It was as if she'd forgotten about him altogether. Well, there were probably other Hogwarts alumni she couldn't recall either, she reasoned, but still, there was something about this particular lack of recollection that didn't feel right.

Perhaps she had done something bad in the past, or upset him in some way that she couldn't recall. Maybe she had teased him or said something mean, in the offhand way kids do. She hadn't been a bully at school so it was unlikely. And even if she'd had, it was a long time ago. Too long to be holding a grudge, surely? One thing was for certain: it was clear now that he loathed her with his very being. Dumbledore may have reason to trust him, but she sure as hell didn't. She was was certain the only thing protecting her from his malice was Dumbledore himself. Whatever kind of man Snape was, his respect for the Headmaster, as far as Rosetta could see, was beyond doubt.

Rosetta took a deep breath. Her heart rate was starting to calm down and she felt a pang of thirst as the adrenaline started to abate. She poured herself a glass of water and drank it in one go. When she closed her eyes, she could still see Snape's black eyes fixed on her, almost pinning her to the spot, and still feel the heat of his hand around her wrist, as those invisible dexterous fingers probed her mind, searching for who knew what. She shook her head to clear the memories. She had to stop obsessing about him, had to stop giving up so much mental energy to a man she despised. But her mind churned and churned, chewing over the unanswered questions, and she couldn't stop the flights of fancy where she wished him ill, or wished him far away from the castle. He was the fly in her ointment, the thorn in her side. She didn't come to Hogwarts to make friends, that much was true. But she certainly didn't come to make enemies either, and yet she'd managed that without much effort at all on her part.

Rosetta filled and downed another glass of water, half wishing it was gin and tonic, even though it was still before ten o'clock in the morning. Distraction was what she needed, and nothing provided better distraction than a good cerebral challenge. She had several hours before her first lessons of the day, and those precious hours could be spent in a positive way, rather than stewing in her own fetid thoughts.

She set down the glass on the nightstand and picked up the old, heavy book Dumbledore had given to her. It really was a thing of beauty. She traced her fingers over the embossed leather, marvelling at the brightness of the gold leaf after so many centuries. There was much pleasure to be taken in just the mere handling of books; the promise of the knowledge held within. And this was no ordinary book: this one held the potential to solve a mystery, to find hidden treasure. It may even unlock the secrets of one of the wizarding world's most elusive and shadowy languages.

A thrill of anticipation shot down Rosetta's spine. With a smile, she opened the grimoire and began to read.

## Chapter 11: Hidden Secrets

*Chapter 11 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 11: Hidden Secrets

October's weather was wet and cold. Rosetta had almost forgotten just how dark and rainy it could get in Scotland compared to the sunnier climes of Greece that she had grown accustomed to. With the chill came shorter days, and with shorter days came longer nights; nights that she spent endlessly pouring over the *Archidoxis magica*, carefully scribbling down notes on sheaves of parchment when a thought came to her, or to highlight important pieces of text. It appeared Paracelsus had created the Alphabet of the Magi as a protective charm initially. There were examples of how he would engrave the names of angels on talismans, which he claimed could treat illnesses and provide protection. It seemed appropriate that if the mythical scrolls actually existed, then they would be written in the Alphabet of the Magi in order to defend the secrets within them.

Luckily for Rosetta, the full alphabet was transcribed and translated inside the book. The alphabet itself did look very magical. To Rosetta's eyes it appeared to be a wonderful combination of many different styles of writing, part Urdu script, part Hebrew script, with a traces of other beautiful exotic languages. The characters looked familiar to her and she had a nagging sense that she had seen them somewhere before. But where? She couldn't place it for now, but still it gnawed at her. Perhaps she was getting confused with the Coptic script, of which she had seen plenty of times in her adopted homeland. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd seen the mystical alphabet somewhere before.

As to the whereabouts of the scrolls, there was unfortunately no treasure map handily drawn inside the grimoire to assist with the search. If there were any clues at all to the scrolls and their location, then they were hidden extremely deeply indeed. Over the course of the month, Rosetta had read and re-read the book cover to cover and whilst she felt extremely knowledgeable on the Alphabet of the Magi now, she was still no closer to finding evidence for the scrolls or their hiding place. Paracelsus was a very clever man; it would not be beyond him to hide clues inside the text of the book itself. That would be yet another puzzle to solve. But there were so many ways to embed codes into text, it was difficult to know where to start. For example, hidden words could be spanned over a continuous set of words. Or, a message could be spelled out reading down the page using the first or last letter of each line. Or even, the first word or letter of each paragraph. And that was just the start. Then there were ciphers and invisible inks too; all that before considering any magical properties that the book could be imbibed with.

Dumbledore had been typically sanguine when Rosetta had shared her summarisation of the book and her ideas of steganography with him, on the Friday night before Hallowe'en in his office. To his mind, they were halfway there. Rosetta was not so sure.

"There are countless ways Paracelsus could have hidden a message inside the book. That's if there are any message to be found in the first place. It could take forever!"

Dumbledore regarded her thoughtfully. "At first glance, it does look Herculean, I admit. But there is a reason why you alone were chosen for this task, Rosetta. You have a unique skill set, consisting of your adeptness with languages and your logical, puzzle-solving brain. I don't doubt that if there are any messages to be found, you are the one to find them."

Rosetta sighed. "It still might take a long time. Time we don't really have."

"True. But I'm not expecting answers overnight. I realised the magnitude of the work needed, and I know you are spending every single moment you can working on this. My advice, if you even need it, is to methodically go through every way you can think of to uncover any hidden clues."

"And if I don't find anything?"

Dumbledore smiled encouragingly. "Then we'll try a different approach."

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Rosetta left the Headmaster's office shortly after nine o'clock and made her way back to her quarters. The corridors were all but deserted, with just the odd painting moving about by candlelight. She liked the calmness of Hogwarts at night; no echoing voices of excitable children or thundering footsteps on polished floors.

She had to admit that working so hard on Dumbledore's project had given her the distraction that she'd craved. She'd hardly thought about the incident with Snape and had managed to largely avoid him at mealtimes and in the dungeons. The rare times their paths crossed she would instantly look away, avoiding all eye contact. For all she knew, or cared, he did the same. They didn't speak or acknowledge each other, and that suited Rosetta just fine.

Heading away from Dumbledore's office she turned right and walked towards the West Wing, where her quarters were located. At the top of a flight of stairs at the end of the corridor sat Mrs Norris, her fluffy tail flicking restlessly and her lamp-like amber eyes darting between the wall and Rosetta as she climbed the steps. It was common knowledge that the majority of students detested the old cat, but as far as Rosetta could see, she was merely a loyal companion to her devoted, albeit slightly creepy, master. Yes, Mrs Norris might be grumpy, but she was probably one hundred and fifty in human years. *I'd be grumpy if I was that old too*, Rosetta thought to herself.

Rosetta paused on the top step and looked down at the elderly grey cat.

"What's up, Missus? Are you on your nightly patrol?"

The cat's ears began to flatten against her head and her eyes became wide as she stared at the wall, now ignoring Rosetta completely. The elderly feline looked more and more agitated, scared even, crouching down on her haunches and licking her lips as her tail began to lash left and right. Rosetta looked around for a ghost or some other presence which could have spooked her, but there was nothing there.

Rosetta stopped and listened hard. There was a faint scratching sound, followed by a cold, whispering voice:

*"Come... Come to me... let me rip you... let me tear you..."*

With a sharp hiss, Mrs Norris ran away with an agility well beyond her years. Rosetta was momentarily paralysed as a terrified chill ran down her spine. It was the same voice that she had heard back in Snape's classroom at the start of term. Whoever or whatever it was, it seemed to be after flesh. *Her* flesh.

Rosetta sprinted all the way back to her quarters, fumbling with her key in her hurry to get away from the voice. She locked the door behind her, breathing hard. She found she was shaking. *Don't be stupid, you're just hearing things*, she told herself. But it was clear from Mrs Norris' reaction that it was no flight of imagination.

Rosetta slept fitfully that night, her snatches of dreams punctuated with undecipherable Magi text and the cold, whispering voice, calling for her flesh.

## Chapter 12: Fright Night

*Chapter 12 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 12: Fright Night

The following day, Hallowe'en, was a Saturday and Rosetta was eternally grateful she didn't have to rise early or spend a day in a classroom. She'd felt like she'd been run over by a Hippogriff after a night of tossing and turning and strangely vivid dreams. She stayed in her room for most of the morning, sipping weak tea and pondering the creepy voice she'd heard. Hearing it once could be dismissed as a trick of the mind, she decided, but twice, and with a thoroughly terrified cat as a witness... Well, it had to be real.

In the cold light of day she could be a bit more objective about it, but she was still afraid. She knew she should say something to Dumbledore about it. He would probably have a rational explanation, as he usually did: the ghost of The Bloody Baron up to his tricks again, or similar. But something was stopping her telling the Headmaster. Was it pride, or not wanting to look weak or scared in front of him? Possibly all three. Either way, this was something that she felt she needed to deal with on her own.

At least there was one thing to look forward to: The Hallowe'en Feast. Nowhere put on a more incredible celebration of all things magical than Hogwarts at Hallowe'en. The Great Hall was usually festooned with enormous pumpkins, orange streamers, water snakes, goblets of coloured candy and all sorts of Halloween-related decorations. Rosetta remembered a thousand live bats fluttering from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkin stutter. Ghosts would appear between courses, floating up through tables and gliding around the hall in formation. It was the highlight of the school year for most students, and now as a teacher, she had to admit she still felt excited about it.

Rosetta decided to make an effort for the Feast regardless of her restless night and wore a long black dress with deep slits in the side over her favourite pair of tight black leather trousers. She coupled that with some cute buckled kitten-heeled boots and the beautiful scarf that Dumbledore had gifted her. She completed the look with black smoky eyes and a black glossy lipstick with her hair pinned up. Tonight, she was going to forget all about strange voices, strange alphabets and strange Potions Masters and have some fun for once. Merlin knew she'd not had much of that since she'd started teaching.

As usual, she was sat next to Pomona, who was in great spirits. She had festooned her outfit entirely in cobwebs, and even had a live spider trained to dance on a thread dangling from her hat. The wine flowed freely (mostly from having her goblet topped up by Pomona) and soon they were laughing and telling each other bawdy jokes, all the while dining on the most delicious food. After one particularly smutty joke featuring a Flobberworm and a Blast-Ended Skrewt which sent Pomona into hoots of filthy laughter, Rosetta caught Snape glaring at them in his usual imperious way. Rosetta stealthily stuck her middle finger up at him whilst Pomona wiped her tears of mirth away. Snape averted his eyes, his expression if possible even more sour than before.

By the end of the feast, Rosetta was decidedly tipsy. She finished the last of her wine and followed the hoard of chattering children out of the Great Hall, Pomona swaying

slightly against her, as they made their way up the stairs in the throng with Dumbledore and the other teachers trailing behind.

Suddenly, there was a hush that rippled through the crowd, and a gleeful, crowing pupil's voice way up ahead yelled, "Enemies of the heir beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!"

Both Pomona and Rosetta's mouth fell open in shock at the use of the disgusting expletive. Moments later there were cries of "My cat! My cat! What's happened to Mrs Norris?" from a clearly distraught Argus Filch.

*Mrs Norris?* Rosetta began to feel a thrill of dread creep up her spine as Dumbledore shouldered his way through the crowd, hotly followed by Professors McGonagall and Snape, with the insufferable fool Lockheart in pursuit. Rosetta was propelled into action and followed in Lockheart's wake, dodging confused students who by now were completely silent. She jostled her way to near the front of the crowd and what she saw made her stomach churn.

The caretaker's old cat was hanging, stiff as a board, from one of the torch brackets by her tail. Her eyes were open wide and she looked as terrified as Rosetta had seen her the previous night. Daubed on the wall behind her in foot-high writing, shimmering in the light cast by the flaming torches, read:

*The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the heir... beware.*

The sobering sight of Mrs Norris, a defenceless animal, strung up in such a way made tears prick at Rosetta's eyes. Who could do such a thing? Was she dead? She couldn't tell if the animal was breathing or not, but it didn't look good.

Filch, understandably, was absolutely beside himself. He began shouting and hollering at Harry Potter and his friends, who were standing closest to the wall, blaming them for murdering his beloved pet and swearing revenge.

Swiftly, Dumbledore strode forwards and detached Mrs Norris from the torch bracket. He held her gently, shielding her from the view of the shocked pupils.

"Come with me, Argus," he said to Filch. "You too, Mr Potter, Mr Weasley, Miss Granger."

Lockhart stepped forward eagerly.

"My office is nearest, Headmaster – just upstairs – please feel free –"

"Thank you, Gilderoy," said Dumbledore.

The silent crowd parted to let them pass. Lockhart, looking excited and important, hurried after Dumbledore; so did Professors McGonagall and Snape.

Rosetta stood rooted to the spot as she watched them leave. She felt sick to her stomach. She had seen Mrs Norris last night. The cat had been with her when she'd heard the voice for a second time, and the cat had heard the voice too. And now the old cat had been attacked, presumed dead. It couldn't be a coincidence. The voice had been calling for flesh, and it appeared to have got what it wanted. Would she be next? Was she, Rosetta, the intended victim, and was Mrs Norris attacked to send a warning to her? And what of the message? What was the Chamber of Secrets and who was the heir the message referred to?

It was Professor Flitwick that took control of the situation as everyone stood around looking dazed and scared.

"Prefects, assemble your Houses. Gryffindors and Ravenclaws line up to the left please, Hufflepuffs and Slytherins to the right. You will be escorted back to your dormitories by a professor immediately."

He turned to the remaining professors.

"Rolanda, could you lead the Gryffindors and Septima, the Slytherins if you please. We'll all meet back at the Staff Room to await news from the Headmaster."

Pomona put a hand on Rosetta's shoulder and squeezed it gently before doing her Head of House duty and heading over to lead the Hufflepuffs. Rosetta watched the pupils file away in a low hum of hushed and frantic whispers. Then she and the few remaining professors made their way down the staircase in silence towards the Staff Room. Rosetta hoped the drinks cabinet was well-stocked with Firewhisky; after all that, she needed a drink.

## Chapter 13: Emergency Meeting

*Chapter 13 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 13: Emergency Meeting

The torches on the walls and the dim fire cast flickering shadows around the Staff Room, giving a gloomy air of foreboding. Dumbledore had arrived ten minutes later with Professors McGonagall, Snape and Lockheart in tow. The other teachers were standing around looking nervous, but none more so than Hagrid, who stood by the fire looking terrified. His beetle-black eyes looked to be wet with tears.

"The cat? Is she alright?" Hagrid burst out, before the old Headmaster had chance to address them.

"Mrs Norris is alive," the Headmaster confirmed.

At this, everyone in the room seemed to let out a collective breath they'd been unconsciously holding. Hagrid dabbed at his eyes with a big spotted handkerchief in relief with a mutter of, "Thank Merlin fer that."

"She has, in fact, been Petrified, but she can be cured with a potion made from one of Pomona's finest Mandrakes," Dumbledore continued "Severus will make the potion when they are ready for picking. But I'm afraid that might take some time."

"And the perpetrator? Do we know who did such a vile thing?" Madam Hooch demanded from a dark corner.

"It must have been a Slytherin pupil pulling a sick prank," Charity Burbage offered. "I heard Draco Malfoy crowing about Mudbloods before you arrived at the scene, Headmaster."



Snape folded his arms and drew himself up to his full height. His tone was icy. "There is absolutely no evidence for such outlandish claims against my House. Given your well-known dislike of Draco Malfoy, Professor Burbage, I'm afraid you may well be suffering from anti-pure-blood bias, which is rather unfortunate for a Muggle Studies teacher." His mouth curled into a sneer of contempt.

Charity flushed in anger at this. Dumbledore raised a hand in a truce-like gesture.

"If you please. Now is not the time to be throwing around careless insults. A Petrification such as this, far more advanced than a mere Body-Bind Curse, could only be caused by sophisticated dark magic. Clearly beyond the realms of any pupil."

A ripple of shocked murmurs spread through the group.

This time, it was Professor McGonagall's turn to speak.

"Headmaster, if you are saying what I think you're saying, then the school should be closed immediately."

There were some nods of assent from the assembled group.

Filius Flitwick, ever cool-headed and rational, answered. "We do not know for certain if the Chamber of Secrets has actually been opened, Minerva."

"But what if it has?" Charity Burbage spoke again. "We all know what happened fifty years ago... a Muggle-born was killed. We can't risk that happening a second time."

Rosetta took a sharp intake of breath at this. The Chamber of Secrets was apparently all too real, and so was the danger it presented. It was difficult and upsetting to believe a pupil had been killed right here at Hogwarts, and that the school held such a malign secret.

"I have to agree with Charity," Septima Vector offered. "If the responsible party is not a student, then there could be an unknown person or persons adept in dark magic running around the school at this very moment. Everybody could be at risk."

"I can assure you, there are no unknown persons in this school," Dumbledore said, taking great care to keep his tone even. "There are enough protective spells and enchantments surrounding this castle to render it impossible to allow any intruders. That said, Filius, would you be so kind to assist me in bolstering the charms after this meeting? We cannot be too careful."

Filius inclined his head graciously.

"No unknown persons," Pomona wondered aloud. "Are you implying it was an inside job, then? That, if it can't be a pupil, then it's a member of staff?"

*Sharp old bird*, thought Rosetta admiringly. The shocked murmurs travelled around the room once more.

"No, dear Pomona. I trust all of you beyond question. And I'm asking you now to trust me. Do you trust me?"

There were nods and firm utterances of assent at this.

Dumbledore folded his arms across his chest characteristically and he looked grave. "At this stage, there is a very real possibility that the Chamber of Secrets has been opened. And of course, the safety of both the students and teachers of this school is my highest priority. But I cannot close the school without absolute proof or consent from the governors. What happened tonight is despicable and should be taken very seriously. Please be assured that I will not rest until I find the culprit. But what I need from you now all is calm."

Dumbledore's piercing blue eyes travelled around the room, looking at each of his staff in turn.

"I want you all to be vigilant. You are teachers, yes, but you are also protectors of the school and it's students. I need your help and I need you to be my eyes and ears. I need you to tell me if you see or hear anything suspicious. Anything at all."

Rosetta shifted uncomfortably. Once more, she had a fleeting thought of telling Dumbledore about the voices and the happenings of the night before, but she stopped herself. This was not the right time, and she certainly didn't want the entire faculty to know her secrets. It would bring too much attention to her and Rosetta wanted to stay firmly under the radar.

"What I also need," Dumbledore continued, "is for you to stay strong. For each other and for the children. If the Chamber has been opened and we are indeed facing a common enemy, then we absolutely cannot allow our differences to get in the way. We need to be united, not cast suspicions on each other. We need to trust each other."

Rosetta's eyes unconsciously flicked to Snape and to her surprise he was staring at her, but his expression was typically neutral and unreadable. She held his gaze for a few moments and looked away.

"Now. I'd suggest you all get some rest. Filius, if I can ask for your assistance?"

Filius hurriedly followed Dumbledore out of the Staff Room and after a moment the other staff trickled out, some whispering to each other as they made their ways to their respective quarters.

Rosetta felt sadder than she had for a long time as she headed back to the West Wing as she mulled over the events of the evening. Dumbledore certainly had the trust of his staff, and in turn he trusted them completely. Trusting the Headmaster was one thing, but trusting each other was something else entirely. She still found it difficult to believe Dumbledore trusted Snape. If it had taken sophisticated dark magic to Petrify Mrs Norris then surely the obvious finger-pointing should be at Snape, as Pomona had tactfully implied. *One doesn't have to be likeable to have some good inside them, or to perform good deeds* Dumbledore had once told her. What good deeds could a former Death Eater possibly have done? Especially one who seemed to take such pleasure in being deliberately nasty.

But Dumbledore was right about one thing: she had to stay strong.

## Chapter 14: Another Attack

*Chapter 14 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 14: Another Attack

Students were understandably jumpy and afraid the day after the Hallowe'en Feast; some of the First-Years in particular were very upset by the attack on Mrs Norris but Dumbledore had reassured the entire school in a speech at breakfast that she would be fine after a revival potion had been made.

Rosetta had discussed the events of Hallowe'en with Pomona in hushed tones after Dumbledore's speech, who had filled her in on the legend Chamber of Secrets. She told Rosetta all about the four founders and their falling out with Salazar Slytherin over which students should be admitted to the school. Slytherin, furious at being snubbed, had apparently built a hidden chamber in the castle, of which the other founders knew nothing. According to the legend, he had sealed the Chamber of Secrets so that none would be able to open it until his own true heir arrived at the school. The heir alone would be able to unseal the Chamber of Secrets, unleash the horror within, and use it to purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic.

Rosetta found the tale to be both fascinating and disturbing, and she had many questions.

"Do you think there's any truth to the legend?" she'd asked Pomona after taking a bit of hot buttered toast.

"It's hard to say for sure," the older witch replied. "It's common knowledge that old Slytherin was a nasty piece of work with repugnant views on the treatment of Muggle-borns. But I don't know if it would be possible to keep a secret like that hidden away at Hogwarts for hundreds of years. Many have tried and failed to find the chamber over the years." She shrugged and took a big slurp of tea.

Rosetta thought about this for a moment. It did sound far-fetched and fantastical, but in her time at Gringotts she learned all about dark curses, some of which could stay dormant for thousands of years. The Ancient Egyptians in particular were adept at that very kind of curse. Perhaps a foul curse was the horror within the chamber? One that Petrified it's victims?

"What happened fifty years ago? Charity Burbage said a Muggle-born had been killed?"

"That's right, dear," Pomona said seriously. "A Ravenclaw girl. Terrible business."

Rosetta paused to take that in. A poor girl from her own House. Was there some kind of vendetta against Ravenclaws?

"How did she die?" The toast felt very dry in her mouth as she asked the awful question, but she needed to know.

Pomona set down her teacup with a little tinkle. "It was rumoured to be a spider, a great big Acromantula."

Well, that was a surprise to Rosetta. She felt sure the answer was a curse. Perhaps the horror within the chamber was a beast. But could an Acromantula survive for hundreds of years inside a secret chamber? If so, had the chamber actually been opened by the heir of Slytherin? And was there now a giant spider on the loose which could Petrify everyone in it's path?

"Do you really think Slytherin's heir is attending the school at this very moment?"

At this, Pomona scoffed. "Not a chance. If Slytherin's heir were here, I think they would do more than just Petrify a cat, don't you?"

Rosetta had to concede that this was probably true. Pomona went on to reiterate about having trust in Dumbledore and Rosetta decided to drop the subject thereafter, feeling the conversation had been closed. She had plenty to think about now she knew the legend of the Chamber of Secrets, and whilst Pomona clearly had decided there was nothing to worry about, Rosetta did not share that confidence.

Meanwhile, life at the school went on pretty much as normal over the week, and a subdued mood gradually gave way to the excitement of a pending Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin at the weekend.

Rosetta had felt a swell of joyful anticipation as she took to the stands amongst her fellow Ravenclaws on the muggy Saturday morning, the massive churning grey clouds seeming to threaten a thunderstorm at any moment. The Slytherin team's brooms were lightweight, fast, and clearly expensive, and they seemed to give Gryffindor the runaround for most of the match. Harry Potter took a hefty Bludger hit which almost took him off his broom but somehow managed to catch the Snitch and lead Gryffindor to victory, despite crashing into the mud from height and breaking his arm. She'd heard a rumour that the oaf Lockheart had de-boned Potter's arm in an attempt to repair the damage and Potter had been sent to the Hospital Wing overnight for the painful business of growing his arm bone back. That rather nasty incident did not seem to deter the jubilation of the Gryffindors, who's elated celebrations echoed around the castle all day.

However, the mood soon became sombre the next day when it was revealed that first-year Gryffindor Colin Creevey had been Petrified and was in the Hospital Wing awaiting the Mandrake Draught along with Mrs Norris. Dumbledore had again urged for calm and the following week, Rosetta had noticed pupils wearing all kinds of strange amulets and talismans. One Gryffindor boy known as Neville Longbottom really stood out as he took to clutching a large, foul-smelling green onion with him wherever he went. Others went for a more subtle, decorative approach with brooches and necklaces.

Thoughts of talismans led Rosetta back to thoughts of the Alphabet of the Magi again. The Alphabet was itself supposedly a form of protection, and with two attacks on pupils in such a short space of time, it seemed more important than ever that Rosetta carry on with her research of *Archidoxis magica*. A few Petrifications were nothing compared with what You-Know-Who was capable of, and her job was to help Dumbledore by trying to crack the code, no matter how distressing the events of the last few weeks had been.

## Chapter 15: A Parselmouth In Their Midst

*Chapter 15 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 15: A Parselmouth In Their Midst

Over the month of November, Rosetta tried many different and time-consuming approaches to codebreaking. First letter encryption did not throw up anything, and neither did first word encryption. She tried reading the first and last letters down the sides of the pages too, but that also drew a blank, as did looking for clues in continuous sets of words. In desperation, she tried last word and last letter encryption but that proved to be another dead end. Her desk was littered with discarded grids and tables from countless attempts at failed alphabetical ciphers.

As November drew to a close, Rosetta felt she had exhausted all the traditional avenues and it was time to try a more magical approach. She vowed to speak with Professor Vector regarding Arithmancy ciphers to open up another line of investigation, and had procured some obscure Charms books to look at too.

What with an ever-larger amount of homework to grade and increasing time spent on her research, Rosetta had little time for much else. Whilst the school was beginning to buzz in the upcoming excitement of Christmas and the weather turned colder and bitter outside, she yearned for sunnier climes and to feel the warmth of the sun on her skin again.

It was a particularly wild night in early December with a blizzard raging outside when Rosetta had been abruptly summoned to Dumbledore's office, presumably for a progress report. The storm whirled and battered the windows, the churning snow mirroring her anxiety and frustration about her lack of advancement. Even though Dumbledore knew the enormity of the task, she couldn't help feeling that the second attack had ramped up the pressure on her to find answers.

It came as a great surprise when Rosetta entered the Dumbledore's office and saw not only the Headmaster waiting for her but also the last person she had expected or wanted to see: Professor Snape.

"Ah, good evening, Rosetta. I apologise for the last-minute and late request for your company. Please, take a seat." Dumbledore gestured to a vacant chair beside Snape, who was watching her with his unreadable black eyes.

Rosetta paused for a second before taking her seat. She folded her arms involuntarily in what was clearly a defensive gesture. Thinking she must look like a petulant child, she tried to arrange her arms in a more natural manner, all the while trying to avoid eye contact with the stern Potions Master. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of appearing rattled by his presence.

"I called you here because I have just had word from Severus that earlier tonight he and the rest of the Duelling Club witnessed Harry Potter speaking in Parseltongue."

Rosetta's mouth fell open in shock. "Harry Potter? What on Earth?"

Dumbledore peered over his glasses. "Severus, if you would care to explain?"

Snape drew breath and began to speak in a bored voice. "Rather than using a Disarming Charm as instructed, Potter struck Draco Malfoy with a vicious Tickling Charm. In response, Draco conjured a snake. The serpent was perfectly harmless, of course, but rather than banish it, Potter began speaking to it."

Rosetta blinked. "What did he say to it?"

At this, Snape gave her a withering look. "As I am sure you're aware, I am no Parselmouth. However, the class seemed to think Potter had encouraged the snake towards a Second-Year Hufflepuff boy."

Rosetta looked back to Dumbledore, thinking fast. "We should speak to Potter right away. He could be the key. He could help us—" She stopped abruptly. Had she'd said too much, or given the game away?

Thankfully, Dumbledore stepped in. "Don't worry, Rosetta. Severus is aware of our broad exploration into understanding Parseltongue." He emphasised *broad* in such a way that it seemed to imply that the myth of the scrolls was not part of that awareness. "But I'm afraid, as tempting as it is, we will not be able to question Harry."

"Whyever not?" Rosetta couldn't believe what she was hearing. They had an actual speaker of an incredibly rare language right in their midst; they could potentially start working out basic lexicon and semantics by Christmas if they could just speak to Harry. And just what had Dumbledore been telling Snape? Weren't they supposed to be working together in secret on this?

Dumbledore paused, clearly wrestling with what to say next. "It appears Harry is being given a rather hard time over this incident. Some students were claiming he is the Heir of Slytherin and responsible for the attacks on students, which of course is utter nonsense." He exchanged what seemed to be a meaningful glance at Snape, before his eyes flicked back to Rosetta. "I believe we should not put the boy under any further duress at this time or bring more undue attention to him."

"But—"

"I'm sorry, Rosetta. Again, I'm asking you to trust me on this."

There it was again, that bloody word: trust. Dumbledore was expecting a lot of trust these days with seemingly nothing to show for it in return. It felt like he was leading her on a merry dance with codebreaking and puzzles, when the key to the riddle of the language was right under their noses. Rosetta's face must have looked like she'd lost a Galleon and found a Knut, but before she could say anything further, the Headmaster continued.

"I realise this is enormously frustrating, but we do have the next best thing to a Parselmouth on hand. We have someone who has witnessed the language being spoken by two different Parselmouths. And, luckily for us, they have agreed to help you in your research." He beamed proudly and opened his arms, like he was offering Rosetta a giant, sumptuous home-made cake.

Rosetta's eyes widened in disbelief and she felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. Surely, he couldn't possibly mean...

"Severus."

Snape gave Rosetta a wan smile, his black eyes glittering, and Rosetta's stomach flipped in fear. It took all of her self-control to keep her expression neutral and her voice steady.

"How wonderful," she answered, her sarcasm almost sounding sincere as she boldly looked back at Snape. "When do we start?"

## Chapter 16: A Cosy Chat

*Chapter 16 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 16: A Cosy Chat

Dumbledore had proposed that Rosetta and Snape meet up as soon as possible and it couldn't have been more timely, for the following evening there had been yet another

attack: this time, on Second-Year Hufflepuff Justin Finch-Fletchley and Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost. Both were led up to the Hospital Wing to reside with the other victims and the nervy mood which permeated the castle since Colin Creevey's attack had now gone into full-blown panic. There was almost a stampede by students to book themselves on to the Hogwarts Express for the Christmas holidays and to be honest, Rosetta couldn't blame them. She was desperate to get out of the castle herself, to get away from the biting cold and clear her mind for a bit. But unfortunately, that had to wait, as there was still work to be done.

She met with Snape on the Saturday before Christmas in Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore himself had suggested the meeting place, which was a relief to Rosetta as she thought it was "neutral territory" although Dumbledore had not appeared to have picked up on any of the awkward and uncomfortable vibes between the two of them and had left them a plate of mince pies and some glasses of port as if it was going to be a cosy chat. Rosetta thought it would probably be anything but as she steeled herself to ask the first question. She thought long and hard about phrasing it, knowing instinctively that mentioning You-Know-Who would probably be a massive faux pas and that Snape would probably not make this easy for her. She had to try and be cordial, and keep him on side.

She was also fully aware of the power dynamic at play, and knew that Snape usually appeared to be superior in any given situation. She decided to counter that by arriving at the Headmaster's office early and taking his usual seat behind the desk. That way, at least, it would give Rosetta some small semblance of being in control. This was her research, after all. She hoped she could take charge of the situation. Plus, having the desk as a barrier between the two of them provided her with a psychological security blanket. Even if she was feeling incredibly nervous, she had to hide her feelings.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," she began, confidently offering Snape a mince pie which he refused with a wave of his hand as he sat on the chair opposite her.

"I can assure you it was not my idea," he answered offhandedly.

She would have bet her last Galleon on that! She was sure Dumbledore had coerced Snape into speaking with her. Frankly, she was surprised Snape had agreed to it in the first place, but as she knew all too well, Dumbledore could be extremely persuasive.

"What can you tell me about your experience of Parseltongue?" she asked directly, keeping it broad and light as she took a bite out of one of the mince pies. The pastry was buttery and the filling sweet, with plump cinnamon-infused fruits. The House-Elves had done it again.

"I have witnessed it being spoken on many occasions," he replied carefully.

Rosetta noticed his tone was guarded, yet without malice. Perhaps the seating arrangement had performed a subconscious trick which had commanded more respect for her. Emboldened, she continued.

"And in all those times, did you ever hear a recurring sound or phrase, that you felt you could attach meaning to?"

Snape did not hesitate in his response.

"Yes."

Rosetta raised her eyebrows; this, she was not expecting.

"Can you tell me what that related to?"

Snape paused before answering. "There were times when the snake appeared to have been directly ordered to kill it's... prey. That sound I tend to associate with the word kill." He was careful to keep his voice even but something told Rosetta he wasn't talking about the staple snake diet of rats and mice. She tried to ignore the shiver of dread that crept down her spine.

"Is that sound something you feel you could emulate?"

At this, Snape gave her a withering look and his black eyes glimmered. "If you think I am about to start hissing at you, then I'm afraid you will be sorely disappointed."

Rosetta almost laughed at this suggestion, but managed to keep it together. Who knew the Potions Master could actually be funny? "That's not what I meant. Hypothetically speaking, would it be possible to emulate the sound? And do you think the snake would react to it in the same way?"

Snape leaned back in his chair and pondered on this, his gaze never leaving Rosetta's face.

"Yes, I think it would be possible to imitate the sound," he said slowly. "And I think the snake would in all likelihood react to it."

Rosetta smiled politely. "Thank you, Professor Snape. This has been truly useful. Do you have anything else you wish to tell me?"

Snape rose and a look seemed to pass across his face as if he was going to say more, but then the moment passed.

"No, that's all."

"OK, then. Goodnight."

Snape's face was once more an inscrutable mask.

"Goodnight."

Rosetta watched him stride across the office and through the door. She felt a wave of relief wash over her. That was short and sweet! Not only had Snape been perfectly cordial and non-threatening, he had actually provided her with some crucial information. He'd said he'd recognised a sound as having meaning – essentially, he'd recognised a word of Parseltongue, even if he was reluctant to demonstrate the sound himself. And he thought it would be possible to mimic that sound, hypothetically, by a non-speaker to have the same effect – which would imply the language could be learned and was not restricted to those born with the ability to speak it. All of which was massive food for thought.

Rosetta celebrated by sipping a glass of port, enjoying the sweet ruby liquid dancing on her tongue. The Snape she had just spoken to seemed like a far cry from the man who had been scowling and sniping at her for the whole of term. Yes, he had been clearly restrained and measured in his answers, and a little uptight too, but there had been a glimpse of something other than pure hatred underneath. She thought she detected a biting sarcastic humour, a flash of something... human. Maybe Dumbledore had ordered Snape to be on his best behaviour, and he had been simply obeying orders. Or maybe her deliberate power shift had effected a change in his behaviour, forcing some respect. Either way, she was glad the outcome had been fruitful and that he hadn't looked at her like something he'd scraped off his boot for once. Maybe Dumbledore was right and there was more to Snape than met the eye.

Idly, she downed the rest of the port and as she stood to leave she noticed that there appeared to be a piece of mistletoe hanging from the door frame. She examined it in disbelief as she left the office. What on Earth was Dumbledore thinking? As if she'd be interested in kissing the Potions Master. What a ridiculous notion! But she couldn't stop the hot flush that crept over her cheeks as she closed the door and made her way down the steep spiral staircase.

# Chapter 17: Festive Thoughts

Chapter 17 of 38

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 17: Festive Thoughts

Term finally ended the following Monday and Rosetta could not wait to take a Portkey back to the Aegean Islands for some much-needed sunshine. Even though the temperature rarely rose above eighteen degrees throughout December, compared to the freezing conditions of the Scottish winter it felt positively tropical. A few days of warming herself on a secluded beach and swimming in the clear seas was like manna to her soul, and the fresh fruit and salad-heavy diet was a blessed relief from the rich Hogwarts food she'd been consuming all term.

Christmas Day itself was a low-key affair, with Rosetta spending much of it travelling to see far-flung friends and relatives to exchange presents and staying to chat only very briefly. In truth, Rosetta wasn't a huge fan of Christmas and as much as it was nice to say hello to some old faces, she was reluctant to get into deep conversations and answer the same old questions about her life. She didn't want people finding out about her teaching post at Hogwarts either. As far as she was concerned, she'd made the effort to give gifts and say hello, and she would catch up with everyone properly in the summertime when her teaching position had come to an end.

The lazy sunny days and fresh sea air had given Rosetta the clarity of mind to once again approach the conundrum of the *Archidoxis magica*. She'd bought a Revealer from Hogsmeade, a bright rubbery red lozenge that looked like a Muggle eraser, which was known to reveal invisible inks. But the device did not seem to work on any of the pages or the front and back covers. She tried both the *Aparecium* and *Revelio* spells but again, they were entirely ineffective. The obscure Charms book she'd obtained before Christmas drew another blank, as did the Arithmancy ciphers Professor Vector helpfully prepared for her. In desperation, she even tried *Alohomora*, but predictably that didn't work either. Perhaps she'd been on a fool's errand after all; perhaps there was nothing in the book to be found. But there was something nagging at Rosetta, a small voice in her head saying that she had missed something obvious. It was a feeling she couldn't shake when she returned to Hogwarts for the start of term in early January.

She'd been thinking over the information that Snape had revealed about Parseltongue and what that could mean for learning the language during her first week back at school. After having had time to reflect, she found she had yet more questions to ask of him. These were questions she probably should have asked him whilst she had the chance, but she had been too excited at the implications of language acquisition not necessarily being innate. She knew there was a chance that Snape might revert to type if she approached him again, but she also knew that Dumbledore had probably impressed upon him the importance of helping her with her research. It felt unwieldy and bureaucratic to ask Dumbledore for permission to have a quick conversation with a fellow teacher and have the Headmaster arrange it like some kind of chaperone, regardless of the benefits of meeting in the neutral space of his office. Besides, what she needed to ask of Snape was just an extension of their previous conversation. It wouldn't take long at all. Convincing herself it was no big thing, she decided to seek out the Potion Master herself on the first Saturday of term after dinner.

Rosetta knew Snape's quarters were in the dungeons and although her own classroom was based there and she'd walked the corridors many times before, it was a different story visiting the Head of Slytherin in his own domain. Her stomach felt tight and the old anxiety returned as she approached the door. What was she thinking? He might hex her into the middle of next week for disturbing his privacy. Did she really think they were suddenly friends because he'd not treated her like mud for once and had merely obeyed Dumbledore's orders? He was still an ex-Death Eater, still likely to be a very dangerous man at heart. He'd performed Legilimency on her without consent and probably knew more Dark spells than Herpo the Foul. And here she was, walking straight into the viper's nest.

She bit her lip, her fist clenched and poised inches away from the dark wood *If he doesn't answer within ten seconds, I'll run away*, she thought. Then she closed her eyes shut and rapped curtly three times.

She got to counting eight seconds before the door swung open halfway with a click. She wasn't sure who looked more surprised; him or her.

It took Rosetta a beat to clear her throat and speak. It was a bit of a shock to see Snape in something other than his teaching robes or his immaculately tailored black frock coat, for he had taken the latter off and was dressed in the high-collared white shirt that he habitually wore underneath. With the top button undone he looked uncharacteristically casual.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I have a few more questions to ask of you for my research. It won't take long, I promise. Can I come in?"

Snape's look of surprise gave way to something more akin to confusion and finally settled into his usual glare as he weighed up the question. Rosetta stood awkwardly in the growing silence looking up at him, not sure if he was going to yell at her, slam the door or jinx her into oblivion. A few long seconds later he wordlessly threw open the door wide and inclined his head for her to come through. She ducked underneath his arm, unable to believe she was now in Snape's own personal chambers.

As he closed the door she took a quick look around. The room was not exactly big or lavish, but it was as neat as a pin: from the pristinely-made dark wooden bed to the polished boots lined up by the side of the looming Victorian wardrobe, nothing was out of place. Snape ushered her to a high-backed chair near the window and as she sat down she noticed a few cards standing on the bedside table, one that stood out was in ornate green and silver.

"Is it your birthday today?"

Snape ignored this question and perched on the edge of his bed.

"What did you want to ask me, Professor Stone?"

His tone wasn't sharp but it did sound weary. Rosetta immediately felt guilty for invading his personal space, and on his birthday too. She wondered briefly if he was embarrassed at being found hiding away in his quarters on his birthday. She had done the same thing on her birthday when she had been sick, so it looked like that was one thing they had in common at least.

"I've been thinking a lot about our last conversation, about hypothetical mimicry. I don't suppose you've ever tried to mimic Parseltongue, or know anyone who has?" Now the question had come out of her mouth, it sounded ridiculous. It had made more sense in her head.

Snape arched an eyebrow. "I'm not in the habit of playing at snakes like a five-year-old."

Rosetta let this response wash off her. "You know that's not what I meant. Have you ever tried to mimic a sound from Parseltongue that you recognised? Or do you know of anyone else who wasn't a Parselmouth that has tried to imitate Parseltongue?"

Snape sighed. "No, I've never tried to speak Parseltongue. And no, I've not witnessed any non-speaker foolish enough to try and speak it either. Is that all you wanted?"

Usually, this kind of response from him would make Rosetta angry, but there wasn't a hint of Snape's typical waspishness in his answer. He just sounded very, very tired.

Rosetta shifted in her seat. "There is one other thing. What are your thoughts on Harry Potter being a Parselmouth?"

Snape's scowl deepened and his lip pulled into a sneer at the mention of the name.

"Harry Potter is, at best, an average student with deluded notions of grandeur. Being able to speak to snakes does not change that."

Rosetta supposed his dismissive response would be typical of a student in the rival House of Gryffindor. But she pushed further.

"Do you think he learned the language somehow, or do you think he was born with the ability to speak it?"

Snape looked at her thoughtfully, and it took him a long time to reply as if he was choosing his words very carefully.

"I think you should heed the Headmaster's advice when it comes to Harry Potter."

Rosetta could not help but feel disappointed. She remembered all too well what Dumbledore had told her: essentially, that Harry Potter was off-limits for her research into Parseltongue. And now Snape had echoed that same sentiment. This automatically made Rosetta think there was something more about Harry Potter that she wasn't being told, which felt a little suspicious. But more than that, she realised that Snape was being completely loyal to Dumbledore by not giving away any information and by backing him up. Perhaps Dumbledore was right to trust Snape after all. Perhaps he had changed.

"I understand. Thanks for your time, Professor Snape."

Rosetta stood and Snape followed suit, crossing the room to open the door and let her out. She paused at the door and withdrew her wand. With a few flicks and swirls, she conjured a simple birthday card, which she handed to Snape. The pattern on the front was identical to the green brocade pouch in which he'd sent the Flu potion on her birthday.

"Happy birthday," she said quietly, looking up into his eyes and softly touching the top of his arm with a small smile.

Snape's gaze darted from her soulful brown eyes, to the card, and on to the warm hand gently resting on him. He looked lost for words as she turned to leave.

"Goodnight, Professor Stone," Snape whispered softly as he closed the door behind her.

## Chapter 18: A Funny Valentine

*Chapter 18 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 18: A Funny Valentine

The visit to Snape's quarters had given Rosetta much to think about over the following weeks. It felt as though she and Snape were no longer enemies, as something had definitely shifted between them and she found she felt less suspicious of him. His loyalty to Dumbledore was, in her opinion, beyond doubt and that had changed her general attitude towards him. Likewise, although they had spoken only a few times since her birthday visitation, the few interactions they'd had were without malice and she had noticed his perennial scowling at her across the dinner table had abated too. They even began nodding to each other curtly and formally as a form of acknowledgement when they passed in the corridors, something which seemed impossible to Rosetta only a few months previously.

The question of Harry Potter kept looming large in Rosetta's thoughts. Dumbledore had told her at the start of the year that the rumours about You-Know-Who's return and his attack on Harry Potter last year had been true. She could see why Dumbledore would want to protect the boy from yet more scrutiny given that being a Parselmouth gave him a disturbing link to the self-titled Dark Lord. But Rosetta couldn't help feeling there was more to the story that she wasn't being told. Was the real intended victim of the attacks actually Harry Potter himself? And how did he become a Parselmouth? Was it innate or did he learn? And if he learned it, then how? Did he have a teacher? It was almost maddening not to be able to ask those burning questions, but like Snape and the other professors she had to once again trust Dumbledore on this and continue her research with a different approach.

The dark month of January eventually gave way to the pale, weak sunshine of February and with the light came a more hopeful feeling across the castle. There had been no further attacks and so it seemed everyone had started to relax a bit more. Pomona had told Rosetta that the Mandrakes were becoming petulant and moody, and would soon need repotting. That meant they were nearly ready to be prepared for the revivication potion, and all the victims would soon be awake.

The optimistic feeling appeared to have reached its peak at breakfast on Valentine's Day, with a display of awkward but probably well-meaning romanticism concocted by Gilderoy Lockheart which seemed to make the entire school cringe. The walls of the Great Hall were bedecked in huge, bright pink flowers and heart-shaped confetti had been charmed to fall gently from the blue sky above. Lockheart himself was dressed rather brazenly in lurid pink robes which matched the décor precisely. He waved for silence as the teachers either side of him sat, stony-faced and unimpressed. Professor McGonagall looked as though she'd chewed something unpleasant, whilst Snape's habitual glower was, if possible, even blacker than ever. Rosetta felt if her toes curled back in her boots any further, they'd snap.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" Lockheart shouted. "And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all – and it doesn't end here!"

Lockheart clapped his hands and through the doors marched a dozen surly-looking dwarfs wearing golden wings and carrying harps.

"My friendly, card-carrying Cupids!" Lockheart was beaming. "They will be roving around the school today delivering your Valentines! And the fun doesn't stop here! I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion!"

Rosetta chanced a glance at a furious-looking Snape, who seemed to be resolutely avoiding eye contact with her. She had to bite her lip to stop a burst of laughter coming out at the utter inappropriateness of the situation.

"And while you're at it, Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I've ever met, the sly old dog!"

Professor Flitwick buried his head in his hands and Rosetta winced. She could not help but feel embarrassed for her former Head of House, who'd surely done nothing to warrant that level of humiliation.

"And if that's not enough, why not get Professor Stone to teach you how to say 'I love you' in Gobbledegook or Mermish?"

Rosetta froze and her eyes widened as the attention of hundreds of bewildered people shifted to her. She would have given all the Galleons in Gringotts for the ground to swallow her up in that moment. Her eyes flicked involuntarily back to Snape and she detected a glimmer of dark amusement as his gaze finally met hers. He was probably feeling sadistically gleeful that she was now squirming awkwardly too, judging by the little smirk at her displeasure. She felt the heat rising in her cheeks but her

mortification was short-lived as Lockheart's speech reached it's nauseating conclusion, after which the students couldn't seem to depart the Great Hall fast enough.

Rosetta walked around the back of the teacher's table to leave, still feeling slightly in disbelief at Lockheart's little stunt, and found Snape was at her side as she made her way down the stairs.

"I had no idea Love Potions were allowed on the curriculum," she ventured innocently.

"I had no idea Gobbledegook was such a romantic language," he countered drily.

She sniggered. It looked as if the surly Potions Master had a sense of humour after all. Gobbledegook was well known to be a harsh, rasping language, which made it sound distinctly inhuman. The tone was as romantic as fingernails scraping a blackboard.

Rosetta watched Snape's back as he strode on ahead, his black teaching robes billowing impressively as he walked. Underneath that buttoned-up, sour exterior lay an acerbic wit, she was sure. She'd seen a few glimpses of it now. A sudden thought flashed unbidden through her mind, of wondering what else he kept under his robes, and once again Rosetta flushed as she checked herself. What on Earth was she thinking? She must be losing the plot. But she couldn't help remembering how different he looked in the crisp, white shirt when she visited him on his birthday, and how the scent of his chambers invoked sandalwood, smoke and the promise of hidden depths rarely seen.

## Chapter 19: Spring Things

*Chapter 19 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 19: Spring Things

Rosetta's unexpected swell of ardour made her feel most unsettled for the rest of the day. It didn't help matters that Lockheart's dwarfs kept bursting into her classroom at inopportune moments to deliver cards or recite woefully pathetic poems to their giddy recipients. It disrupted the whole class each time it happened and put her off her train of thought. Additionally, there was a small part of Rosetta hoped that she would be the intended receiver, even though she knew it was completely weak and foolish to admit that to herself.

In truth, Rosetta had been single for a long time. She was used to fending for herself and having to be strong and self-sufficient, so much so that she'd built up a kind of invisible barrier around her to prevent any men from getting too close. Her last relationship had ended pretty badly and since then she'd been somewhat of a closed book. But that didn't mean she didn't still get lonely from time to time, or crave the touch of another's hand.

Rosetta thought she was clearly desperate if she was starting to get the hots for a former Death Eater though. Sure, she used to have a thing about bad boys when she was younger, but there was a difference between bad boy and a follower of an insane megalomaniac Dark Lord with repugnant views on the treatment of Muggles. Snape was hardly what you could call a looker either, although there was a certain way in which he carried himself which was quite formidable. When he stopped scowling and showed flashes of his biting wit there was more than a hint of allure underneath that buttoned-up, prudish exterior. He was clearly highly intelligent too, and as a Ravenclaw that certainly appealed to her. Only none of that changed the fact he was snarky, ill-tempered and potentially dangerous to boot.

Whilst Rosetta was trying to keep her libidinous feelings in check, her brief daily encounters with Snape were starting to feel more relaxed and they seemed to have a shared mutual understanding of respect and humour. As on Valentine's Day, they often traded sly, private witticisms whilst leaving the Great Hall after breakfast, as passing commentary on the daily updates and notices from either Dumbledore or McGonagall. Rosetta felt herself looking forward to these little morsels of contact, of spending the whole of the meal thinking of just the right one-liner to trade afterwards. Snape was not one to laugh but she knew she'd hit the mark if his eyes glimmered or there was a curl of a smirk at the corner of his mouth. In turn, his sometimes outrageously barbed comments frequently made her burst into shocked laughter which she would often have to suppress in order to not draw attention to the pair of them.

Despite the somewhat fragile and restricted developing friendship between them, Rosetta was resolute that she wouldn't let any burgeoning attraction get in the way of her real purpose of being at Hogwarts, which was cracking the conundrum of Parseltongue. It was fair to say she was beginning to run out of ideas on that front however. She felt as if she'd tried every magical and non-magical way of codebreaking and yet the *Archidoxis magica* did not seem to want to reveal any hidden secrets. Once again, she started to doubt if there were any secrets actually there to reveal. But as February gave way to March, she still couldn't shake the feeling that she'd overlooked something vitally obvious.

It was now nearly four months since Justin and Nearly Headless Nick had been Petrified, and nearly everyone seemed to think the attacker, whoever it was, had retired for good. Rosetta hadn't forgotten about the disembodied voice she'd heard, but as the weeks went on it became increasingly easy to explain it away on being stressed or overtired.

One day in the middle of March, several of the Mandrakes threw a loud and raucous party in Greenhouse Three. This made Pomona very happy.

"The moment they start trying to move into each other's pots, we'll know they're fully mature," she'd told Rosetta. "Then we'll be able to revive those poor people in the hospital wing."

The joy of Spring seemed to spread across the castle and the lighter evenings certainly seemed to put more of a spring in everyone's step. The Easter holidays meant another week in Greece for Rosetta and although she once again relished the chance to top up her Vitamin D along with consuming the most wonderful seafood, she found herself missing her daily interactions with the sharp-tongued Head of Slytherin.

*Pathetic*, she thought to herself as she nibbled at a honey-soaked Koulouri. But she couldn't help but wonder if the brooding Potions Master was missing her, too.

# Chapter 20: Too Little, Too Late

Chapter 20 of 38

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 20: Too Little, Too Late

Rosetta returned from Greece feeling anxious. The last thing she needed was an unrequited love like some silly schoolgirl, yet Snape was taking up more and more of her headspace. What if he'd grown tired of their little daily interactions? And what if her cool exterior slipped and he noticed her feelings for him had started to change? He'd probably crush her as easily as a Scarab Beetle. Of all the men to start to develop feelings for, Snape was possibly both the most inappropriate and least likely to reciprocate.

It turned out that Rosetta had no need to worry, as she and Snape fell in to their usual post-breakfast banter easily in the weeks after the Easter break and nothing in his demeanour suggested anything had changed. *I need to keep it together*, Rosetta thought as she made her way out of the Great Hall one sunny and breezy Saturday morning towards the Quidditch pitch to watch Gryffindor play Hufflepuff. She could count the number of weeks she had left at Hogwarts on two hands and she had a lot of work to do between now and then. She had to stop being distracted from the job in hand, of cracking the mystery of Parseltongue. But that was proving to be more and more difficult as the days wore on.

Rosetta took her place in the stalls next to Pomona in the Hufflepuff end of the pitch. They were surrounded by a loud and excitable crowd and Pomona herself was wearing her brightest canary yellow robes in support of her House.

"The Hufflepuff team have been working hard all season. I think we have a fair chance, even with Harry Potter playing for Gryffindor," Pomona told Rosetta whilst the teams walked on to the pitch to temultuous applause.

Madam Hooch had only just released the balls when Professor McGonagall came half-marching, half-running across the pitch, carrying an enormous purple megaphone.

"This match has been cancelled," she called through the megaphone, addressing the packed stadium. There were many boos and shouts, with members of the crowd looking at each other incredulously with confusion.

"All students are to make their way back to the house common rooms, where their Heads of Houses will give them further information. As quickly as you can, please!"

Pomona shrugged her shoulders sadly and gave Rosetta a, *I have no idea what's going on* look before rallying her disappointed Hufflepuffs back to their common room.

Rosetta followed the masses back inside the castle, with many students grumbling about the match cancellation whilst others looked extremely worried. A knot had started to form in her stomach. Something bad had to have happened for Quidditch to be cancelled. As if on autopilot, Rosetta climbed the stairs towards the Staff Room, as she had done on the night of Hallowe'en. The murmur of the crowd grew less with every stair she climbed and she was just about to round the corner into the corridor which lead to Staff Room when she heard a voice which made her stomach sink like a stone.

*"Kill this time... Let me rip... tear..."*

Rosetta felt fear wash over her as if she'd been doused in water and before she knew what was happening she had sprinted to the Staff Room and closed the door behind her with a slam. Thankfully, she was the first person inside, so there was no-one there to see her trembling in shock. She now knew without a shadow of a doubt without being told that there had been another attack, and that the voice and the attacks were inextricably linked. She took in a few deep breaths and gripped the back of an old leather armchair for support.

A minute later, more teachers began to enter the room looking tense and shortly after that, the Heads of Houses joined them. The Headmaster, Rosetta noted, was curiously absent. Professor McGonagall wasted no time in getting to the point.

"I am saddened to tell you that there had been another attack, another double attack, on two of our students. Ravenclaw Penelope Clearwater, and a student from my own House, Hermione Granger."

Rosetta had never seen the older witch looking so distraught as the assembled teachers gasped with shock and clamoured for answers. She chanced a glance at Snape, and even the stony-faced Potions Master looked tired and resigned.

"The latest victims have been Petrified and are residing in the Hospital Wing with the other victims. And until the culprit of these vile attacks is found, we will be taking emergency measures to ensure the safety of our students. Effective immediately, all students will return to their house common rooms by six o'clock in the evening. No student is to leave the dormitories after that time. Students will be escorted to each lesson by a teacher. No student is to use the bathroom unaccompanied by a teacher. All further Quidditch training and matches are to be postponed. There will be no more evening activities. And teachers will be required to patrol the corridors of the schools every evening in pairs."

The teachers listened in silence as the Deputy Headmistress continued in somewhat of a choked voice, "I need hardly add that I have rarely been so distressed. It is likely that the school will be closed unless the culprit behind these attacks is caught. I would urge anyone who thinks they might know anything about them to come forward."

Rosetta felt a pang of guilt at this. Maybe if she had mentioned the voices she had been hearing last year, they would have caught the culprit and all of this could have been avoided. She made up her mind that enough was enough, and she needed to speak to Dumbledore. But where was he? Just as she had formed the thought, Professor Vector had taken those words right out of her mouth.

"The Headmaster is currently reporting to the Minister of Magic and therefore I am responsible as Deputy Headmistress until he returns to Hogwarts this evening," McGonagall answered. "I know you will all be feeling as shocked and upset as I am. But if there is one small glimmer of hope in all of this, it is that the Mandrakes will be ready for cutting in a few weeks and the poor victims will not have to suffer any longer."

Rosetta hurried up to her quarters after the staff meeting feeling incredibly troubled. If the Minister of Magic was now involved, then the outlook did not look good. If Dumbledore himself, one of the most formidable wizards in the United Kingdom, hadn't been able to protect the students from an unknown assailant, then what hope did the Ministry have? Would they punish Dumbledore or, like McGonagall had feared, close the school? Would they put it under the control of the Ministry?

Rosetta couldn't help feeling partly responsible for all this. She should have spoken to Dumbledore sooner, she should have trusted her instincts about the disembodied voice. The voice, it was now clear, had to be directly linked to the attacks. But how? And why was she seemingly the only person who could hear it? She was sure that



Dumbledore would have theories about this but, frustratingly, she would have to wait until the evening until she could speak to him.

With a sigh, Rosetta picked up the *Archidoxis magica* and thumbed through it idly to pass the time before Dumbledore's return, willing it for what seemed to be the millionth time to reveal its well-hidden and mysterious secrets.

## Chapter 21: A Stroll In The Moonlight

*Chapter 21 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 21: A Stroll In The Moonlight

Dinner in the Great Hall that evening was a rather sombre affair, with the Headmaster still conspicuous by his absence. Afterwards, the students were escorted by their Heads of Houses back to the common rooms by six o'clock as McGonagall had instructed, and then the teachers met once more to be given a rota for their evening patrols. It came as a great surprise to Rosetta to find that she'd been paired with Snape. Was it coincidence, or had McGonagall begun to notice their brief breakfast banter? Either way, Rosetta felt doubly nervous as she made her way to meet the Potions Master to scout out the ground floor corridors. She was still feeling rather shaken after hearing the voice earlier and was afraid she might hear it again. Rumours had resurfaced throughout the day about the Chamber of Secrets and the Heir of Slytherin, and Rosetta couldn't help but mull over what it might all mean. She thought back to her conversation in October with Pomona about an Acromantula being suspected of the attack fifty years ago. Surely, it couldn't be the same beast? Surely, they would have got rid of it the first time round?

She was also still racked with guilt for her inaction over hearing the voices in the first place, which may well have allowed further attacks to happen. Plus, as much as she'd been hoping for a chance to converse with Snape beyond their morning interactions, this couldn't have been worse timing. She needed to find Dumbledore at the earliest opportunity.

Snape was waiting for Rosetta at the bottom of the main staircase. He cut an imposing figure, dressed head-to-foot in black and flanked by two flaming torches which cast shimmering shadows on the walls. The pale moon shone through the high leaded windows and gave his pale features an almost otherworldly look. The knot in Rosetta's stomach twisted even more as she drank in the sight of him. Yes, it looked like her crush was in full effect, and now she had to go for a little stroll in the moonlight with the object of her affections. Was fate trying to tell her something?

"Good evening, Professor Stone," Snape greeted her politely in a low voice as he caught sight of her approach. As ever, his face was unreadable.

"Good evening," she answered quietly. "And please, call me Rosetta."

Snape inclined his head at this, but made no invitation in kind of his own.

"Shall we begin clockwise? Then we can double-back on ourselves."

"Fine with me."

They fell in step together, the sounds of their boots clicking softly along the corridor. All the while Rosetta's pulse was racing and she felt like she was one big bag of nerves. She was acutely aware of the figure next to her; his height and also his smell. A light smoky sandalwood aroma, that was unmistakably masculine and unmistakably *him*. Their proximity seemed to provoke a flight or fight response in her, and she didn't know if she wanted to fling herself at him or run away. As if to make matters worse, every shadow seemed to make her jump as she found herself straining to listen out for the mysterious voice.

Her edginess did not go unnoticed.

"Is there something the matter, Rosetta?"

The sound of her name on his tongue was unfamiliar and delicious; his rich baritone made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. But where to start answering that question? She had been hearing voices like a crazy person, she probably could have prevented more attacks on innocent people by confiding in Dumbledore months ago and she now had the hots for the Head of Slytherin. Neither of which she wanted to admit to anyone, let alone him. And now she was a jittering wreck, and looked weak and foolish in front of the very person who seemed to despise those traits.

"I'm sorry for being jumpy," she sighed, turning to face him. "It's just these recent attacks have really shaken me up. I thought they were pranks that had gone too far at first, but now I don't know what to think." She looked into his eyes. "What do you think?"

Snape considered this for a moment. "I have concerns for the future of the school if the culprit is not found soon."

"Do you have any ideas who the culprit may be?"

Now it was Snape's turn to sigh. "I know Dumbledore has a theory, but as to what that may be I have absolutely no idea."

Rosetta's interest was peaked. Now, she had even more reason to find Dumbledore once her patrol duty was over.

Snape's attention was caught by a shadow flickering across one of the old suits of armour that lined the corridor. He swiftly lit his wand by casting *Lumos* and used the tip of it to flick up the helmet visor and in doing so, released a puff of dust which made him sneeze.

"Bless you. But what about the whole Chamber of Secrets stuff? Do you think there's any truth to it? Could the culprit be the so-called Beast of Slytherin, the same giant spider that was thought to have killed that poor girl fifty years ago?" Rosetta knew she was treading on thin ice by asking this, because judging by Snape's reaction at Hallowe'en it was clear that he saw the Heir of Slytherin rumours as nothing more than a smear campaign against his House. Say what you wanted about the man but he was loyal as any Hufflepuff when it came to defending the House of Slytherin.

"Aspersions on my House aside, it seems highly unlikely that any beast could lie hidden and dormant in this castle for hundreds of years, let alone a giant spider. In any case, I would have thought the Beast of Slytherin would have been some kind of snake, wouldn't you? The unfortunate death of a pupil all those years ago to my mind was nothing more than a tragic instance of being in the wrong place at the wrong time..."

Snape had continued walking as he spoke, but Rosetta was now standing still on the spot as if fixed there by a Freezing Charm. Her eyes were wide open as the

realisation began to dawn on her. *Some kind of snake.* Of course, it was so obvious! If Slytherin's Heir had a beast, it would of course be a snake, the symbol of Slytherin House. A snake that could be commanded with Parseltongue! At this, another thought struck her which sent chills down her spine. Perhaps the voice she'd been hearing was someone or something speaking Parseltongue. Perhaps she, Rosetta, was a Parselmouth too?

"Rosetta?" Snape had noticed Rosetta had fallen behind and had stopped a few paces ahead.

"I'm sorry, Severus, I have to go."

And with that, Rosetta sprinted towards the Headmaster's office, leaving Snape looking confused and with the slightest hint of disappointment.

## Chapter 22: Dark Times Ahead

*Chapter 22 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 22: Dark Times Ahead

Rosetta's feet pounded on corridors and her thoughts buzzed with every step. She had so much to discuss with Dumbledore. Severus had said that the Headmaster had his own theory about the Chamber of Secrets. Did that mean he already knew about the snake? And how long had he known? Was that why he'd recruited Rosetta in the first place, to learn Parseltongue in order to speak to the Beast of Slytherin? What would he make of her hearing voices? Would he agree that, all along, it looked as if Rosetta herself was actually a Parselmouth? And what of the Heir of Slytherin? Did Dumbledore know their identity, too?

Rosetta breathlessly muttered the password to the stone gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office which, seemingly sensing her haste, quickly leapt aside as she clattered her way up the moving, steep spiral staircase. She had just reached the top step when she almost collided with the figure of Professor McGonagall, who had just stepped out of the door of the Headmaster's office and was looking sadder than she'd ever seen her. She was very pale and it looked as if her cheeks were freshly damp with tears.

"Professor McGonagall," Rosetta panted, out of breath from her exertion. "I need to see the Headmaster—"

Professor McGonagall dabbed at her eyes quickly with a lacy tartan handkerchief before replying. "I'm very sorry, Rosetta, but the Headmaster is not here. The school governors have signed an Order of Suspension, effective immediately, due to a vote of no confidence. And as for Hagrid—" The older witches' voice faltered and the hand holding the hanky balled into a fist at her mouth. It looked as if it was taking all her control not to burst into tears once more.

It took Rosetta a second to process this. *Dumbledore gone?* It didn't seem possible. And what did the grizzly groundskeeper have to do with it?

"How?" Rosetta was all Rosetta could say in response, feeling as if she'd been winded.

McGonagall pursed her lips disapprovingly and a steely look flashed in her eyes. It appeared her sorrow was slowly turning into anger. "I would bet my last Galleon that Lucius Malfoy had something to do with this. Lucius is on the board of governors and his mistrust of Albus Dumbledore is well-known. I wouldn't have put it past him to turn the other governors against the Headmaster."

Lucius Malfoy? Draco Malfoy's father, Rosetta presumed. Draco had always come across as an entitled little shit, bragging about his father's wealth at any opportunity and echoing similar sentiments about the Headmaster when he thought no-one in authority was listening. It looked like the mouldy apple didn't fall too far from that particularly rotten tree.

But with recent events, Rosetta supposed it wouldn't have been too hard to form a smear campaign against the Headmaster when it appeared as if he had sat by and merely let the attacks happen. It was so frustrating as Rosetta felt they were on the edge of making a breakthrough, about both Parseltongue and the attacks. She needed to contact him.

"Where's Dumbledore gone?"

"Back to his house in Godric's Hollow, where he usually spends the summer, I presume," McGonagall shrugged.

"So what happens now?"

"I will make an announcement at breakfast tomorrow morning," McGonagall sighed heavily and shook her head, appearing to summon her resolve. "Now, what was it you were in such a rush to see the Headmaster about? Can I be of any help?"

There was a short pause as Rosetta considered her options. She trusted McGonagall, without a doubt, but the Deputy Headmistress had more than enough on her plate at the moment and Rosetta wasn't sure what, if anything, Dumbledore had told her about the work they had been doing on Parseltongue. She decided to bluff.

"I'm sorry, Professor, it's going to seem very trivial after all this. I wanted to report a disturbance after curfew, but I suppose it can wait until tomorrow."

The older witch inclined her head. "A disturbance? Nothing serious?"

"Well, more of a party in one of the common rooms, to be honest with you," Rosetta lied easily.

McGonagall smiled ruefully. "After the dreadful events of today, we should let the children have their fun. I feel a rather pressing urge for a dram of Firewhisky myself."

The older witch urged Rosetta to get some sleep and bade her goodnight. As Rosetta

followed her down the stone staircase her mind once again started to hum with questions. Why would Lucius Malfoy have such a grudge against Dumbledore? What did Hagrid have to do with anything? And just why did Godric's Hollow sound so familiar?

One thing was for sure, despite McGonagall's insistence that she get some rest, with all the unanswered questions racing around her brain it looked as if Rosetta wouldn't be getting much sleep that night.

# Chapter 23: An Interview with a Snake

*Chapter 23 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 23: An Interview With A Snake

Rosetta's head felt thick and full of cotton wool the following morning after a restless night full of anxious thoughts. She'd barely slept, tossing and turning and replaying the events of the previous night over and over, with her mind full of unanswered questions. She attended a very hushed and subdued breakfast, where McGonagall announced Dumbledore and Hagrid's departure from the school. Everyone looked utterly crushed, and even Snape's usual scowl had been replaced with what looked to be weary regret.

There was no post-breakfast banter this time. As Snape met Rosetta on the stairs leading down from the teacher's table she gave him a sad smile and in return, although his expression was typically neutral, she could see a glimpse of sorrow in his eyes as he politely gestured for her to descend the stairs in front of him in silence.

After the doleful breakfast, Rosetta had managed to pull her jumbled thoughts from the previous night into some kind of order, and she decided that her first priority was how to prove if she was a Parselmouth or not. She considered using Serpensortia to conjure a snake, which had seemed to have worked for Harry Potter during the Duelling Club as he had apparently spoken to the snake, but this didn't feel good enough somehow. Rosetta wanted to be in front of a living, breathing, non-magical snake. The only problem being, there weren't many wild snakes in the Scottish Highlands. Rosetta could have gone abroad to sunnier climes to hunt down a serpent, but she was not a snake expert: it could have been dangerous to approach the first snake she saw in the wild as there were hundreds of poisonous species out there. And besides, Rosetta wanted answers quickly; she didn't have time to find any in their natural habitat, so she had to think again.

Rosetta decided a trip to the local Muggle zoo would be the quickest and safest option. She donned her least wizarding clothes and left Hogwarts mid-morning, Apparating from Hogsmeade to a secluded part of Murrayfield Golf Club and made her way on foot to Edinburgh Zoo. The whole trip took less than an hour but she spent the last leg of the journey feeling slightly furtive as she tried to casually blend in with sight-seekers and residents going about their Sunday morning business on the streets of the Scottish capital.

Rosetta followed the street signs to the zoo until she reached the wide glass-fronted entrance area. There were crowds of people milling about inside and she quickly spotted the queue for tickets and joined the line. She had no Muggle currency, but a quick and discreet Confundus Charm on the front of house staff was enough to gain entry.

It didn't take long for Rosetta to find the reptile enclosure, but to her disappointment, only two snakes were on show. The first was a snoozing giant Boa Constrictor, curled around a branch. Rosetta was not afraid of snakes, but the Boa was massive and would probably be very angry to be woken up. In the tank opposite was a Taiwan Beauty Snake, which was highly alert and looking at Rosetta curiously. He was a stunning olive green with mottled dark spots down his back and a black stripe across each of his eyes. His tongue flickered as she approached the tank and rested her hands on the cool glass.

The only other visitors in the reptile enclosure were a pair of chattering children, who squealed and giggled at the lizards in the far corner. Rosetta waited patiently for them to grow bored and leave, then locked the door with magic behind them so she was at last alone with the snake.

How to begin? She'd come all this way, but now she was here she didn't know what to say and felt rather embarrassed. To her great surprise, the snake spoke first.

"You're not one of them, are you?"

Rosetta's stomach plummeted to the floor and her first impulse was to look around to see if the voice came from elsewhere. But it there was no-one else around; it was definitely the serpent that had spoken.

"You don't work here, do you?" the snake persisted, his voice almost like a drawn-out whisper. Whilst the tone was slightly different to the one she'd heard in the castle, higher in pitch and softer somehow, there were striking similarities and there was now no doubting that the disembodied voice was indeed Parseltongue.

Rosetta's mouth felt very dry and she felt quite dizzy, but she managed to answer. "N-No, I don't work here."

"Shame. It's about time for my mid-morning mouse." The snake weaved and rose up, seemingly to get a better look at her.

Rosetta swallowed. "Do you usually speak to the staff here?"

"Oh, I try. But they don't seem to understand me. Why can you?"

"It's hard to explain," Rosetta answered, and then a thought came to her out of the blue. "Have you ever spoken to anyone else?"

The snake seemed to regard her with his clever black eyes before replying. "No, I have never spoken to a human before. It is strange..."

Rosetta thought that was putting it mildly. If it was strange for the serpent, it was downright bizarre for Rosetta. She asked more questions and the snake enthusiastically told her about being born in the zoo, and how it could get lonely from time to time, and how the Boa in the tank opposite was fairly pleasant but was a bit like an elderly relative in that it could be a little exasperating after a while. It also said something that took Rosetta by surprise.

"The more I talk with you, the more I am compelled to be with you. Will you take me with you?"

The snake was now right at the front of the tank and looking up at Rosetta with what could only be described as affection, if snakes could feel such an emotion. It seemed to her as if the act of speaking Parseltongue to the viper had made it compliant in some way, that the language itself had lured the snake to her and she was quite confident she could have asked it to do things on her behalf without needing to coerce it with magic. This would explain why You-Know-Who found it so easy to get snakes to do his bidding, as they appeared to give themselves of their own free will to those who could speak to them.

Rosetta felt sad for the snake, lonely and sweet-natured as he was, politely declined the offer of taking him away and reassured him that she would come and visit him again and bring mice with her next time.

By the time Rosetta returned to Hogwarts it was lunch time, but she didn't feel much like eating. She was still processing that she was indeed a Parselmouth, with all that implied. From where had she acquired the skill? Neither her mother or her father were Parselmouths, of that she was quite sure. However, it was common knowledge that all wizarding families were related somehow, no matter how distantly, and although she did not know how far back her ancestry went, it was not impossible for her to have ancestors that could speak Parseltongue.

But there was no time for a family history lesson just yet as there were still other questions to answer. Like, what kind of snake could be hiding in the castle, and just who was talking to it? Did Dumbledore already know? Rosetta thought back to her conversation in the summer with the absent Headmaster, when he'd first offered her the teaching job. He'd told her that You-Know-Who was back. Her eyes widened as she fully realised what this could mean. The Heir of Slytherin – could it really be You-Know-Who?

The time for speculation was over; Rosetta had to get a message to Dumbledore.

## Chapter 24: The Letter

*Chapter 24 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 24: The Letter

Rosetta spent the rest of the afternoon attempting to write a letter to Dumbledore, but it was difficult to put her thoughts down on parchment. She felt like she'd wasted a year of the Headmaster's time, a year in which they could have both found out so much and potentially stopped the awful attacks on students. She wanted to apologise to the Headmaster and explain all her theories about the Chamber of Secrets, and get the answers that Severus had implied Dumbledore already knew.

After a number of failed attempts, she eventually finished a foot-long scroll full of cramped writing and had just begun to roll it up when a sinister thought struck her. It was highly likely that the Ministry of Magic were now involved, given the severity of the situation, and therefore she might not be able to speak as freely as she would wish to. The Ministry could have Aurors and officials monitoring the school. They might even monitor the post, especially any post going to the suspended Headmaster. Rosetta couldn't take the risk that her letter might be intercepted. Admitting she was a Parselmouth could draw suspicion on to her – perhaps the Ministry would think that she was the Heir of Slytherin, or was responsible for the attacks and was trying to cover it up, or had colluded with Dumbledore somehow. With a frustrated sigh, Rosetta lifted her wand and cast *Incendio* and the scroll was enveloped in flames, the black ashes falling on to her desk mere moments later.

If the Ministry were now monitoring the post, then they would also surely monitor the Floo Network too, Rosetta reasoned. But she had to get a message to Dumbledore. She couldn't just turn up on his doorstep unannounced. For all she knew, maybe the Ministry would be monitoring his visitors too? Maybe she was being paranoid, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

In desperation, Rosetta looked around her quarters and her gaze fell on to the *Archidoxis magica* which lay habitually at the side of her bed, its secrets still safely stored within. And then inspiration struck. Of course! She needed to write a message in code, a message that would seem innocuous on the outside but which had a true message contained within. Taking a narrow piece of parchment, she began to write:

*Dear Albus,*

*We're all so sad to hear of your departure and*

*everyone sends their love. It's definitely*

*not the the same without you here. With*

*exams coming up, the students are spreading*

*excited rumours that they might be cancelled!*

*Doubtful I know, but you can't blame them for*

*thinking wishfully at such a sad time. Pomona's*

*optimistic that the Mandrakes will be ready to*

*trim soon so that the Revivication Potion can be*

*allocated to the students. We miss you*

*lots, take good care and please do let us*

*know if you need anything at all.*

*Fondest Regards,*

*Rosetta*

It wasn't much, but under the circumstances Rosetta thought it was the best that she could do. Rosetta had discussed the types of decryption methods she'd attempted on the *Archidoxis magica* with Dumbledore at length and she knew the old wizard would be able to decode the first-letter encryption easily. Hopefully, anyone looking at the letter would take it as face value; it had no magical charms on it and it held no interesting information. For all intents and purposes it was just a friendly note from a member of staff. It also put the onus on Albus to set a meeting place and time, which would probably be easier to arrange on his side.

It was nearly dinner time when Rosetta had finally walked up to the Owlery to post the letter. Her stomach gave a loud rumble of protest as she climbed the steep stone stairs and she suddenly became acutely aware of just how hungry she now was, having skipped lunch. The wind swirled through the glassless windows as she climbed on to the platform, clutching her parchment and signalling for owl to come to her.

She didn't have to wait long before a stunning Great Horned Owl gracefully and soundlessly landed on the perch next to her, obediently holding out its leg for its next delivery. Rosetta carefully tied the letter to the owl and sent it on its way with a whisper of good luck as it circled the room before soaring out one of the open windows and out into the Scottish skies.

Rosetta slowly made her way back into the castle, lost in her thoughts about what she would say to Dumbledore when the time came. How would he feel about her being a Parselmouth? And, more to the point, how did she feel about it? At this moment in time, with no-one to speak to about it, Rosetta had to admit that it felt like a huge burden to carry around. Not that she was ashamed of it; it was a big shock when she had initially found out of course, but now the revelation made it feel like she didn't really know who she was any more. Did it make her a bad person? Parseltongue had always been associated with the most evil people in history and therefore the language was tainted by mistrust and suspicion. Well, that wasn't strictly true, Rosetta reminded herself as she strolled up the corridor. Harry Potter certainly didn't appear to be evil, he was just a normal kid who's life had unfortunately been marred by You-Know-Who. And Paracelsus wasn't evil either, and he had been credited with discovering the language in the first place.

At this thought, Rosetta stopped dead in her tracks and the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

Paracelsus. There was an ornate marble bust of Paracelsus right here at Hogwarts, which she'd passed many times in the past going to and from the Owlery. And that bust was at the very end of this passageway! How could she not have thought of it before?

With her pulse quickened and her mind racing, Rosetta sprinted up the corridor towards the old statue, adrenaline pumping with every step.

## Chapter 25: Busted

*Chapter 25 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 25: Busted

Rosetta skidded to a stop near the old marble bust of Paracelsus, her heart beating frantically. So many times she had passed the statue without giving it more than a second glance. Now, however, she couldn't take her eyes off it. Could it really hold the key to Parseltongue?

The bust of Paracelsus was carved in the traditional ancient Graeco-Roman style, showing just the head and shoulders of the old scholar and leading down to a narrow, ringed footstand. The marble was soft cream in colour and exquisitely detailed. From the soft curls of his beard to the folds of his robes, the intricacy of the craftsmanship was exceptional. The bust itself was standing on a tall marble plinth of the same hue, decorated all around in swirling S shapes and many interlinking symbols. At first glance these decorations looked to be just complex ornamentations, but on looking more closely, Rosetta saw the carvings looked very familiar indeed. They were in fact tiny snakes, each side of a group of symbols she knew to be from the Alphabet of the Magi.

A thrill of excitement ran down her spine as Rosetta traced the cool marble shapes with her fingers. This had to be significant. But she needed the *Archidoxis magica* to translate the engravings, which was safely stored in her her quarters. She was tempted to dash upstairs straight away and grab the book, but she willed herself to pause for a second to think logically about the situation. Dinner was currently in full swing in the Great Hall, after which was curfew and then her nightly patrol with Severus. She didn't think she'd have enough time to translate the bust before the students finished dinner. Rosetta also realised that she hadn't spoken properly to the Potions Master since she ran off to try to speak to Dumbledore the previous night, and she was acutely aware that her behaviour had looked odd and potentially suspicious. It would look even worse if she failed to show up for dinner, given that she had been absent at lunch too. Severus was a shrewd and clever man, and he would be sure to start asking questions unless she played it a bit cooler. Now was not the time to blow it by hurrying; she had waited this long for answers and she would have to wait a while longer, even though her curiosity was burning. With a sigh and one last longing look at the bust, she turned around and hurried towards the Great Hall for some much-needed sustenance.

Dinner was delicious; herby chicken with dauphinoise potatoes and green beans, and a helping of steaming treacle tart for dessert. Rosetta wanted to devour it in great gulps as she was so ravenous, but forced herself to eat normally so as not to draw attention to herself. The mood in the Great Hall was still subdued, and Rosetta couldn't stop her eyes flicking occasionally to Dumbledore's empty chair, wondering if he had received her message and deciphered it's code.

After dinner, the Heads of Houses and Prefects lead the students safely back to their dormitories as usual, and Rosetta strolled down to wait outside the old oak castle doors for Severus. It was their turn to patrol around the front perimeter of the castle. Rosetta was grateful for a mild evening. The gentle breeze which rustled the leaves on the trees gave an impression of calmness; a feeling that Rosetta certainly didn't share herself. She willed herself to be still and not to pace back and forth with impatient nerves, but her mind was racing and all she could think about was the bust and what the engravings could mean.

She was staring off into the middle distance completely lost in her thoughts when suddenly a beautiful tawny owl came swooping silently towards her, taking her quite by surprise by landing ungraciously at her feet and hooting somewhat urgently, shaking it's leg at her. Rosetta peeled off a neatly-rolled, narrow strip of parchment which had been tied to the bird, and she hastily unrolled it and began to read.

*Dearest Rosetta,*

*Many thanks for the letter, it was*

*enormously kind of you to*

*entertain me in such a fashion.*

*Tell everyone I miss them too, and*

*not to let standards slip – I expect all*

*OWL results to be tip-top!*

*Will you let me know the results of the*

*House Cup? It appears to be a close*

*one this year, and I can't help feeling*

*Gryffindor might yet be piped by*

*Slytherin.*

*Hope you're well. It's important that*

*everyone stays positive at this time.*

*As ever, I remain at your disposal, so*

*do keep in touch.*

*Fondest regards,*

*Albus*

Rosetta stared at the letter, her mouth open in shock. It appeared that she was once more going to have to abandon her patrol duties, and she had a feeling Severus would be extremely cross and highly mistrustful about being "stood up" for a second time in a row. But what choice did she have? The situation was beyond her control now, and she needed to get to Hogsmeade to speak to Dumbledore, even if that meant damaging the fragile friendship she had started to build with Severus.

Weighing up her options and with very little time to lose, Rosetta tucked the letter into a pocket, pulled out her wand and conjured a fresh piece of parchment and a quill and ink, and scrawled in hurried writing:

*I'm sorry I can't make it tonight. I will explain when I can, but please trust me.*

*R*

It was brief, but she hoped it conveyed the sincerity and respect that she truly felt. Rosetta swiftly fixed the note to the heavy oak doors with magic and then vanished the quill and ink. With one last glance at the note, she turned and sprinted out through the gates, weaving her way out of the Hogwarts grounds far enough to be able to Apparate to the Hog's Head.

## Chapter 26: The Hog's Head

*Chapter 26 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 26: The Hog's Head

Rosetta was out of breath by the time she'd reached the bottom of the Hogwarts grounds and had to take a few steadying breaths before Apparating; the last thing she needed was to lose focus and end up being Splinched. She inhaled deeply through her nose and out through her mouth, eyes closed with intense concentration, before turning on the spot and Apparating to the dirt path a short walk away from the Hog's Head.

As she approached the shabby old pub, Rosetta remembered the time she had encountered Dumbledore at this very spot just eight short months ago. It was outside of the Hog's Head that he had "accidentally" bumped into her and coaxed her to come for a chat up at the castle, and had then gone on to persuade her to teach at the school. It seemed fitting somehow that they would meet here, the shady place where the whole story had begun.

Bracing herself and fixing a determined look on her face, Rosetta pushed open the door and entered the pub. It looked very much like she had remembered, threadbare and grubby, with a few patrons dotted here and there, minding their own businesses over tarnished flagons of beer. There was no sign of Albus Dumbledore, however. Aberforth was behind the bar, wiping down a spillage with a dirty-looking cloth. He gave her a small nod and without asking poured her a shot of Firewhisky and sent it over to the secluded table in the far corner that Rosetta had commandeered.

Rosetta nodded her thanks and toyed with the shot, scanning the room for any signs of Albus. She didn't have to wait long; as if from nowhere, a tall figure in a grey hooded robe slipped into the seat opposite her. Only the signet ring he wore habitually on his little finger indicated his identity as his face was entirely obscured by shadow. Rosetta silently watched as Albus raised his head slightly, enough so the feeble light of the candle stub on the table illuminated his features, before he subtly drew his wand and murmured the Muffliato charm in order to protect their privacy.

"Thank you for coming, Rosetta. What is it you wanted to see me about?"

Rosetta exhaled a breath she had not realised she had been holding. Where to start? They had so much to discuss. She had no time for courtesies though; the time had come to be brutally honest.

"I know what's causing the attacks on students. It's a snake."

Albus considered this for a second, and it looked like a lightbulb had gone off in his head. "Are you quite sure?"

Rosetta nodded, once again playing with her shot glass.

"I've been hearing it all year, without realising it. But it all clicked into place when I found out... I'm a Parselmouth, Albus."

Albus raised his eyebrows at the news, but he didn't look angry or horrified. He looked as if he was chewing over this new piece of information like one of his trademark Sherbet Lemons.

"And how do you feel about that?"

"How do I feel? Like I could have stopped everything months ago had I realised... This whole time I've been running around solving clues to find out the secrets of Parseltongue without knowing I could speak to snakes. I feel like I've wasted so much time. Students have got hurt because of me." Rosetta broke off miserably, feeling rather wretched.

Albus now looked rather serious. "You cannot blame yourself for the attacks, Rosetta. You have been doing everything in your power to find answers, I know too well how

hard you have been working. And now you have found out the cause of the attacks. This is critical information, and I thank you for sharing it with me.”

Rosetta knew the old wizard was speaking the truth, but it didn't do much to assuage her feelings of guilt and foolishness. She sighed before continuing.

“There's something else. The bust of Paracelsus in the corridor near the Owlery has engravings of the Alphabet of the Magi all over it.”

“And have you had to chance to decode what it says?” Albus' eyes glinted in the dim candlelight.

“Not yet. I was going to do it tonight.”

Albus steepled his fingers characteristically and appeared to weigh up very carefully what he was about to say next.

“Rosetta, I think you are on the cusp of discovering something hugely important. But I'm asking you to wait a little longer before you go any further with your investigation into Paracelsus.”

Rosetta's face screwed up in puzzlement.

“What do you mean? We have the key, we have the statue... we could have the answers we've been looking for in a few hours! We can't just stop now!”

The old man closed his eyes momentarily and it seemed to Rosetta that he looked very, very tired.

“Do you remember what I told you when we first met in my office? About the rumours that had been circulating?”

How could Rosetta forget? Albus had told her that You-Know-Who was back; it was the reason they were searching for clues to unlock Parseltongue after all. A shiver ran down her spine as she realised what Albus could be implying.

“Are you saying You-Know-Who is behind all of this? That he's the Heir of Slytherin?”

In response, Albus gave her a grave, meaningful look. “If that is indeed the case, and he has managed to breach the castle with a creature that can do his bidding, then you will need to tread very carefully indeed. I trust you have told no-one else about being a Parselmouth?”

Rosetta shook her head. Well, she thought, not unless you counted the poor snake at Edinburgh Zoo.

“Good, let's keep it that way. And I think you should hide the *Archidoxis magica* somewhere safe too for the time being. It is my feeling that he would not like the thought of another Parselmouth around, someone who could find out his secrets or manipulate the Beast of Slytherin. If he ever found out there could be truth to the legend of Paracelsus, I have no doubt he would want to find the scrolls and destroy them. We cannot let that happen, not now we're so close to finding answers.”

Rosetta felt suddenly afraid. You-Know-Who would probably want to destroy her, too, just for being a Parselmouth. “What are we going to do?”

The old wizard gave her a steely look. “We need to lay low for now. We cannot risk making a move too soon or exposing our knowledge.”

“You mean, we do nothing and act normal? What about the snake on the loose? What about You-Know-Who?” Rosetta asked incredulously. She felt as if they were sitting ducks, waiting to be picked off one by one by the monster roaming the school.

“It's imperative Voldemort thinks everything is going his way, and that no-one knows his secret about the snake. I know it's hard, but we have to continue to let events unfold for now. If you hear the snake again, do not try to talk to it under any circumstances. Close your eyes and hurry away from the sound of the voice. I will be in touch when the time is right to act. And Rosetta?”

“Yes, Albus?”

“The information you have just given me is key, but there are other factors at play, and we need to let them play out. The safest thing you can do right now is to carry on as normal and not draw attention to yourself. I know I have asked this repeatedly of you, but please: trust me.”

Rosetta looked into the old wizard's eyes and saw the burden of knowledge he was carrying. There was more to the story clearly than he was letting on, but somehow she knew she wouldn't get anywhere if she were to press him on it. It felt like madness to carry on as usual when they now knew precisely what kind of danger they were all in. Could she allow herself to trust him again, when it felt so counter-intuitive to do so? But, she reasoned, hadn't she just asked the exact thing of Severus; asked him to trust her when she had been sneaking around and keeping secrets?

“I trust you,” Rosetta said finally, hoping that saying the words would make her actually believe it.

Albus inclined his head respectfully. “I'll be in touch soon. Take care of yourself.”

And with that, Rosetta watched him pull his hood low and leave the pub with a few long strides. She downed the Firewhisky in one gulp, trying to suppress the anxiety rising inside her.

## Chapter 27: The Darkest Hour

*Chapter 27 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 27: The Darkest Hour

The following weeks saw Rosetta feeling extremely conflicted and tense. Part of her trusted Dumbledore and what he had told her made sense: she knew she shouldn't draw any undue attention to herself, and if he had a bigger plan (which she suspected he must have) then any reckless moves on her part could potentially jeopardise that. But the other part of her, the part burning with curiosity and frustration at having to do nothing but sit and wait, could not be quelled. Knowing the beast was a snake, and not being able to share that information filled her with a sense of wretched guilt. The snake had to be huge; Rosetta suspected a Basilisk but couldn't say for certain. If there was a Basilisk roaming the school then surely it wouldn't be too long before someone got killed?

Rosetta found that the stress of it all had made her extremely irritable and snappy with her classes, who were already under pressure with imminent exams looming in a matter of days, and even the hint of summer creeping over the Hogwarts grounds and the announcement that that Mandrakes were finally ready to be cut and the Revivication Potion could now be administered to all those who had been Petrified did little to raise her spirits.

It was mid-morning on one of the last days of term, and Rosetta had been in a particularly foul mood with the Year 7 Slytherins, who were uncharacteristically cowed. She'd sent them out of class five minutes before the bell went as she couldn't bear to be in the same room as them a moment longer. It wasn't like they were going to achieve grades any higher than a 'T' anyway; it was a giant waste of time trying to teach such a group of bigoted and uncaring individuals the subtleties of magical languages.

Rosetta put her elbows on the desk and her head in her hands as she waited for the blessed relief of the school bell to signal break time, which meant twenty uninterrupted minutes to herself. But the school bell never came; instead, echoing through the corridors came Professor McGonagall's voice, magically magnified.

*"All students to return to their house dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staff room. Immediately, please."*

Rosetta sat bolt upright and she felt like she had been doused with water. Every time the professors had been summoned to the staff room previously it had meant an attack had occurred. Rosetta found herself praying to a God she did not even believe in that this wasn't the case this time, but she knew deep down something was desperately wrong.

Hoping against hope and with a knot of anxiety lodged in her stomach, she made her way up to the Staff Room as quickly as she could. More teachers filtered in after her, some looking puzzled, others looking downright scared. Rosetta caught Severus' eye and as usual his expression was unreadable. After a few minutes, the Headmistress arrived looking pale and tense.

"It has happened," she told the silent staff room. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

Filius let out a squeal. Pomona clapped her hands over her mouth. Rosetta felt like she was going to vomit. Severus gripped the back of a chair very tightly and said, "How can you be sure?"

"The heir of Slytherin," said the Headmistress, who was very white, "left another message. Right underneath the first one. Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber for ever."

Rosetta was rooted to the spot, wrestling with her conscience. Should she say something about knowing what was in the Chamber and what was causing the attacks? Or should she stay loyal to Dumbledore and say nothing at all? Whilst she was deliberating, Filius burst into tears.

"Who is it?" asked Rolanda Hooch, who had sunk, weak-kneed, into a chair. "Which student?"

"Ginny Weasley," said the Headmistress. "We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow. This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore always said..."

The staff-room door banged open and for one wild moment, Rosetta was sure it would be Dumbledore. But it was Gilderoy Lockhart, and he was beaming.

"So sorry – dozed off – what have I missed?"

He didn't seem to notice that the other teachers were looking at him with something remarkably like hatred. Severus stepped forward.

"Just the man," he said in a silky, dangerous tone. "The very man. A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself. Your moment has come at last."

"That's right, Gilderoy," chipped in Pomona. "Weren't you saying just last night that you've known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?"

"I – well, I –" spluttered Lockhart.

"Yes, didn't you tell me you were sure you knew what was inside it?" piped up Filius.

"D-did I? I don't recall..."

"I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn't had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested," said Severus smoothly. "Didn't you say the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given a free rein from the first?"

"I... I really never... You may have misunderstood..."

"We'll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy," said the Headmistress crisply. "Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We'll make sure everyone's out of your way. You'll be able to tackle the monster all by yourself. A free rein at last."

Lockhart gazed desperately around him, but nobody came to his rescue. He didn't look remotely handsome or dashing any more. His lip was trembling, and in the absence of his usually toothy grin he looked weak-chinned and weedy.

"V-very well," he said. "I'll – I'll be in my office, getting – getting ready." And with that, he left the room.

"Right," said the Headmistress, whose nostrils were flared, "that's got him out from under our feet. The Heads of Houses should go and inform their students what has happened. Tell them the Hogwarts Express will take them home first thing tomorrow. Will the rest of you please make sure no students have been left outside their dormitories."

Rosetta was left feeling sick to her very stomach. As the teachers rose to leave one by one, Severus gave her a consolatory nod before striding off to do his Head of House duties. As the crowd of staff dwindled, it struck her that if school was being closed tomorrow, then there would be no chance for her to continue her investigation into Paracelsus, and no chance to finish the research into Parseltongue which she'd painstakingly put so much effort into.

She'd told Dumbledore she would not tell anyone about being a Parselmouth or about the snake, and she would continue to uphold that side of the promise, despite the intense feelings of guilt and shame it was causing her. But she would not let the fruit of her efforts turn to ashes and waste a year of her life. She'd made up her mind; tonight, she was going to visit the bust of Paracelsus.

## Chapter 28: Thwarted

*Chapter 28 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.



## Chapter 28: Thwarted

Rosetta waited til after sundown to creep out of her quarters, the *Archidoxis magica* clutched tightly in one hand. She'd never known the castle to be so quiet and deserted. It seemed as if there was a brooding sense of ominousness about the place and she'd be lying if she said she didn't feel afraid of what she would find lurking behind every corner. Every squeak of a floorboard made her jump and her senses were heightened by pure adrenaline. But it was now or never; if she didn't approach the statue right now she might not get a chance before the school was closed down tomorrow.

She turned into the familiar corridor which held the bust of Paracelsus and was shocked to find the imposing figure of Severus standing in front of it, like a bouncer protecting a door at a nightclub. A swell of dread began to climb inside her as she met his gaze.

"Severus... What are you doing here?" she asked, hoping her voice did not betray how unsettled she felt.

"I could ask the same question of you." He raised an eyebrow quizzically.

Rosetta stared in disbelief as she searched for something to say. She eventually decided that honesty was the best policy.

"Look, I've got something important to do for Dumbledore. I would appreciate it if you would please just let me get on with it."

"I'm afraid I can't do that." He folded his arms across his chest characteristically, bringing himself to his full height.

Rosetta felt her trepidation turn into annoyance. "What the hell is going on? Just get out of my way!"

She strode forwards to try and dodge past him but Severus moved fast, almost cat-like, and held Rosetta firmly but gently by the shoulders, staring deeply into her rich brown eyes.

"I know you want to finish your little project with Dumbledore but it is far too dangerous."

Rosetta gazed back into Severus' black eyes and for a moment had the strangest feeling of vertigo, of falling into a black hole and never getting out. She blinked and shrugged herself out of his grip. Dumbledore had said as much to her about it being dangerous, but none of it made any sense.

"Why? Why can't you just step aside and let me get on with it?"

Severus sighed and it seemed to Rosetta he was battling in the same way as Dumbledore had, knowing something he couldn't share with her and trying not to say too much.

"There are events unfolding tonight which are bigger than you and I. It would be safer for you if you got rid of that book altogether."

*How did he know about the book? Had Dumbledore told him?* Instinctively, Rosetta clutched the *Archidoxis magica* tightly to her chest as Severus calmly held out his left hand for her to give it to him. Unbeknown to him, as he moved the sleeve of his robe fell back and revealed his Dark Mark in all it's terrible glory.

Rosetta felt a bubble of panic rise in her as she glanced down at the intricate black skull and snake motif. And suddenly her thoughts became as clear as crystal.

*He wants the book for Voldemort. He was on Voldemort's side the whole time.*

Severus noticed her gaze and swiftly whipped his sleeve down, but it was too late. Rosetta's flight or fight responses had kicked in and she had already withdrawn her wand.

"Stay away from me, Severus. *Nebulus!*" Rosetta cried and thick, swirling clouds escaped from the end of her wand and instantly created an opaque fog between the two of them, giving her the chance she needed to escape.

"Rosetta! Wait!" Severus called after her as she sprinted away, but it was no good. The fog was so dense he couldn't more than a few inches in front of his face. By the time he'd cleared it with a counter spell of his own, she had gone.

Rosetta ran until her lungs felt like they would burst. She scrambled inside her quarters, slammed the door and locked it with every charm and spell she could think of before collapsing on her bed in a fit of tears.

She had been foolish to trust Severus in the first place. Dumbledore had said he was a reformed character but it was obvious to her now that he'd been in cahoots with Voldemort from the start. Seeing the Dark Mark emblazoned against his pale skin was like a jolt of electricity, awakening her senses. It appeared that Severus had known about the book, and he may therefore have known about the scrolls too. He'd probably told Voldemort all about it. Voldemort had most likely instructed him to retrieve it from her, which is why he was guarding the statue. But how much more did he know? Did he know she was a Parselmouth?

Rosetta wiped her tear-stained cheeks with the back of her hand, taking a deep shuddering breath. Why had she let herself get close to him? He had been nothing short of hostile when she had first started teaching, that should have been a warning sign. As had the fact that she couldn't remember anything about him from the past. Rosetta tried again, thinking hard about her schooldays, but it was like looking through frosted glass at a figure just out of reach. Why couldn't she remember him? Had something happened to her in the past? Had she had her memory modified? If so, by whom? By him?

Rosetta felt her blood run cold at this thought. What on Earth had happened to her? She felt like she was a puppet, being pulled in different directions, a character in a story she didn't even know. Surely, she was in more danger then she could possibly realise, and with Severus clearly on Voldemort's side and Dumbledore estranged from Hogwarts, this was a danger she was going to have to face alone.

## Chapter 29: Regret

*Chapter 29 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 29: Regret

Severus stomped back to his quarters, frustration pouring out of him with every step. Dumbledore had told him to protect Rosetta in his absence and that's exactly what he'd been trying to do. Dumbledore had rightly predicted that Rosetta would want to get to the bust of Paracelsus tonight and that she would be carrying a book. He'd told Severus that it was important that he stop her from doing anything rash and to take the book from her. Merlin knew he'd asked why over and over but the old man refused to give him a straight answer, merely saying that it was important to let events unfold and to ensure Rosetta was safe and not involved in any way.

He'd tried his best to be reasonable and make her trust him. And then she'd seen the Dark Mark on his arm and had assumed the worst; that he was on Voldemort's side, that he'd wanted to destroy the book or to harm her, which was simply not true. But what could he have said to make her think any differently? Their friendship, such as it was, was incredibly fragile and it wasn't as if he and Rosetta had been on particularly good terms from the outset. But she was the closest thing he'd had to a friend, to romance even, for many years.

Severus sank down on his bed and put his head in his hands. He'd remembered her from his schooldays, of course. She had been a few years below him and in Ravenclaw, and she had always been trying to spin some money-making scheme or other. If he were honest with himself, Severus had been jealous of her entrepreneurial spirit back then and had found her to be equally insufferable and alluring.

But as time wore on it had become increasingly clear that she had no recollection of him at all from days past. Severus felt guilty then, for it must have been his Memory Modifying Charm which had been too powerful and affected her memory. He'd revisited that event many times, another piece of his bleak history he wished he could undo.

He rose from the bed and walked over his bureau, flipping down the lid. Inside the cupboard was a Pensieve, churning with white mist, the memory in question already swirling in the depths. He gripped his hands either side of the bowl and pushed forwards until he could see a small picture of a Hogwarts corridor. Further and further he went, and bigger and bigger the image got, until he flipped over and landed inside the memory, next to his Year 6 self.

His younger self was standing in the shadows at the end of the corridor watching his Housemate, Mulciber, trying to steal money from a Year 4 Ravenclaw: a young Rosetta Stone.

"Give it here. All of it."

Mulciber's face twisted into a cruel smile and he held his left hand out with a beckoning gesture. Rosetta scowled back at him, her fingers gripping defiantly around the small pouch of coins.

To be fair, thought the older Severus as he looked on, she'd earned that money fair and square through hours spent toiling away on other people's homework. Including Mulciber's homework. It's not like Mulciber needed the gold, though. His family, unlike the Snapes, were absolutely loaded.

"Come on. Give it to me. Or you might find yourself on the end of a Cruciatus curse."

Mulciber drew his wand silkily with his right hand and aimed it squarely at Rosetta's chest. Rosetta's jaw tensed as her eyes flicked from the wand back to the older boy's face. To give her credit, her expression stayed neutral, but she must have been scared.

They all knew he was bluffing though; an Unforgiveable Curse would be a one-way ticket to Azkaban. But Severus didn't doubt that he was quite capable of hurting her nonetheless. There was the incident with Mary Macdonald, on whom Mulciber attempted to use Dark Magic. Those rumours would not have escaped Rosetta. *Pranks*, most of the Slytherins had called it. Everyone else knew it to be good old-fashioned bullying. And here Rosetta was: trapped, wandless and alone in a dead-end corridor, facing up to the bully himself.

"I'm losing my patience, Stone."

Mulciber twitched his wand and all of a sudden her scarf began to unravel and fell on to the floor. Another twitch and her tie began to loosen, the ends unknitting and unfurling around her neck. Rosetta grabbed at it, panic rising on her face, but it slipped through her fingers like water.

"You can lose the gold, or you can lose your clothes. It's your choice." Mulciber took a step towards her, leering.

Now her cardigan had begun to unbutton, and Rosetta breathed hard. She looked like a cornered animal trying to weigh up her options. Her grip tightened on the coin pouch and she closed her eyes, as the cardigan began pulling and pulling to be free of her arms.

Severus continued to watch from the shadows as his younger self silently walked up behind Mulciber.

"Now, now, Mulciber. I think she's got the message."

Mulciber's head snapped round and Rosetta's eyes shot open. Almost immediately the cardigan stopped tugging and she shrugged it back on to her arms, pulling it closed around her.

"Snape! What did you do that for?" Mulciber was furious.

The younger Snape walked forwards slowly so he was now standing alongside his House mate.

"After the McDonald incident, which nearly got us expelled, perhaps it may be prudent if you showed a little more... restraint?" His tone was calm and even, but did little to ease Mulciber's ire.

"Since when do you care about restraint?" the boy sneered in response. "You found it hilarious!"

"I care about what happens when we leave this school." He looked pointedly at other boy. His words were clearly loaded with meaning.

Mulciber chewed on the side of his mouth with frustration. He paused, as if weighing something up, and then without warning pulled his wand vertically from top to bottom yelling "*Diffindo!*" and there was an almighty rip as Rosetta's clothes fell from her as if cleaved in two by an axe. She let out a yelp of surprise as she struggled to cover herself with the remaining rags.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, Stone," he smirked, his eyes roving up and down hungrily for a moment. But then he turned his attention to Snape. "You'd better not be going soft, Snape. I'm sure *our mutual friend* would want to know if you've lost your bottle."

The look that the younger Snape gave to Mulciber was icy cold. *Our mutual friend* values intelligence, which given your behaviour is something you seem to be tragically lacking. If you think reports of your pathetic attempt at petty larceny will impress him, then you're sadly mistaken."

It was clear Mulciber had no retort for that. His face was like thunder as he turned and stamped off down the corridor, his boots clicking angrily on the polished wood. Both Snape and Rosetta watched him turn the corner, before Snape turned to Rosetta.

She was shaking as she clutched the remnants of her clothing around her. Wordlessly, Snape took off his cloak and handed it to her, averting his gaze. Rosetta never took her eyes off him as she fumbled with the cloak, finally covering her modesty.

"Thank you," she managed in a cracked voice.

"Do not thank me."

This wasn't about saving a damsel in distress, however much it looked that way, the older Severus remembered. He was saving his own skin. He was saving himself from expulsion. He was saving a friend from making a stupid mistake which would make both of them look bad in front of the Dark Lord. There were only two things Snape wanted in the world back then: firstly, to graduate Hogwarts with impeccable grades after learning as much as he possibly could about magic and secondly, to become a Death Eater. He wasn't about to let a friend's retarded actions ruin either of those things for him.

Satisfied she was now decent, the younger Snape's eye's met Rosetta's as he pondered what to do next. She was a Ravenclaw, which meant she would be astute enough to work out the veiled references to their mutual friend. Also, an attack like this could not go unreported: Rosetta was clearly shaken, which would attract the attention of her Housemates who would inevitably coax out of her what had happened and then tell Dumbledore. His name would be dragged into it alongside Mulciber's and then there would be hell to pay. Yes, it was too risky to simply let her go.

Rosetta fumbled with her pouch of coins and pulled out a fat Galleon, holding it with a trembling hand towards Snape.

Snape merely shook his head and raised his wand, bearing down on Rosetta. Her eyes widened in shock and the scream never left her throat before Snape cried, *"Obliviate!"*

The older Severus watched as the surprisingly powerful spell knocked Rosetta out cold. Before she could hit the ground, the young Snape scooped her up in his arms and carried her to a nearby bench where he laid her down as if she were merely resting, the pouch of gold still clutched in her small hand.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, before walking down the corridor back to the Slytherin Common Room.

With enormous effort, Severus pulled himself out of the Pensieve feeling utterly wretched. He had been an accessory to the attack. He should have gone to Dumbledore with her, he should have done the right thing. But he had been so preoccupied with power, with his own self-interests, with his future. Rosetta had every right to despise him, whether she remembered the incident or not. She'd seen the Dark Mark and in a way that seemed liked divine penance for having lived in ignorance of his behaviour for so long. But now she knew the truth: he was a selfish, conniving man who carried too much darkness inside him to be anything other than bad. He deserved everything he got.

After all, didn't any woman who got close to him end up being hurt, or worse?

With shaking hands, he reached for the half-empty bottle of Firewhisky on the sideboard and drank it straight from the neck.

## Chapter 30: The Feast

*Chapter 30 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 30: The Feast

After crying herself hoarse, Rosetta had managed to get herself together enough to have a hot shower and then, with all tears shed and a lack of anything productive to do, decided there was nothing for it but to go to bed. Although it was proving hard to sleep with the thought of a murderous Basilisk, a duplicitous Death Eater and the most evil wizard the world had ever seen potentially roaming the castle looking for her. She hoped her protective spells would be strong enough to keep them all out, and hid her wand under her pillow just in case.

She tossed and turned for what seemed like the hundredth time, trying to get comfy and clear her mind from terrifying intrusive thoughts, when suddenly through the inky darkness the voice of Minerva McGonagall, magically magnified, filled the air.

*"Everyone to report to the Great Hall immediately. There is no time to dress. Now, please!"*

Rosetta sat upright, the familiar sense of panic welling up in her. Was Ginny Weasley dead? Did they find her body? Were they evacuating the castle right now? She leapt out of bed and pulled on a pair of boots, which looked completely at odds against her pink and grey fluffy pyjamas. She grabbed her wand and jammed it in the waistband of her pyjama bottoms. She hesitated at the door, thinking of the *Archidoxis magica* which she had cast both an invisibility charm and a waterproof charm on and had stashed in the cistern of her toilet. Then, her mind made up, she dashed to the bathroom, grabbed the book and cast a swift shrinking spell on it too, tucking it tightly into the side of her left boot before racing down the stairs as fast as she could.

As she grew closer to the Great Hall her fear quickly turned into confusion. The place was alive with excited chatter. It certainly didn't seem like bad news. In fact, it looked like the hall was prepared for a grand feast. All of the pupils and many of the teachers were in their pyjamas and there was not one sad face in the room. The Weasleys and an incredibly filthy-looking Harry Potter were jubilantly surrounded by a sea of Gryffindors. She felt her shoulders sag with relief. Ginny must be OK.

As she approached the teacher's table she saw Albus Dumbledore, who swooped her up into an enormous hug. It was at that moment she knew everything was alright.

"It's over?" she breathed, now daring to believe it was actually true.

"Thank you for your patience, and your trust in me," was all he said in return before climbing the lectern and addressing the hall.

Rosetta noticed that Severus, fully dressed in his usual black robes, was looking at her intensely as she took her seat opposite him on the teacher's table, but she averted her eyes. For all she knew, she'd had a very lucky escape tonight and had cheated death. Pouring herself a healthy measure of red wine, she resolved to speak to Dumbledore as soon as she could. This thought was swiftly interrupted by Pomona, clad in a white frilly long sleeved nightie, unselfconsciously whooping for joy and throwing her arms around her and giving her an almighty squeeze. Rosetta couldn't help but laugh as she hugged her back, for what felt like the first time in months.

The whole school paid rapt attention as Dumbledore explained about the Chamber of Secrets, the Basilisk and Harry Potter's bravery. Rosetta felt vindicated about her guess about the Basilisk being the Beast of Slytherin but still felt a stab of guilt about her lack of inaction as the Headmaster relayed the tale.

There was tumultuous applause once Dumbledore had finished, an expression of sheer delight that they were all safe and that the school would stay open after all. And although the announcements that all exams had been cancelled as a school treat and that Lockheart would be unable to return to teaching next year drew massive cheers of joy, the biggest cheer of all was when the un-Petrified victims came in from the Hospital Wing, waving happily as they passed the long tables. Even Filch, who's face normally resembled a bulldog chewing a thistle, had cracked a smile and was holding Mrs Norris tightly as the old cat purred happily in her owner's arms.

After this, Dumbledore proclaimed that Gryffindor had won the House Cup for the second year running and the Great Hall was magically festooned in drapes of scarlet and

gold. The Gryffindors could barely contain their excitement, banging on the tables and stamping their feet. The Slytherins, meanwhile, were subdued with sour looks on their faces. And there were yet more cheers when at half past three, Hagrid the gamekeeper walked in, looking none the worse for his mysterious stay in Azkaban.

Rosetta hadn't known a feast like it, and the celebrations went on all night. She felt as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders and clearly she was as happy as anyone that Ginny Weasley was alive, the victims were all unscathed and that Voldemort had been vanquished. But the emotions of confronting Snape were still raw and confusing and in a quieter moment, watching the hubbub of excited children whirling around on an impromptu dancefloor with Pomona leading the charge, questions started to form in her mind.

Dumbledore and Severus had both implied that they knew there would be a showdown between Harry Potter and Voldemort tonight. Did they just sit back and let the boy fight him alone? Or did they help? Was that part of Dumbledore's grand plan? She could see why she had been advised to stay away, though. She might have got in the way and ruined everything, or she could have even been killed or had the scrolls taken from her and destroyed.

But had Voldemort really gone? Dumbledore described the Voldemort that Harry Potter faced as being a memory, a incorporeal form that gained strength through sucking the energy of another through the pages of a book. But what of the real Voldemort? Where was he? Was he still out there, barely alive? Would Dumbledore still want her to uncover the scrolls? Or was it just a long-term back-up plan, in case Harry Potter failed to triumph tonight?

And what of Severus accidentally showing her his Dark Mark? Dumbledore said to trust him, but did he know that Severus had stood in the way of her getting the answers they both so desperately sought and had demanded the book from her? Had Severus wanted to book to give to Voldemort? Or was he, as the Headmaster continually insisted, Dumbledore's man all along?

Dumbledore could see Rosetta was lost in her own musings as he approached her from the sidelines of the dancefloor.

"A Knut for your thoughts?" he asked, peering over his moon-shaped glasses.

"Make it a Galleon and you have a deal," Rosetta answered wryly.

Dumbledore chuckled at her little joke, but then became serious. "Is everything alright, Rosetta? You look very tense."

Rosetta sighed. "I need to talk to you. But not here." Her gaze unconsciously flicked to Severus and back again, something that didn't go unnoticed by the older wizard.

"I see. Well, perhaps you would like to come to my office?"

Rosetta nodded and the pair wound their way surreptitiously through the crowd and out of the hall, unnoticed by everyone apart from a frustrated-looking Severus Snape.

## Chapter 31: Explanations

*Chapter 31 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 31: Explanations

"So what's on your mind, Rosetta?" Dumbledore looked across his office desk at his Magical Languages professor with an expression of genuine concern.

Rosetta was sitting opposite the Headmaster, like she had done so many times before. But this time it felt different. Before, it felt like they were doing something together, trying to solve a riddle together in order to achieve a higher purpose: to defeat Voldemort. Now, with Harry Potter having just saved the day, she felt like she was superfluous, just an ordinary teacher with apparently nothing useful to contribute. She shifted in her chair uneasily, wondering where to begin. The truth seemed like a good place as any.

"I tried to visit the statue of Paracelsus last night. I know you told me not to."

Dumbledore inclined his head thoughtfully. "Yes, I thought you might."

"Snape was there. He knew about the book. He tried to take it off me and I saw the Dark Mark on his arm. He wanted it for Voldemort, I just know it!"

Dumbledore's mouth quirked at this. "Severus was there on my orders. I asked him to stop you doing anything rash for your own protection."

This came as a surprise to Rosetta. Snape, protecting her? Really?

"But he tried to take the book—"

"At my request," Dumbledore interrupted kindly. "As I've said before, Severus is very much on our side now. I'd have thought with your blossoming relationship that you might have trusted him a little more."

Rosetta didn't know how to answer that, so she just scowled back like a petulant child, feeling heat rise in her cheeks. Blossoming relationship! Well, that was one way to put it. Bizarre crush on a shadowy unpredictable man who she had no recollection of from her past was more accurate, but she wasn't about to spill her guts about her lack of memories or burgeoning romantic feelings to the Headmaster. The thought of Snape protecting her made her pause for thought, however. It was true that he hadn't hurt her, and hadn't drawn his wand to stop her either. Maybe she had been overreacting after all?

"You knew there would be a showdown between Harry Potter and Voldemort tonight," she ventured rather bluntly, changing tack to avoid dwelling too much on her feelings for Severus.

Now it was Dumbledore's turn to shift uncomfortably. "I had my suspicions, given what the boy went through last year. Voldemort seems to have a vendetta against Harry, and Harry had to be the one to confront him."

"Alone?" Rosetta couldn't believe the Headmaster would let a twelve-year-old boy fight a killer snake and an evil dark wizard single-handedly.

"He had some assistance," Dumbledore replied mildly. "But the boy is very capable, and has courage beyond his years."

“And Voldemort... Has he gone for good this time?” This came out rather more forcefully than Rosetta had intended.

Picking up on her obvious frustrations, the Headmaster breathed deeply through his nose before answering. “It’s very complicated, Rosetta. I know you must feel shut out from the events of last night, but the truth is I don’t have all the answers yet despite appearances to the contrary. I know I am asking a lot of you when I ask you to trust me and I am grateful for all the work you have done so far on the basis of that trust. But now I am going to tell you something, which requires me to trust you.”

He paused, steepling his fingers characteristically before continuing.

“Harry Potter faced a memory, an incorporeal form that gained strength through sucking the energy of another through the pages of a book. Incredibly strong Dark Magic. But to my mind, that’s all it was: magic. Do I think Voldemort is out there somewhere? Absolutely. Is he back to full strength? No, otherwise he would have attempted to penetrate the castle himself, not simply use a memory.”

Rosetta pondered on this for a second. It made sense, given what Dumbledore had told her earlier in the year about how Voldemort was barely alive.

“Do you think he is still using snakes to mobilise and sustain himself?” she mused.

“In all likelihood, yes,” Dumbledore replied. “It’s my feeling that Voldemort’s physical form has been compromised for some time, hence his reliance on Parseltongue to survive.”

The thought of Parseltongue led Rosetta back to the subject of the scrolls and the *Archidoxis magica*, which was still shrunken and invisible, and tucked snugly inside her boot.

“So where does that mean for our research?”

Dumbledore looked seriously at Rosetta.

“It means we need answers more than ever. The longer he stays alive, the stronger he will become. Of that I have no doubt. And it feels like you are on the cusp of a very important discovery.”

That was certainly true. Rosetta felt she had all the pieces of the puzzle in her hands, and now she just had to put them all together.

“It feels like the answers are close,” Rosetta admitted.

“Well then, Rosetta. Can I ask you to keep pushing ahead, and find those answers before the end of term?”

Rosetta sat back in her chair. She’d come too far to simply walk away now, especially given the knowledge she had just learned about Voldemort not being vanquished after all and how he could well be getting stronger by the day. She prided herself on her tenacity, her intelligence and her ability to get things done; it was a matter of personal pride as much as national security. The feelings of uselessness and wasted effort from earlier had all but dissipated. She had a job to do, an important job – one that Dumbledore had entrusted only to her. And she was going to see it through to the end.

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Rosetta.” The old man smiled. “Your keen mind is invaluable. Now, it’s been a long night. If you’ll excuse me, I will need to retire to bed. All those Pumpkin Pasties have made me suddenly very sleepy!” He patted his stomach contentedly.

Rosetta smiled back and rose to leave. As she reached the door, Dumbledore spoke once more.

“Oh, and Rosetta?”

She stopped in her tracks and looked back. “Yes, Albus?”

“Perhaps it would be wise to speak with Severus and clear the air, as it were. I would hate for anything I’ve done to come between the two of you.”

The old man smiled genially and Rosetta couldn’t shake the feeling Dumbledore was playing matchmaker and implying there was something other than platonic feelings between the two of them. Wordlessly, she left the room, her thoughts again filled with the enigma that was Severus Snape and what, if any, his intentions towards her were.

## Chapter 32: Mutatio in Memoria

*Chapter 32 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape’s world upside down.

### Chapter 32: Mutatio in Memoria

Rosetta wanted to stop off at the statue of Paracelsus on her way back from Dumbledore’s office, but was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of exhaustion and had to cling to the handrail of the stairs to guide herself. Realising it must have been an adrenaline crash after the nerve-shredding events of the past twenty-four hours, she decided not to fight it and instead went back to her quarters and fell straight into bed, grateful that at least she didn’t need to change into her pyjamas. It was past seven o’clock in the morning by the time Rosetta had finally got to sleep and she slept right through to the early evening. She felt like a new woman after the rest and emerged, freshly showered, dressed and famished, for dinner at the Great Hall.

The energy in the room was still buzzing with excited chatter and relief. As she shovelled down mouthfuls of chicken and leek pie, she couldn’t help but notice that Severus was nowhere to be seen. Her thoughts turned to what Dumbledore had implied earlier about their burgeoning relationship and how they needed to clear the air. If Severus had been trying to protect her, she hadn’t made it easy for him. But was it any wonder she had been mistrustful? Seeing the Dark Mark on his arm had reminded her all too clearly of the link he’d had with Voldemort, and it seemed more than likely in the heat of the moment that he had switched his allegiance and wanted to take the book from her for nefarious reasons rather than good.

Dumbledore certainly had an unwavering trust in Severus and Rosetta was curious to know why. Maybe his strings were being pulled by Dumbledore? She wondered if, like her, Severus was only prone to a certain amount of information from Dumbledore when it came to Harry Potter and her research on Paracelsus. She knew Severus was highly intelligent and had probably figured out some things on his own. And he clearly wasn’t the nicest or most approachable of men. But still, Dumbledore had

insisted that Severus was his man through and through. Perhaps she needed to gain some trust in him, too.

After dinner, Rosetta wandered down to the Dungeons to seek out Severus. She slipped past his empty Potions classroom and approached the door to his quarters. She felt the familiar nerves stirring in her stomach as she knocked on the door.

Severus opened the door after only a few moments and if he was surprised to see her he hid it well.

"Good evening, Severus," Rosetta said hurriedly, before he had chance to say anything. "I'm sorry to disturb you. Can I come in?"

Severus silently stepped aside and let Rosetta pass through the door. She noted that his room was as immaculate as ever, with not one thing out of place. She stood awkwardly, waiting for an invitation to sit which never came. Of course, he wouldn't make this easier for her. Why would he?

"Dumbledore told me you were trying to protect me last night," she said without any preamble.

"I was obeying his orders," Severus replied wearily. "That's all."

"I realise that now. I'm sorry I doubted you."

At this, Severus raised an eyebrow. "You were right to doubt me. You trusted your instinct, and your instinct about me was perfectly correct."

Rosetta was not expecting this response. Surely, he couldn't mean...

"You're on Voldemort's side after all?" Rosetta felt her heart jump into her throat.

Severus snorted. "Don't be foolish! Do you think I would be here right now if I was? But your instinct was not to trust me, and that at least was accurate." His tone was bitter.

Rosetta looked puzzled. If he wasn't on Voldemort's side any longer, then why shouldn't she trust him?

"I'm not following you, Severus. Why shouldn't I trust you?"

"You don't remember me from school, do you?"

Rosetta felt the hairs creep up on the back of her neck; a premonition of something bad to follow. "Not really, no."

"Do you want to know why?"

The breath caught in Rosetta's throat. She had come here expecting to trade an olive branch for a silly misunderstanding, but instead she had a swell of dread rise up in her once again.

"I can show you," Severus continued, not waiting for an answer. Rosetta watched him walk to the bureau and flip down the door, revealing a Pensieve hidden underneath. "Go on, take a look."

Gingerly, Rosetta stepped forwards towards the bureau. She both wanted to see and didn't want to at the same time. Thoughts tumbled through her brain as she approached the Pensieve, imagining what horrors could lie within, each thought more awful than the last. She saw a small image floating in the cloudy depths of the Pensieve. She glanced at Severus, unsure if she should proceed, but he merely nodded his encouragement for her to continue.

Slowly, she put her hands either side of the Pensieve and drew her face closer until it had submerged completely into the memory.

Severus could only watch as she immersed herself in his shameful past. She would be furious with him, no doubt, and she would in all likelihood never want to see him again. But she deserved the truth, and she deserved to know what kind of man he truly was: one that deserved her suspicion and mistrust.

After what felt like ages, Rosetta pulled herself shakily from the Pensieve. She found she'd been crying without realising it, and hastily wiped away her tears with the back of her hand.

"Why did you Oblivate me?" she asked in a cracked whisper.

Severus' shoulders slumped as he regarded the sorrowful witch in front of him. He was expecting anger, cursing and shouting. He wasn't expecting tears.

"I was a coward," he confessed. "I was saving Mulciber and I from expulsion. I didn't want us to look bad in front of the Dark Lord."

Rosetta shook her head and smiled wryly, thinking back to that night and trying to put the pieces together. She'd awoken sometime later feeling groggy and had realised quickly that she was naked except for a cloak that was far too big for her. She'd snuck back up to Ravenclaw Tower, a feeling of shame hanging over her as she'd hidden behind pillars and suits of armour along the way to avoid being seen. She'd always presumed that she had been sexually assaulted, even though there was no evidence to suggest that she had been, not being in pain or having sustained any injuries.

"All this time, I thought I'd been raped and blocked it out because of the trauma!" Rosetta choked, her voice betraying the years of bottled up hurt and anger.

Severus closed his eyes, not able to bear seeing Rosetta in so much anguish.

"I was selfish. I should have taken you up to the Headmaster's office. But all I could think about was my future with the Dark Lord. I'm sorry. But you were right not to trust me from the start." He looked down, self-loathing etched all over his features.

Rosetta swallowed hard. "Why tell me this now? Do you really hate me that much?"

At this, Severus' mouth fell open in shock.

"Hate you? Of course I don't hate you. Quite the opposite—"

"Well you have a funny way of showing it!" Sorrow had finally given way to fury, and anger poured out of Rosetta like lava from a volcano. "How dare you fuck around with my head like this!"

"I had to be honest with you, Rosetta. You deserve to know what kind of man I am. I know Dumbledore likes to paint me as some kind of reformed character but the truth is, my allegiances might have changed but I'm still a monster underneath it all. It's better you found that out now, before something happened that you truly regret."

Severus looked at Rosetta meaningfully, and Rosetta felt a flush of humiliation douse the hot flames of her anger. So he had noticed she was attracted to him, then. He probably found her as pathetic as a schoolgirl and wanted to be very clear that the feelings were most certainly not reciprocated. Well, this was certainly a potent way of rejecting any unwanted advances!

Rosetta bit down on her finger to stop fresh tears from falling and let out a sob as she ran out of Severus' quarters, slamming the door behind her.

# Chapter 33: Secrets Revealed

Chapter 33 of 38

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 33: Secrets Revealed

Rosetta's urge was to leave the castle and head back to Greece after fleeing Severus' quarters with tears of hurt and fury still damp on her face. It's not as if she had to stay around for exams anyway; they'd all been cancelled as a school treat and although she had planned to do a few light pop quizzes in her final classes as a replacement, it hardly seemed necessary now. As her feet pounded up the corridor from the dungeons she felt angry with Severus for his betrayal of her trust but more than that, she felt angry with herself. All those years she had wasted, blaming herself for an attack that hadn't even happened. Her perceived assault had shaped her whole personality, making her second-guess every person she met. She should have pursued the truth harder. And she should have certainly known better than to fall for a former Death Eater.

Rosetta's plan for this year had been to lie low, stay under the radar, do her job, pocket the money and leave. Instead, she'd become embroiled in Dumbledore's plans for defeating Voldemort and had her heart broken. What a fool! What she wouldn't give to be sat on the edge of a cove by the Aegean sea, the warm sun at her back, watching the gentle lapping of the crystal clear azure waters and pretending this miserable year hadn't happened...

She paused at the split in the corridor near the Great Hall. One way led towards her quarters, and the other led towards the front door. It would be so easy to slip out; she could run to the edge of Hogsmeade and be on her way in no time. But this tempting thought was quickly replaced by another, that of her promise to Dumbledore about finishing the job on her research into Paracelsus. Not that the meddling old man deserved it, she thought to herself bitterly. Clear the air with Severus, he'd said. Had he known that Severus would make a fool out of her in the end? Or had it merely been wishful thinking on his part, that he could play matchmaker? Either way, Rosetta suddenly decided she wasn't going to finish the research for Dumbledore after all.

She was going to do it for herself.

Because it was her puzzle to solve. And she wasn't going to give Severus the satisfaction of seeing her run away from him like a scolded child. He was going to have to live with his bad decisions, just like she had to.

Decision made, she sprinted up to her quarters to retrieve the *Archidoxis magica*.

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Rosetta approached the statue of Paracelsus, clutching the ancient grimoire tightly. This time, there was no Potions Master to block her path or threat of Voldemort to contend with. The corridor was all but deserted and a comforting sort of muffled silence filled the air.

She regarded the beautiful cream bust and quickly found the engravings flanked by tiny snakes on the base. She flipped open the *Archidoxis magica* to the pages which contained the transcription of the Alphabet of the Magi. She then drew her wand and spelled out the translated letters in sparkling writing which hovered before her in the air, her eyes flipping from the statue to the book as she worked. After a few minutes, she had written out four lines of text:

**With viper tongue**

**you must speak**

**To reveal the secrets**

**that you seek**

Rosetta supposed it was hardly surprising that it took a Parselmouth to unlock the bust, but it didn't give any clues as to what exactly she was supposed to say. She searched the statue forensically in case there was anything she'd missed, but that was all the bust said.

She sighed, pocketing her wand and snapping the book shut. Apart from the time she'd spoken to the snake in Edinburgh Zoo, she hadn't spoken any Parseltongue since. She wasn't even sure she could speak it without a snake present. A chill ran down Rosetta's spine when she realised Voldemort could have all too easily opened the bust himself had he'd been given the book. Trying to hide this unpleasant thought, she decided there was nothing else for it. She was just going to have to try.

"Open," she said, but it just sounded like her normal voice.

"Open," she repeated, slightly more forcefully this time, but again just her normal voice came out.

She ran her fingers through her hair with frustration, thinking hard. She'd come so close, there was no way she was going to give up now. Did she need a snake to be present in order to speak Parseltongue? Where was she going to get one? She go back to Edinburgh Zoo, she reasoned. The snake there did seem keen to come with her.

Just as this thought had entered her mind, her eyes fell on the small snake engravings either side of the body of text on the statue. Perhaps, if she concentrated hard enough, she could pretend they were real snakes.

Rosetta screwed up her eyes and stared hard at one of the snakes. The shadow that fell on the engraving from this angle made it look it was rearing up, and if she used her imagination she could almost see its tongue flickering in and out.

"Open," she said again, and this time there was no mistaking the hissing sounds of Parseltongue that escaped her mouth.

After a moment the engravings of the snakes glowed a bright bluish-white and from nowhere, surrounded by the same bluish-white glow, a drawer magically appeared in the base of the statue and there was a deep rumble as a ton of marble began shifting as the drawer opened.

Rosetta found she was trembling as she looked inside. Resting in the drawer was a beautiful cigar-length cylindrical ornate silver object that immediately reminded her of a Mezuzah case. It was exquisitely cast, with delicate filigree patterns along the body and intricately set precious stones along the rounded top and bottom. She picked it up as carefully as she would a newborn baby, overcome with emotion. It felt pleasingly heavy and cool to the touch. Rosetta could only guess how much such a rare mythical object would fetch at auction; in all likelihood it would be priceless.

She noticed that one end had a set of small hinges and an indentation, which she figured must be the lid. Slipping her thumb in the indentation, she gently prised open the top and sure enough, inside the case rolled up side by side were a set of two identical scrolls.

Rosetta exhaled heavily, the grief of earlier now replaced with lightheaded excitement. She'd done what she had been brought here to do. Now she needed to speak to Dumbledore.

She cast one last longing look at the beautiful case before stowing it carefully inside the breast pocket of her robes and making her way towards the spiral staircase that led to Dumbledore's office.

## Chapter 34: Mission Accomplished

*Chapter 34 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 34: Mission Accomplished

Rosetta waited patiently as Dumbledore silently examined the scrolls. The only sound that punctuated the air was the faint hum of the bizarre silver magical instruments which filled the cabinets in the Headmaster's office, whirring and tinkling as he worked. He ran his wand over the scrolls a few times, muttering inaudible spells that she did not know. One made the letters glow golden on the page, another made the scrolls light up in a bright fluorescent purple.

"Quite brilliant, Rosetta," he breathed after a few minutes, seemingly satisfied with his handiwork. "These are the genuine mythical scrolls of Paracelsus. The parchment has been dated as medieval and there is a magical charm on the scrolls which is not Dark in nature, but appears to be an accelerant to magical language acquisition."

Rosetta pulled out the *Archidoxis magica* from the pocket of her robes and placed it on the desk in front of Dumbledore with a soft thud. "You'll be needing this," she replied, nudging it forwards with a finger. "The scrolls are written in the Alphabet of the Magi and the key to translating it is in here. It's yours now."

Dumbledore peered over his glasses. "But the book was a gift. Are you quite sure?"

Rosetta nodded. "The scrolls are quite useless without the key to translation. And the book is no longer any use to me."

Dumbledore inclined his head respectfully. "Thank you, Rosetta. For everything. I don't need to reiterate how important getting these scrolls has been. You have given me what I believe is a valuable tool in the fight against Voldemort. Every single piece of information we learn about him is another step towards taking him down. I am truly grateful for your help."

Rosetta felt a blush beginning to form on her cheeks. He made it sound like she was some kind of brave war hero, rather than the weary mercenary she knew herself to be.

"It's what I was paid to do," she said, deflecting the compliment. "I'm just glad I got the job done in time."

Dumbledore seemed to know that as much as the praise felt awkwardly, it needed to be said nonetheless.

"You raise a good point about payment," the Headmaster said thoughtfully. "We'd agreed thirteen thousand Galleons, which you will have in full at the end of the academic year, but it rather feels like you deserve something extra as a token of appreciation."

His blue eyes twinkled, and Rosetta shifted uncomfortably. Could there be a tone of accusation in his voice? Not for the first time, she had the eerie feeling she was being X-rayed, and that he knew more than he was letting on.

"Really, it's fine," she replied, trying to sound more casual than she felt under his shrewd gaze. "We'd agreed a rate for the job and I've completed the job. I'm glad you're happy with my services but it's not like I killed Voldemort with my bare hands!"

"As you wish. But I'd like you to know that, beyond what you have achieved with the scrolls, your teaching has made a difference too. Should you want to or your circumstances change, there is always a place here at Hogwarts for you. There were a clutch of students who really benefited from your teaching this year and I know they are inspired to consider jobs in the Goblin Liaison Office based on their newfound language skills."

Rosetta felt a twang of guilt at this well-intentioned and partially hidden invitation. She had no plans to stay on beyond what she had already promised Dumbledore but it did no harm to respond ambiguously, she decided. It was never a bad thing to keep her options open.

"Thank you, Albus. That's good to know."

"Well, you've certainly earned yourself a break after all the hard work you've put in this year. Do you have any plans for the Summer?" the Headmaster asked nonchalantly.

Rosetta knew better than to assume this was an entirely innocent question along the standard hairdresser going-anywhere-nice-for-your-holidays type of interrogation. Rather, she had the sense that Dumbledore was trying to steer the conversation around to the Potions Master and the nature of their acquaintance once she'd left the school. She tried to ignore the bristle of irritation that flashed through her at the thought of Severus.

"I'm going to catch up with family and friends, and then spend some time back in Greece," she answered evenly. "I really miss being by the sea."

"I can imagine," he replied mildly, and thankfully didn't push the subject further.

Rosetta made her excuses and left shortly after, leaving Dumbledore to the task of deciphering the scrolls by himself. If he was right about the charm on the scroll, it might only take a few hours for him to master the ways of Parseltongue.

She was glad to have helped the war effort in some small way, but in truth was relieved the task was over and could not wait to get out of the castle. She wasn't lying when she said she desperately missed the sea and more than that, she wanted the term to be over so she could finally put Severus Snape behind her. She just needed to get through the next few weeks and then she could be free once more.

She'd never set out to fall for anyone in her time at Hogwarts, let alone a former Death Eater. In fact, she remembered all too well how much she despised him at the start of the year. It looked as if her instincts had been right all along, just as Severus had insisted earlier, despite the flashes of the real man she'd thought she'd seen underneath all the snark and acid. What she really needed was time; time to forget the chemistry between them, time to push down thoughts of what might have been and



time to bury any fanciful notions of how much she wanted to claim his mouth with her own.

But there were some things even sweeter than a lover's kiss. Pushing her pathetic lovelife aside for a moment, in practical terms Rosetta now knew she would be leaving the castle much better off than when she had first entered. She had a tidy nest egg all of her own, and with any luck that nest egg would mean she'd never have to work again.

Just a few more weeks to bear and then she'd be living it up, set for life.

She patted her top pocket and smiling to herself and with a renewed spring in her step, she made her way down the winding corridors that led to her quarters.

## Chapter 35: The End of Term

*Chapter 35 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 35: The End of Term

The rest of the summer term passed in a haze of blazing sunshine. Hogwarts was back to normal again with only a few differences. Defence Against the Dark Arts classes had been cancelled and Lucius Malfoy had been sacked as a school governor. Draco Malfoy was no longer strutting around the school like he owned the place. On the contrary, he was looking resentful and sulky, and the rest of the Slytherins seemed to have lost their bravado too. The other difference was that Rosetta and Severus no longer traded post-breakfast banter and for all intents and purposes she avoided him as much as possible. Rosetta had chanced a glance at Severus during one meal and thought for a second she saw a sorrowful look cross the Potion Master's face but it was soon replaced by the familiar inscrutable mask. She had resolved not to look at him after that, no matter how difficult it was for her.

Rosetta had a change of heart and made her classes take some pop quizzes as a replacement for the cancelled exams in the final week of term after all and was genuinely pleased with most of the results, apart from the Year 7 Slytherins of course, whose papers she gleefully marked with large letter T's. She had achieved more than she thought possible in her Magical Languages lessons, and she felt satisfied that she had completed both jobs that Dumbledore had set her and so could leave the castle with a clear conscience.

It was a bright and sunny afternoon on the last day of term when Rosetta was tidying up her classroom and packing all of her teaching materials away. She was humming happily to herself as she gathered up textbooks, almost able to taste sweet freedom on her tongue. That taste was soon soured when there was an unexpected rap at the open door and standing in the doorway was the man she'd spent the last few weeks resolutely avoiding. She cast him a weary look before ignoring him and continuing with the job in hand.

"Are you leaving today?" Severus asked, without any preamble.

"Why do you care?" Rosetta parried, flicking her wand more forcefully than she intended to and setting down a pile of books in her trunk with a loud thunk, her good mood evaporating in an instant.

"Of course I care," he replied quietly. "I thought you knew that."

At this, Rosetta let out an indignant bark of a laugh. "Oh really? Is that why you performed a complete U-turn after spending the first half of the year scowling at me like I was something you scraped off your shoe? Could it be because you're a Death Eater who wanted to gain my trust so you could sabotage my research into Paracelsus? And when it didn't go your way, you decided to punish me with that awful memory! I was a fool to think there was anything more under that third-rate goth outfit than a bad tattoo and a personality that could wilt flowers."

Rosetta surprised herself with that tirade, but she'd been bottling up her feelings for weeks and it felt really good to retaliate and let go of some of the hurt feelings and transform them into white-hot rage.

Severus flinched at the use of Voldemort's name, but otherwise looked genuinely perplexed as he tried to uncover the meaning behind her fury and barbed insults. "You thought I was trying to sabotage you? And that I showed you that memory to *punish* you?"

"Well, that's what it looks like from where I'm standing!" Rosetta felt herself shaking with anger. It took all her effort not to hex him into the middle of next week.

Severus closed his eyes and took a slow breath in through his nose before answering calmly. "I was protecting you that night at the statue, at Dumbledore's request. He told me to take the book from you, you can ask him yourself. And I didn't show you that memory as a punishment. I showed you it because you needed to know the truth about what happened that night, and the truth about me and why I did it. I knew it would risk hurting you to see it but I had to be honest with you. You deserve honesty and respect."

Rosetta could feel her heart hammering fast, a combination of anger and... something else that she refused to name at this moment in time. She narrowed her eyes, not entirely convinced. "Why is it so important for me to know the truth about you? Why bother showing me that memory at all? You'd spent the last few months gaining my trust, what reason would you have other than to deliberately hurt me?"

Once again, Severus looked puzzled. He opened up his hands in a gesture of truce. "Isn't it obvious?"

Rosetta turned to face him in exasperation. "Obviously not!"

Severus swiftly took three paces across the room and just as he had at the statue of Paracelsus, he gently but firmly put his hands on Rosetta's shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. She was too shocked to shrug him off, once more getting the feeling of vertigo as she stared back into the inky depths of his gaze.

His eyes flicked down to her slightly-parted mouth and Rosetta felt the breath in her throat hitch as his head moved towards hers. He was barely a few inches away when he whispered, "I want you, Rosetta. I always have."

The room seemed to spin as he finally closed the gap between them, claiming her mouth with his in a kiss full of need. Rosetta froze for just a moment before kissing him back with fire of her own, one hand raking through his black hair, the other cupping his face.

Severus growled with approval as his hands moved from Rosetta's shoulders to her waist and he swiftly lifted her up on to her desk, the better to get closer to her. She

clung on to his shoulders as his mouth found her neck, feeling the heat from the length of his body pushed up against her. She gasped with pleasure and her eyes fluttered shut as she gave in to his ministrations, wrapping her legs around his narrow hips.

She began plucking at his robes and then, panting, eyes heavy with need, he pulled away to find her gaze once more.

“Do you want this?” he asked, voice thick with lust.

Rosetta merely smiled in response, waving a hand to wandlessly slam her classroom door before unbuttoning the top of her robes, her eyes never leaving his.

## Chapter 36: Entwined

*Chapter 36 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 36: Entwined

Rosetta could hear the pounding of her heart in her ears as she watched Severus shift his gaze whilst she let her robe fall over her shoulders, revealing swathes of luminous dark skin. His glimmering onyx eyes roamed her chest hungrily and her breath caught in her throat as he meticulously appraised her exposed flesh. He reached up to delicately cup one of her breasts and she marvelled at the striking contrast between the cool alabaster hue of his hand against the warm cocoa of her skin, the jarring juxtaposition of white against black.

Slowly, so slowly, he lowered his head and Rosetta could feel the tickle of his hair as he planted a row of kisses from her neck down to her breasts. Once more, her eyes flickered shut as she relented to the sensations.

His kisses, although full of passion, were surprisingly tender and Rosetta thought that maybe she had missed the obvious after all; maybe he had harboured feelings for her all along. Perhaps he had pushed her away precisely because he'd felt attracted to her and had been ashamed of his actions back when they'd been at school together. And then they had been forced into each other's orbits through Dumbledore's insistence and despite his best efforts of trying to quash his feelings, he had discovered they actually got on well which made things even more difficult, and had made him feel even more guilty about his past. So he showed her the memory, not because he despised her, but because he felt she had a right to know what had happened that day and what kind of man he used to be, before they both developed further feelings for each other. And all the while she had thought the worst of him, interpreting his actions as hostile rather than self-preservation.

This would explain his use of Legilimency on her too, Rosetta suddenly realised as his hot breath seemed to scorch her flesh. He was searching for that one memory, to see if it had come back to her, and instead found that it had been worse than he'd expected: that his Obliviation had been too powerful and she did not remember him at all. Was it any wonder he'd wanted to avoid her? He'd felt guilty and angry with himself for the mistakes he'd made in the past.

His kisses continued with increasing urgency and Rosetta thought of all the times he'd touched her before, through the use of Legilimency and stopping her at the statue. He'd never once hurt her, she remembered, even though she had been expecting him to. And now, as his long fingers squeezed and caressed her soft skin, his touch was taking her to new heights of pleasure.

He lifted his head, locking eyes once more as her hands moved to the front of his robes, attempting to unbutton his frock coat with her fingers. It was no easy task; the buttons were small and fussy, and Severus actually smirked as he watched her struggling. Rosetta gave a mock pout in return.

“Call yourself a witch?” he drawled, waving a hand casually, and Rosetta grinned in delight as the little buttons popped open from top to bottom and his frock coat fell open.

Rosetta pulled him towards her, hands now inside his frock coat and feeling the heat of his body through his crisp white shirt as she kissed his mouth. Her tongue flicked over his lips, eliciting a growl of pleasure, as she kissed him deeper.

Severus drew back a little, finding her gaze, and as their eyes locked she felt something brush her mind. It was like Legilimency but softer; not a probe but a mental caress. She understood the action to be a kind of reassurance that she felt the same way as him, and that she wanted this as much as he did. She was touched at the comfort of the gesture. She let her thoughts and emotions surface to the front of her mind, so her intentions could be easily read. He cupped her face, black eyes shining with astonished delight as he absorbed the display of feelings without words. He nodded at her unasked question, reciprocating her feelings right back at her.

And then he swooped back for more, lips entwined whilst she raked her hands across his chest and her tongue darted into his mouth.

This time, her hands made light work of the shirt buttons and she soon felt the smooth milky skin underneath. She could almost feel the magic radiating off him, a soft thrum of the power he held inside. *He's so pale*, she thought, tracing circles with her dark fingers then lightly dragging her nails down his sides.

His mouth found her neck again and her nails dug lightly into his back as his teeth grazed the soft skin above her collar bone.

“Severus,” she moaned, every nerve end on fire as skin met skin, torso to torso, his hot kisses sending shivers of pleasure down her spine. “I want you.”

He came up for air, panting slightly, his usual ivory complexion now slightly flushed.

“You know how I feel about you, Rosetta,” he whispered. “Stay with me tonight.”

Rosetta gazed back into the vertiginous depths of his eyes and knew, then, that this moment would change everything for them. She smiled, stroking his face tenderly and nodded.

# Chapter 37: The Night Is Theirs Alone

*Chapter 37 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

## Chapter 37: The Night Is Theirs Alone

Rosetta did not remember how they ended up in the Potion Master's quarters and was only dimly aware of tumbling on to his bed, the crisp white sheets soft against her bare flesh. All she could focus on were the sensations of skin on skin, of kisses and caresses. They writhed, lithe and languid, caught in their lover's dance. White against black and black against white, yin and yang joined in blissful union, over and over. Words were not necessary; they communicated through thought and looks, taking their passion to a higher level.

How long they remained in this ecstatic limbo she could not say, but she guessed it was dawn by the time they eventually lay silently spent together, side by side and holding hands, dozing contentedly and at peace with the world.

Even underneath the swell of love in her heart, Rosetta could not shake the feeling that this wonderful, fragile oasis they had created for themselves could not last. When she finally fell asleep, Rosetta dreamt of scorched sand and deep azure seas, and endless blue skies.

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Awaking the following morning was decidedly surreal for Rosetta, finding herself in the Potion Master's empty bed. Severus himself was in the shower, which gave Rosetta a chance to try to process what had just happened between them. She pulled on her hastily-discarded underwear and perched on the edge of the bed, her body pleasantly aching after a long evening of lovemaking and her brain buzzing with thoughts. Deep down, she knew there was fire underneath Severus' cool exterior but the heat of the passion was like nothing she had experienced before. Both of them, it seemed, needed the release from months of pent-up desire. She now knew she had been so blind all this time to mistake his attraction for loathing, and also that things just simply weren't that clear cut when it came to Severus Snape.

They had shared their bodies and their feelings with each other, but what would happen now, she wondered to herself as Severus emerged from the bathroom, clothed in his habitual black trousers and white shirt.

She gave Severus a small smile as he fiddled with fastening his cuffs. "Alright?"

Severus walked towards Rosetta, his hair still slightly damp around his face. "Good morning to you. I trust you slept well?"

Rosetta couldn't help but chuckle. It felt very strange for Severus to revert to being so formal after the wanton night of lust that they'd both shared.

"I was absolutely shagged out." She gave a mischievous grin, and a smirk passed Severus' lips as he looked away.

"Are you still planning on leaving today?" he asked quietly after a moment, his face becoming serious once more.

The question landed like a stone in Rosetta's gut. It looked like their private oasis had now been well and truly shattered. Yes, she had to go, their night of passion hadn't changed that, but she didn't want to leave Severus. But, she realised with a flash of excitement, perhaps she didn't have to.

"Come with me." Rosetta's eyes shone brightly, full of fervour as she reached out and clutched Severus' hand tightly. "Come to Rhodes. We'll be set for life, we won't even need to work..."

Her voice petered out as she saw the conflicted grimace on Severus' face. This was clearly not the emphatic yes she had been hoping for.

"I can't," he said bitterly, as if it pained him to say the words.

Rosetta tried to push down the bubble of hurt that was threatening to spill over. "Why not? I know you detest teaching, you hate kids even more than I do and that's saying something."

"It's not that..." He couldn't even look her in the eyes. What was he supposed to say? That he forfeited his entire life to look after a dead woman's child? That his bruised heart would never be completely free of Lily Potter, who'd had a grip on it since he first saw her as a child in that playground in Cokeworth all those years ago? That he hadn't banked on having any kind of happiness or joy in his life ever again, let alone getting emotionally involved with a woman, and that this wasn't supposed to happen? That he should have walked away and not let the seed of his feelings take root? That he'd been too weak to resist the undeniable physical chemistry between them and now he was about to break both of their hearts?

Rosetta bent in front of him deliberately to catch his gaze, forcing eye contact.

"Is this just a one-night stand to you?"

"Absolutely not!" Severus looked affronted at the very idea. "You know very well how I feel."

"Then what is it?"

Her mind started racing as she watched Severus wrestling with what to say next. And then the thought struck her like a Stunner.

"Fucking Dumbledore," she spat. "It's him, isn't it? He's got you over a barrel spying for him and he won't let you go." She crossed her arms across her chest, shaking her head with frustration.

"That's more or less the upsum of it," he answered ruefully.

Rosetta sighed. "I get it. If he had his way, he'd trap me here teaching too, but I can't do it Severus, I just can't. I'm not cut out for a 9 to 5 existence."

"Well, that leaves us at somewhat of an impasse." A fleeting look of sorrow passed over his features.

Rosetta's brows furrowed at this. Uh, hello? Ever heard of Portkeys? I happen to be quite the expert, you know. You can come and visit me whenever you like. It'll be

easy."

Severus shook his head imperceptibly, and Rosetta's stomach was flooded with cold when he next spoke.

"I can't see you again. It's too dangerous."

"In what way? Voldemort isn't going to follow you on holiday, is he?"

She watched as Severus flinched at Voldemort's name and then angrily shoved up the left sleeve of his shirt. "This," he ground out, "Is more than a novelty tattoo. It's a Dark Mark, it's the Dark Lord's way of communication and control. I will never be free of it, or him, for as long as he lives. Yes, he's barely human now, but he grows stronger by the day and one day the Mark will start burning and I will have no choice to run to him and kiss the hem of his robes. I cannot risk him knowing I have feelings for another. He would use it as leverage and if he found out I have switched my allegiances he would kill you without question. I cannot do that to you." Or to me, he thought weakly.

Rosetta put her head in her hands. She knew he was telling the truth, and that the situation was impossible. "So that's it, is it? I find the one man I would put everything on the line for, one I've had the best sex of my life with and one who claims he has feelings for me, and it's the one man I can't have."

She began laughing then. It started as a giggle and then became a full-on guffaw. Severus eyed her awkwardly as she laughed herself out.

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping a tearful eye, though through sorrow or mirth she couldn't quite tell. "It's funny because it's so fucking tragic."

Severus stepped forwards then and pulled her up from the bed by her hands, and this time the black eyes sought out the brown. If only she knew the half of it. She was the second woman in his life to have touched his heart and the irony of their names had not escaped him. He was tied to Lily Potter in death, her name meaning the flower that represented funerals and mourning, and yet Rosetta Stone, the "little rose", was offering him love and life. But death had won again, as it surely always would.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way. You know how I feel about you." Severus' voice was tight, like he was forcing emotions down like bad medicine. "Last night was the best night of my life. Please don't regret it."

She gazed back through watery eyes. It was clear Severus was conflicted, but she knew he'd sworn some ungodly oath to Dumbledore to help defeat Voldemort and there was no way out. That thought made her heart ache. They really were in a no-win situation.

"I don't regret anything. But I don't want this to be just one night. You'd better defeat that Dark Lord of yours, Severus Snape. And the second you do, you're coming over to Greece, you hear me? Don't forget about me." Rosetta couldn't stop the tears from falling then, and Severus pulled her close to his chest.

Severus wanted nothing more than to escape to Rhodes with Rosetta and start over, but deep down he knew that he wouldn't be free until either Voldemort was dead, or he was. And somehow, it felt like he would need to pay his past mistakes with his life.

"I'll never forget you," he breathed into Rosetta's hair, willing himself not to shed tears of his own.

## Chapter 38: Til We Meet Again

*Chapter 38 of 38*

A trader on the edge of the wizarding world is about to turn Snape's world upside down.

### Chapter 38: 'Til We Meet Again

Severus and Rosetta had held each other tightly that morning, their hearts breaking at having to say goodbye after only just admitting their feelings for each other and physically sealing their love. Severus was once more consumed by guilt as he held her close. She had guessed the truth, but she didn't know the whole story. It was true that Dumbledore had him over a barrel, but he had omitted to tell Rosetta why.

There were many reasons, if Snape were honest with himself, why he felt he couldn't tell her about Lily. Firstly, because he knew it would hurt her and she would, understandably, feel second best to a dead woman. Secondly, it was his most guarded secret and the thing he had hidden away from everyone - Voldemort, Lily's son, the whole of the wizarding world. It was his weakness and he had to bury it inside him, because if the truth came out, it would be used against him - especially by Voldemort and the Death Eaters themselves. A Death Eater in love with a Mudblood? They would laugh as they killed him in the dirt. And thirdly, it would be a burden for Rosetta to know. It wasn't that he didn't trust her with the information but as far as he was concerned, the least amount of people who knew, the safer his secrets were away from Voldemort's prying mind and the less danger she would be in. He, unlike Rosetta, was a skilled Occlumens after all.

If he survived the upcoming war and Voldemort fell, he promised Rosetta he would flee to Rhodes to carve out a new life and tell her the full story, warts and all. But until that time, he knew he had to stay guarded and pretend to be the Severus Snape everyone knew him to be - cold, unfeeling, callous, and without sentiment.

That afternoon, the tears now dry on her cheeks after their painful farewell, Rosetta took some time to stroll around the Hogwarts grounds before leaving for Rhodes. The old castle looked breathtaking in the afternoon light, the sun glinting off windows and shimmering across the still waters of the Black Lake, reflecting a warmth that was not in her heart.

It was just her luck that she had fallen for someone who could not love her back. Or could not love her *backright now*, she corrected herself. But knowing he felt the same way as her did not make the bitter pill any easier to swallow. She knew that Severus' role in helping Dumbledore bring Voldemort down would only get more dangerous as the one he called the Dark Lord grew in power, and she also knew he was protecting both of them by cutting contact with her until the war was over. But how long it would take to bring Voldemort down, she did not know. Neither did she know just how Dumbledore had convinced him to deflect, Severus had promised he would tell her everything in time, if he survived the war. A chill ran down her spine at this thought, that horrible *if*, an icy reminder that he was risking his life by switching sides and how there was a very real possibility she would never see him again.

As she strolled around the perimeter of the lake, Rosetta reflected on how her life so far seemed to run in cycles of wanting something, getting it and then losing it, and having to rebuild from scratch. She'd had to reinvent herself time and again, starting with her time at Gringotts.

It had been her first job and she'd wanted it so badly and had worked so hard. Who could blame her, as an eager rookie Treasure Hunter, for wanting some of the glory for herself after all she'd done? It wasn't her fault she'd ended up doing two jobs. She had fought her corner about the useless Curse-Breaker partner to which she had been assigned and how she had been carrying them both, having to both source and secure the treasure, but to her fury the bosses said she had overstepped her role and was

no longer welcome in the Wizard Bank. They had suspected her of taking treasure, but they'd had no proof.

So she'd lost her job at Gringotts and had to try her hand at another career, this time at the Ministry of Magic. Her formidable language skills soon snagged her a job in the Merperson Liaison Office and within a year of hard work she'd become the head of department. She'd forged links between the elusive Aegean merpeople and European wizards, setting up an alliance and rebuilding trust after years of silence and exclusion. And when the merpeople wanted to trade, Rosetta gladly helped them. As far as she could see, it was a mutually beneficial arrangement. *Corruption*, the Ministry officials had called it in their written warning of conduct. Rosetta had called it earning a living, a supplement for her meagre Ministry wages.

Feeling unfairly treated after all she'd done, she'd left the Ministry and moved to Greece to become a trader full-time, once again reinventing herself and living on the outskirts of wizarding society, licking her wounds from her double fall from grace. That was fine for a while; it felt like she was self-sufficient and finally finding her niche in life with no bosses to answer to, until she'd ended up at Hogwarts. That decision had been driven only by the need to survive, to get enough gold to live out her days in freedom. And then she'd ended up falling in love, which was not part of her plan at all.

She was suddenly struck by a phrase she'd heard a long time ago, perhaps in a Muggle song, or from a well-meaning relative: You can't always get what you want, but sometimes you get what you need.

Well, she supposed as she turned back from the lake and up the old dirt path that led towards the gates, perhaps she got a bit of both this year. She wanted gold and she got more Galleons than she would earn in a decade. She needed Severus but she couldn't have him right now. She might not get to have him at all, and she needed to make peace with that. The war effort could take years and who knew if he'd end up alive? She would have to trust in their promises to each other, stripped bare of lies and presumptions. If they were destined to be together, it would happen one day. She needed to believe it.

But beyond that, she knew that once more she would have to make it on her own and this time, life wouldn't be so tough. Because she'd reinvented herself before and she knew she had the depth of character to do it again. And because this time, she had something more precious than gold, and more reliable than love.

Rosetta stopped short in front of the wrought iron gates and pulled out a silver cylindrical object from her pocket, watching it glint in the sun. This was her future; the cost of her work for Dumbledore and the payment for her broken heart. It was priceless.

With a tight smile, she stowed the ornate scroll case back inside her robes and held her head up high as she walked through the gates, never once looking back.

THE END

(Or is it?)

*A/N: Thank you to everyone who has read this story, I know it's taken a long time to complete (damn you, day job!) You get extra House points if you were reading from the very start! My intention was to make this as canon compliant as humanly possible in sticking with the plot points and timelines of Chamber of Secrets, and yet weave a fresh tale that would sit alongside it that could feel plausible without interrupting canon. It was no easy task but I did it the best that I could under my self-imposed parameters.*

*Rosetta's character had been with me for a few years before writing this so I am so pleased I have finally managed to get her out of my head and woven in to a story. The story also took a turn that I wasn't expecting, either. I set out to write a traditional love story along the boy meets girl, boy and girl hate each other, boy and girl end up getting together sequence of events but as I started writing it was clear that Rosetta had her own tale to tell and it wasn't going to work out like that after all! It wasn't my intention to have Severus and the story of their romance at the peripheral of the story but that's just the way it happened.*

*Thanks again for reading this far and who knows? Maybe Rosetta will nag me to write another! It certainly feels like there is unfinished business between the two of them.*