

Turning the Corner

by Grace has Victory

Michael Corner rides an emotional roller-coaster in the fortnight leading up to the Yule Ball where, to his own very great surprise, he is smitten by a beautiful redhead.

The River-Lotus

Chapter 1 of 21

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Note 1. I do not own Harry Potter, Hogwarts, the Potterverse, or even the Classlist. They are all the property of **J. K. Rowling**. This story is not by **J. K. Rowling** and therefore does not qualify as Harry Potter canon. Nobody is making any money out of these words. No infringement of copyright is intended.

Note 2. Extra thanks to my beta-readers. First **Elanor Gamgee** picked up the small errors, then she had the trust and courage to turn me loose to finish this story on my own. Now **Pirate Queen** has corrected this new, post- *HBP* version of the story.

Note 3. And extra-extra thanks to my alpha-reader, my son **Robert**, age 11, who is joint patent-holder of the Silencing Varnish. He pointed out that I was about to fall into a large plot-hole, and we soldered it together with the wonderfully convenient Varnish.

Note 4. This new edition of the story includes changes to a few of the characterisations. But I did not in any way update my portrayal of Blaise Zabini. He remains his despicable old pre-*HBP* self. Honestly!

Introduction

Although answers are not necessarily guaranteed, this story is dedicated to anyone who has ever asked the following questions.

1. Why was Michael Corner attracted to Ginny Weasley?
2. Why was Ginny attracted to Michael?
3. How did Neville Longbottom feel about that?
4. Who was Michael's official Yule Ball partner, and how did she react?
5. If Parvati and Padma Patil were the two best-looking girls in fourth year, why were they still dateless as late as the last day of term?
6. If Dean Thomas fancied them so much, why didn't he invite one of them to the ball?
7. Come to think of it, whom *did* Dean Thomas take to the ball?
8. Did Draco Malfoy ever do anything malicious, manipulative or mendacious that was not directly targeted against Harry Potter or his friends?

9. Why did Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle fail to find dance partners?
10. When Percy Weasley attended the Yule Ball, did he ever acknowledge Penelope Clearwater's presence at Hogwarts?
11. How did Eloise Midgen's acne improve so dramatically?
12. Has anyone ever succeeded in striking Zacharias Smith dumb?
13. Who hates Roger Davies most in the world?
14. What gender is Blaise Zabini?
15. Is there anything at all to be said about Moon, Rivers, Roper, Runcorn and Spinks?
16. Is it socially acceptable for a woman to go the ball with a Younger Man?
17. How long does it take a wizard to learn a foreign language?
18. What is wizard dancing like?
19. Do vampires exist?
20. Did anyone photograph the Yule Ball?

CHAPTER ONE

The River-Lotus

Padma. My lotus-flower. My river-goddess. My muse and inspiration. The girl with midnight in her eyes.

I had been at Hogwarts for a whole year before I noticed Padma. In my first year I had been too busy boiling potions, casting spells and playing Quidditch to bother much with girls. But Terry said I should invite them to my birthday party anyway that was only polite.

My birthday is on 5 September, so I was the first person in second year to become a teenager. The house-elves sent a huge chocolate cake up to our common room, together with a charmed knife that always cut the right number of slices and always of exactly equal size. Robert and Kevin were letting off Filibuster's Fireworks, the girls were huddled in a giggly knot letting off noisy poppers, some first-years were bouncing balloons up to and down from the ceiling, and Terry was trying to rouse the third-years to lead the singing. After they had sung, and I had started slicing, everyone cheered, and I suppose we were quite noisy, because Professor Flitwick appeared in the doorway and gently reminded us, "Friends, I know it's Mr Corner's birthday, but that's a *little* louder than necessary. Can't you revel without carousing?"

Padma snatched a plate, murmuring, "I knew that final slice was left over for a reason," as she whirled around to face Flitwick. "This is your slice, Professor," she told him as she pressed it into his hands.

"How very kind ... but I hope you young people are remembering your homework ... fourth-years have a Potions test tomorrow, and I know Professor McGonagall set a first-year essay this week ..." By the time Flitwick had finished remembering everyone's homework tasks, he had been pushed into the most comfortable blue plush chair and plied with butterbeer, and there was no more thought of interrupting the party.

I realised Padma was a seriously cool girl.

For the rest of that year I watched Padma Patil. I watched her glide across a room, laughing with her eyes at whatever fascinating things her friends were saying to her, and wondered what she was saying in return. I watched the way she tossed her head, her hair like a black satin bell-rope, I watched the way she drank from a goblet, and I watched the way she copied down Herbology notes. I never knew what to say to her, but girls didn't expect boys to speak to them anyway.

In fact it wasn't a very happy year at our school. Some strange monster was lurking in the corridors knocking people unconscious. I didn't want to admit to Terry that I was afraid, but I took good care not to leave a room unless he was with me. Seven members of the school community were attacked, and the poor gamekeeper was wrongly accused of controlling the monster, before all the trouble ended. In fact it never was very clear exactly what the danger had been, although Dumbledore assured us that the Dark wizard who had masterminded the attacks had been "dealt with". Students had wild theories. One version even claimed that the monster had been a giant snake who slew at a glance and that a twelve-year-old boy had killed it with a magic sword! Obviously I don't believe anything as far-fetched as that. I'm just trying to give you an impression of what the school atmosphere was like.

Yet all through that year when I was thirteen, I couldn't be too upset. The thought of Padma kept intruding. Padma existed. The world must be the right kind of place.

Third year wasn't too good either. Some lunatic escaped from Azkaban, and the Ministry posted horrible Dementors all around Hogwarts to "protect" us, they said. At times I felt I'd rather deal with a simple murdering lunatic than with those Dementors. They gave me the shivers. If we couldn't avoid passing one, we used to whistle. Terry became pretty good at "Onward Christian Soldiers", and I memorised all the verses of "Derby Kelly" and if that didn't cheer me up, I used to think about Padma. I would see her face in my mind's eye and find myself laughing for no reason. The Dementors couldn't hurt a person who knew Padma Patil.

There were some high points in that miserable year. One was the lesson when Professor Lupin, the DADA teacher, taught us how to tackle Boggarts. "The secret is laughter," he told us. I certainly didn't feel like laughing when I was confronted with that dirty great fanged vampire lunging for my blood. "Laugh ... laugh ..." I muttered to myself between clenched teeth. Then suddenly I forgot about laughing and fixed my mind on *pink* vampires. Within an instant, the vampire was pink, its oozing blood was bright turquoise, and its creaky bat-wings were juggling silver balls. The whole class laughed out loud, and crack! the boggart had vanished.

Another good time was that snowy weekend in Hogsmeade. Terry and I went into Scrivenshaft's to buy quills and came face to face with Padma Patil and Morag MacDougal buying parchments. I didn't know what to say, but Terry managed a confident, "Hi, are they doing a just price on those scrolls?" and Padma replied, "No, horribly inflated they must be losing business because of the Dementors."

We could all talk about the Dementors, and by the time we'd finished paying for our stationery, we were relaxed enough to invite the girls to the Three Broomsticks with us. There were no Dementors inside the pub, so after couple of butterbeers all round (paid for by me, so that Padma could see what a *kind, generous* chap I was) we had all become very cheerful. Terry and Morag began swapping hints over a Runes homework translation that had stumped them both, and they were soon so deeply immersed in it that I was able to walk back to school pretty much alone with Padma.

"I always thought Runes was a rather silly subject," said Padma. "My sister says Divination is cool. Maybe I should have chosen that instead of Muggle Studies."

I was saved from the trouble of making a profound statement about Divination because Padma slipped on a sheet of ice hidden under the slush. I grabbed her arm just in time and slid my fingers down to her hand as she steadied herself. She didn't seem to mind, so I closed my fingers around her hand, my heart racing, as I asked with elaborate casualness:

"But if you have Astronomy and Arithmancy, do you still need Divination? I don't really know, I'm just asking is it useful?"

She did not release my hand until we entered school and had to sign Filch's check-in book.

Padma Patil was my girlfriend.

Dumbledore sent the Dementors away quite suddenly, the day after our exams finished. The final month of third year was just brilliant, with the long hours of light and no homework to slow us down. One evening Terry picked up a book that someone had left lying by the common room fire. "*Wisdom for the Searching Heart*," he read the title. "Anyone lost this?"

The sixth-year Prefect, Penelope Clearwater, came forward. "It's a charmed book," she explained. "It always opens at the right page." She flipped the cover, and displayed for us a lemon page inscribed with the motto:

Keep your words sweet:

you never know when you will have to eat them!

She flushed. "I was rather sharp with those first-years ... anyway, you have a try, it's usually right."

Terry's face fell as he opened to an apricot-coloured page that stated:

The best way to get rid of your duties is to discharge them.

"I did neglect to honour my parents," he admitted. "I'll write them an owl tonight. Here, Michael."

I grabbed the book and slid my finger into a green page near the beginning. But the pages flipped away from me, and suddenly they were open in the pink section, bearing the curious legend:

Romance will never last for those starry-eyed youngsters with mournful faces.

To preserve love, keep laughing!

Starry? Was I really so mournful about Padma? There seemed to be an important point in there somewhere, but as I handed the charmed book back to Penelope, I couldn't help wondering what laughter really had to do with love.

A Happy Announcement

Chapter 2 of 21

The Yule Ball is on and everyone must learn to dance. But will everyone find a dancing partner?

CHAPTER TWO

A Happy Announcement

Our fourth year at Hogwarts was a good one. There were no monsters hiding around corners, officially or unofficially, and by this stage we had become pretty confident in our studies. Quidditch was cancelled for the year, so Terry and I could practise flying without worrying about whether we were good enough to be selected for the Ravenclaw team. Dumbledore announced that we would be hosting the Triwizard Tournament, and the champion for Durmstrang turned out to be no less a person than Viktor Krum himself.

It was actually the visitors from the other school, Beauxbatons, who attached themselves more to Ravenclaw, and they all seemed to like Padma, who had not forgotten her primary-school French. After one very animated breakfast I asked her:

"So what were you saying to that Taileb Tarzan?"

"Tarzan!" she snorted. "His name is Tahleb Tahseen! I was only asking him to pass the pumpkin juice. Only I didn't remember the French word for pumpkin."

"It seemed to take a very long time," I complained.

"You were just bored because you didn't understand. Honestly, it wasn't anything worth translating!"

"The visitors seem to take up a lot of your time with things not worth translating."

"Well, that's the point of the tournament, isn't it? To make friends with our foreign guests?" Padma was irritated. "Tahleb is a really interesting and humorous person. You'd think so too if you bothered to listen to what he says."

I knew that Padma was right, and that I'd be making a mountain out of a molehill if I said any more, so I kept a disgruntled silence. I didn't really mind that Padma was friendly to the guests; what annoyed me was that she was so irritated when I asked her about it. I felt that if I said another word we'd have a full-blown argument.

During our first two classes I sat with Terry while Padma sat with Morag. At recess the four of us stamped around the chilly grounds together and discussed our homework, our earlier tiff forgotten. I was about to mention that life seemed rather boring lately, but pulled myself up just in time. Boring? When we had the foreign guests, and the Triwizard Tournament, and Quidditch practice this evening? What did I have to bore me?

Professor McGonagall kept us working hard through the next lesson, even though it was the third-last Transfiguration class of the term. She announced that a five hundred-word essay ("Describe, with examples, the ways in which Transforming Spells must be adapted when performing Cross-Species Switches.") would be due on Monday. It was only when I finally slammed my notebook closed that I realised she had ended the class five minutes early.

"I have an announcement," she said. "If you would stop doodling, Entwhistle. You may know that a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament is the Yule Ball. This is an opportunity to do our part towards establishing international goodwill among wizards and socialise with our guests. The ball will be held at eight o'clock on Christmas Day in the Great Hall, and everybody in fourth year and above is invited to attend."

I noticed that all the girls seemed suddenly interested. McGonagall was explaining how we had to wear dress robes, and must not embarrass Hogwarts with immature behaviour ("She means getting drunk," hissed Terry), but must do our best to ensure the visitors enjoyed their evening ... I only half-listened, because I didn't see myself as

a likely dancer. Would *any* of the boys want to go?

But as soon as McGonagall had dismissed the class, Padma seized my hands and exclaimed, "That's the best idea the teachers have had for years. Can you dance, Michael?"

"No," I said.

"Nor can I," she said. "At least, only Indian dancing. But Marietta Edgecombe can. We must ask her to organise a practice session. Come on, ballroom can't be difficult! They wouldn't expect us to be doing something that we can't reasonably learn in the two weeks we have left. Can you dance, Morag?"

"I learned some Highland when I was little," said Morag. "I'm thinking ballroom goes rather like this." She took Padma's hands, and whirled her around the Transfiguration classroom. Padma was nothing loath, and they tumbled around together in reasonable synchrony.

"I've done some ballet," admitted Mandy. "I wasn't any good at it, but they say a start in ballet gives you a start in any kind of dancing."

"I took jazz and tap lessons for a while," offered Lisa. And the next minute Mandy and Lisa were jigging around together after Padma and Morag.

"Well," said Terry, as we made our way down to lunch, "it seems all the women want to follow Professor McGonagall with tambourines and dancing."

"Are you going to look for a partner?" I asked. The ball might be fun if Terry would take Morag, so that we were a foursome, and only spent about half the time actually dancing.

"Nah, McGonagall said it was okay to come alone. Only students below fourth year need to come with partners."

"I thought you had to be in fourth year to come at all," I said.

"Weren't you listening? All fourth-years can come, with partners or without. And the partner can be in third year or even younger, I suppose, if we like. But younger students can only come if they have an older partner."

"I don't know if I want to go at all," I said. But I knew Padma would never forgive me if I skived out of a grand social event like this one.

"Oh, it'll be all right," said Terry. "There'll be food, and a band, and even if we don't find a partner, we can still find someone to dance with once we're there. Not that you need to worry you're lucky enough to be already yoked."

When we arrived at Greenhouse Three for a rather frosty Herbology class, it was clear that the Slytherins also knew about the ball. Pansy Parkinson's gang of girls was shrieking about their clothes, hair and make-up.

"Tell me, Mandy!" Pansy yelled across the Bouncing Bulbs. "Do you have a beau yet?"

"*That Four-Eyes!*" scoffed Daphne Greengrass. "Maybe one of Hagrid's Blast-Ended Screwws would take her!" And the Slytherin girls dissolved into guffaws.

"Keep the noise down, ladies," admonished Professor Sprout, but of course they took no notice.

While the girls were cackling loudly, I realised the Slytherin boys were having a quiet conference of their own.

"Any idea for which girl you'll try, Nott?" asked Malfoy.

"Perhaps," said Nott. "Haven't asked anyone yet. What about you, Zabini?"

"Face it, Zabini," mocked Malfoy, "who'd go with you?"

"*Lots* of girls," said Zabini firmly. "Definitely. Why should that surprise you?"

Zabini had a point, I thought. I had no idea what girls considered attractive in a boy, but surely Zabini was the only Slytherin with any claims at all in that direction. I had overheard Padma telling Morag that Malfoy and Nott were weeds and Crabbe and Goyle were trolls, but that Zabini's eyelashes were *almost* tempting.

"I could get *two* dates if I had to," Zabini boasted.

"Want to bet on it?" asked Malfoy suddenly. "A Galleon for every girl who accepts you?"

"Yes," said Zabini, "if you're offering to throw away Galleons. With incentive like that, let's make *it* three. I bet you three Galleons that I can have three girls agreeing to be my partner at the Yule Ball."

"If you've cash to spare, you can bet me too," said Nott.

Malfoy gave a withering frown. "Not *you*, Nott. We know you can probably find *one* girl who'll have you, and almost certainly *can't* find as many as three. But, Zabini we'll make a binding magical contract tomorrow. I'll fix it this evening."

I had no more excuse to linger around the giant cactus, so I made my way back to our table. I was about to tell Terry what I had overheard, but at that point Professor Sprout called for silence so that she could teach us the theory part of the lesson. By the time I had taken three pages of notes I had forgotten all about the Slytherin boasting and betting. I didn't even remember it on the way to dinner when I overheard a gaggle of girls talking about prospective partners. After all, no-one would take this partners business too seriously, right?

Wrong. All through dinner, girls were giggling about dress robes and dancing steps and partners. Morag and Su said they had robes that reflected their ethnic heritage, but Padma said that Muggle Indian costume would look stupid at a wizarding ball, and Mandy and Lisa wanted to know just what an English witch's ethnic heritage costume looked like anyway.

Terry tried to clear his throat at this point, but no-one was listening.

Then Padma and Mandy had to attract Marietta Edgecombe's attention for long enough to beg her to run dancing classes, but Marietta protested that her dancing wasn't really good enough, and then Sylvia Fawcett interjected that she believed Madam Hooch knew something about it. The Beauxbatons champion, Fleur Delacour, announced that *all* the Beauxbatons students took dancing classes, just as they learned to ride broomsticks, and she felt it was *aræ-sen-si-ell* aspect of every witch's education, given the number of formal parties the *Alliance des Sorcières* ran each year.

"*Accio, salt!*" commanded Terry.

The salt flew into his raised hand. "Learned a trick from watching Potter hurling down the great dragon," he grinned.

"Yes, but why did you use magic, love?" asked Lisa. "One of us could have passed you t' salt." And before Terry could reply, she had turned back to the giggling girls.

So the ball was happening. Terry and I would have to get used to the idea. The girls expected us to attend. They expected us to invite them to be our partners. And they expected us to learn to dance with them.

I had a sudden image of Terry and Morag, festooned in dress robes and capering around the Great Hall like grasshoppers. I nearly laughed. Then I remembered that I would be dancing with Padma. At the idea that she might think me a grasshopper, all laughter died.

Blaise Zabini's Bet

Chapter 3 of 21

Michael's sense of honour is outraged when he overhears a very private conversation.

CHAPTER THREE

Blaise Zabini's Bet In the common room that evening, it was even worse. While I tried to scribble down spell adaptations for McGonagall and applications of cassia for Sprout, the girls kept humming and hissing.

"I do fancy..." (I couldn't hear the boy's name, and I tried not to listen.)

"Oh, he's a really sweet guy, but he isn't my type."

"Are you kidding? He's gorgeous!"

Then an apparent switch to discussing a different boy: "He's the most sensational-looking boy in the school such a pity about his personality!"

"Yes, a real berk, and self-centred too."

"Whereas his friend is quite a decent person just doesn't have any brains." Giggle, muffle, and eyebrows of innuendo.

It was impossible not to wonder who the victims of these discussions were. I hoped none of them was myself. Then I realised what it would mean if none of the girls were talking about me and started to hope that one of them was myself. Decent but brainless? Handsome but arrogant? Merely "sweet"? Oh, Merlin, which was the worst fate?

I folded up Sprout's parchment just in time to see an owl tapping at the casement. I let it in, and it swooped down on Penelope Clearwater. She paid the owl, read the note, and suddenly her face was wreathed in smiles.

"It's from my boyfriend at the Ministry," she explained to Sylvia Fawcett.

"The one who works for Crouch?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, poor Mr Crouch has come down very sick, so he's sending Percy to represent him at the Yule Ball. I know it's not really good news, but I can't help being glad that Percy and I will be together on Christmas night."

"Well, that's your partner settled, then," remarked Sylvia, a trifle sourly, betraying that her own partner was nowhere near settled yet.

"All these chattering girls, the suspense is driving me up the wall," complained Robert.

"Maybe it's the girls who are in suspense," remarked Kevin, "waiting for some boy to ask them to the ball."

"If they care that much, I wish they would ask us," said Anthony, looking up from his book.

"You'd hate that," Terry reproved. "Being asked by a girl is only fun if it's a girl you wanted to go with anyway."

"Well, it's no fun being the one who has to ask and be refused, either," I pointed out.

"No, it's vile. But if I had to choose," Terry sounded quite serious, "I'd rather take the pain of being refused than the embarrassment of having to do the refusing. After all, I'd only ask a girl if I trusted her to refuse me nicely. But the kind of girl who'd throw herself at a boy well, there's no guarantee she'd accept refusal without a mighty cup of wrath."

"Oh, I can't *stand* this!" Robert muttered. He scrambled up onto the table, in full view of the whole house, and shouted more loudly than the girls' twittering:

"Mandy Brocklehurst!"

Startled, Mandy bit off her chattering mid-sentence while Lisa's mouth froze at a round "o". Every student was silent while Robert shouted:

"MANDY, WILL YOU BE MY PARTNER AT THE YULE BALL?"

Now everyone was rigid with horror. It seemed a very long three seconds before Mandy replied:

"I should be delighted, provided your robes don't clash with purple."

We all burst into applause while Robert and Mandy laughed with relief.

The girls' chattering was no better the next day. There was glancing and giggling all through Potions, as Padma and Morag and Mandy and Lisa and Su struggled between Snape's frowns and their overwhelming urge to compare notes with the Hufflepuffs. Only when we arrived at Greenhouse Three did Padma abandon Morag in order to slip her hand through mine she must have drawn the line at sharing her intimate speculations with the Slytherins.

"You were wrong, Pansy!" were Lisa's first words. "Mandy were t' first in the class to find herself a partner for the ball."

Daphne Greengrass tittered pityingly. "What, the rest of you haven't found anyone yet?"

The class kept itself strictly in four separate groups for that lesson, which was entirely a practical, charming the cassia pots to withstand the frost. Terry rather overdid it, because his plant caught fire, and he foolishly tried to clamp down on the flames with his bare hands. I saw him doubled over in agony, with the apricot flames still burning brightly and about to lick into his hair, and hastily doused the fire with a water charm.

"Prize idiot, Boot," sneered Nott. "His plant catches fire, and *hetouches* it!"

"I didn't think it could be real fire!" Terry explained weakly.

Professor Sprout arrived at our side and pulled Terry's palm towards her. "That's a nastier burn than can be treated with anything I have in the greenhouse," she said. "Go to the hospital wing at once. Honestly, Boot, what possessed you to touch a live anti-frosting flame with your bare hands? If anyone else has forgotten his greenhouse gloves, put them on immediately!"

Terry shuffled out of the greenhouse, still in too much pain to care about the Slytherins' sneers.

"There is no need for anyone else to stop working," Sprout reminded us. "Has anyone finished a first batch of pots yet?"

I had; I carried my tray to the back of the greenhouse, which meant walking past the Slytherin boys' table. Sprout was busy at the front, so while I unstacked empty pots and filled them with fresh compost, I was on my own. Malfoy didn't notice me when he handed Zabini a bucket of white egg-shaped stones.

"I've charmed these," he said. "There are twenty of them. You ask a girl the Yule Ball, you touch her with one of these *Before* she replies it won't work if you wait until afterwards. On the robes will do if you can't get it to touch her hand."

I abruptly turned my back to them so that if Malfoy did see me, he would not realise I was listening intently to every word. The stones looked very ordinary; you might mistake them for eggs, but you wouldn't think of them as charmed objects.

"When the girl replies," Malfoy continued, "her name will appear on the stone in silvery letters. Or maybe gold. But more likely silver. And the stone will change colour. Got that?"

"Okay." Zabini lifted one stone out of the bucket. "Got that. But why?"

"So that I'll know you didn't cheat, of course. Twenty stones. The chance to ask twenty girls."

Zabini had obviously upped the stakes since the conversation yesterday. His original plan had been to prove he could invite three girls to the ball. But ... twenty?

Malfoy did not seem perturbed. "I can give you more than twenty, of course, if you use these up, but the point is I need to keep count. At ten o'clock on Christmas Day you bring them back to me, and I'll know how many girls agreed to be your partner at the ball."

"How will you know that?"

"Well, if the girl says no, the stone will turn black. If she says yes, it will be red, blue or green. And if you didn't bother asking as many as twenty, the spare stones will stay white."

"Why three colours for girls who say yes?"

"Ah, that's my secret for the time being. I'll tell you when we settle accounts. All you need to know now is that a green stone is worth one Galleon. A blue is worth two. A red will be three. A black, of course, is worth zilch. So you'd better hope they all turn red. And if any of them have gold writing, that doubles the stakes. So if you bring me twenty red stones with the names of twenty different girls in gold letters, I'll owe you a hundred and twenty Galleons that's the theory. Some chance, of course!"

Goyle was stuttering, as if he wished he'd thought of betting on the Yule Ball too. It must be nice, I thought, to be able to throw the Galleons around like that.

"A hundred and " Zabini was gasping. "So what's the catch?"

"None," said Malfoy, "unless, of course, you're afraid of girls."

"*Me?* Ha!"

"The catch is that I've put a time limit on these stones," continued Malfoy. "Ten o'clock on Christmas night. So when you bring back your multi-coloured stones, I'll be taking the spare white stones around the Great Hall, and touching them on the girls I think suitable. And those stones will change colour red or blue or green or black according to whether the girl *would* have gone to the ball with you if you *had* asked her. And if they all turn black, fair enough. You win your bet, as many Galleons as your coloured stones add up to. But if even one turns a different colour, you lose. All your coloured stones both the first set, back in this bucket, and the new ones that I'll be bringing back to you they'll all add up to money that *you owe me*. Got that? One Galleon for green, two for blue, three for red, and double if the writing is gold."

"Well, I don't see that that's such a catch," said Zabini. "All I have to do is use up all my stones before Christmas Day, and the second half of the bet won't be happening."

"Correct. But if you're bringing me a bucket of twenty black stones for no cash and I'm knowing the names of twenty girls *what didn't* fancy you well, so much for your claim to get yourself three dates at once!"

"Not a problem." Zabini was lazily swinging the bucket of stones. "I'll get three dance partners. More likely six. And there is no way I'll fail to invite any girl who is going to accept me."

I had run out of excuses for lingering, so I slowly carried my pots back to the Ravenclaw boys' table. This bet wasn't just a Slytherin thing any more. If Zabini really wanted to win his bet, he'd be hitting on girls from other houses too.

It sounded like an everyone-lose situation to me.

A Bucket of Hexes

Chapter 4 of 21

Michael accidentally collides with a dastardly Slytherin plot.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Bucket of Hexes

I puzzled over it all through Ancient Runes, a lesson for which Terry did not appear. Meaning to consult him about the best way to warn off the girls, I went to meet him in the hospital wing afterwards. But Madam Pomfrey shooed me away from the door. "Boot needs to sit quietly in his bandages for half an hour yet," she said. "If he fidgets he'll come unravelled and we'll have to start again, so I'm saying no visitors. Oh... but since you are here, Corner, could you ask Professor Sprout for some supplies?"

She gave me a long shopping list, which had to be taken all the way back to the greenhouse, and then the box of herbs had to be carted all the way back up to the infirmary. After Madam Pomfrey had finished thanking me, Terry was still being kept quiet behind the door, and I was very late to lunch.

I was not the only one. As I rushed down the last few steps to the Entrance Hall, a door to my left was flung open, and there were also swift footsteps to my right the other latecomers were obviously as ravenous as I was. I skidded to a halt with a second to spare as the person on my right, not bothering to slow down, charged straight into my pathway. With an almighty crash, the person on my left was bowled onto the floor, while a number of dense objects smashed around our ankles.

"Troglydote!" That was Zabini's voice.

"Watch it!" I held out my hand to the person on the floor.

"That hurt! And you've dropped something." These unnecessary observations came from Zacharias Smith of Hufflepuff.

Zabini glowered at us, although the accident had very obviously been his own fault. He was carrying his bucket, and the dropped objects were small white stones. Zacharias, with a resentful glare, began to help picking them up, while I stared stupidly. Those stones... if I could take them away... I actually had one in my hand before I came to my senses. Whatever mischief Zabini was planning, that didn't make it right for me to steal his property. The stone felt surprisingly sticky, as if I could leave fingerprints on it.

"What are you doing? Those are mine!" Zabini rounded on me furiously even though I was handing his stone back to him. "I've hexed them. Don't bring down curses upon yourselves!"

"So sorry!" muttered Zacharias sarcastically. "Next time a lout knocks me out without apologising, I'll not try to help him! Next time I'll be a thug too!"

"How have you hexed them?" I asked.

"Never mind. But now you have poked your fingers where they weren't wanted, don't be surprised if you find you can't tell anyone about this little adventure. Accio, stones!" And they clattered back into the bucket.

"If I was finishing my Potions essay," said Zacharias, "and Zabini was hexing stones, what's your excuse?"

"Errand for Madam Pomfrey. But, listen, Zacharias, about those stones..." I launched into an explanation of the bet. Zacharias, the unlikeliest confidant, listened agog. We sat down back to back, so that I had a clear view of the Slytherin table. But Zabini didn't sit down at all; he ambled over to the Hufflepuffs.

"Zacharias," I craned my neck around to the seat behind me, "can you see what Zabini's doing?"

"Nothing much," replied Zacharias. "He's speaking to one of the girls. No, I'm not knowing her name, she's not in fourth year."

I shifted my gaze cautiously. But Zabini had apparently finished. He was walking away from a block of Hufflepuff girls, slipping something into his pocket and grinning. At the very end of the row he stopped to speak to another girl.

But he can't do that, I thought. *That one looks as if she's only in first year. Besides, he's in plain view of the first victim there he can't go chatting up Number Two in front of her and still expect to have a third opportunity later!*

"He touched that little girl with one of his hexed stones," Zacharias muttered in my ear. "What's he up to?"

"He was asking her to the ball," I began to explain.

"*That kid?* Fat chance! Use your common sense more likely hexing her with blisters."

So perhaps that was Zabini's ploy: only ask girls whom no-one could suspect him of asking. But how on earth was he going to stop the girls finding out they were being twenty-timed when they discussed his invitations with one another?

After lunch Terry appeared, his hands as good as new, and we borrowed school brooms to practise flying. But the air was so cold and gusty that it wasn't very pleasant. Padma, stamping her feet on the iron ground, complained that it wasn't much fun for her to crick her neck in order to "watch boys mucking around".

"Well, you have a turn flying, then," I offered, holding out my broom.

"No, thanks, you know I don't fly very well."

"Then make yourself some fire and read a book on the side. Or go indoors and do something completely different. Honestly, it doesn't matter to me whether you're watching or not."

"*Nice*," she muttered to the dead grass. "My boyfriend doesn't care whether I'm there or not!"

"Don't be silly, of course I care. What I'd like best would be if you would fetch your own broom and fly with us. But only if you want to. If that isn't what you want, it doesn't make much difference to me what other option you take."

"Of course, it wouldn't occur to the great Michael Corner," Padma flared, "to give up his flying and spend half an hour doing something that choose. After all, it isn't exactly as if you're the offspring of Mercury neither you nor Terry will ever be the stuff of school Quidditch teams."

I thought that was rather uncalled for, so I suppose I was somewhat sharp in asking what alternative activity she'd had in mind.

"I can't decide offhand!" she almost shouted. "I haven't had a moment, for nearly a year, to think about how I'd choose to spend the lunch hour if I didn't have to consider you. But just give me a moment, and I'll think of something, with you or without!" And she stalked off the Quidditch stands, with Morag faithfully trailing five paces behind.

Terry landed beside me. "What was that about?"

"Don't know," I said truthfully. "Girls are just moody sometimes, I suppose. Lately it seems that every little thing is setting Padma off into a dramatic fight."

"Seasoned with too much salt?" he asked. "A sign you're becoming bored with her?"

I stared at him. "No, of course not!" But as we trudged back to the broom shed, it did cross my mind that one possible reason for Padma's touchiness was that she was perhaps becoming bored with *me*.

Our History of Magic lesson was less torpid than usual. Instead of going to sleep while pretending to take notes, the Gryffindor boys were teasing one another. I couldn't work out what the joke was, but apparently Weasley, Finnigan and Thomas were finding Potter very, very amusing.

Professor Moody permitted neither rest nor play in his classes. He assigned a whole chapter to be read for homework, with threats of a test next Wednesday. But I was so bemused by the idea that Padma might be bored with me that I didn't even write down the page numbers. The four o'clock bell rang, and the weekend had begun.

Was Padma really bored with me?

I tried to remember. The first six months had been idyllic. We had laughed a great deal, and felt very comfortable together, but I had never lost sight of what an extraordinary person Padma was and how lucky I was to have her as my girlfriend.

Then there had been the summer holidays a flurry of exchanging owls three times a week, and thinking of her every hour, and cajoling my parents into arranging for the two families to meet up together in Blackpool for the first weekend in August. I had enjoyed Blackpool all the more after the month's separation; we had seen the sights, being very careful not to let Padma's twin sister or my little brother feel left out, and I had been so pleased when my parents agreed that "the Patils were a very nice family indeed". And I had been overjoyed to see Padma again on the Hogwarts Express on the first of September, and she had seemed equally glad to see me.

So far, so good. Being fourth years had been very comfortable for us. I hadn't asked myself any questions about how long Padma and I would stay together. I had just enjoyed being a couple, had assumed that she was as happy as I was. Perhaps we had been *too* comfortable. I'd heard the older boys saying that girls fussed if you "took them for granted". Had I stopped remembering how wonderful Padma was and taken her for granted?

I didn't think so. After all, people who know each other well are supposed to feel comfortable together. I didn't have to keep asking Terry ~~if~~ still wanted to be my friend! And I hadn't let feeling comfortable lead to being familiar (I was always careful to be polite to Padma) or bossy (I never suggested she ought to give up her other friends or activities in order to be with me). Nor had I really minded Padma's recent spate of ratty moods: everyone puts up with the occasional ratty mood from a friend.

It was just that... well, we had been a couple for eleven months now. And for the last two of those months we had been annoying one another fairly often. Why was Padma so easily annoyed lately?

Could the real reason be nothing more complicated than that she found *me* annoying?

I pushed that highly uncomfortable thought away easily when Terry nudged me. "Did you hear that, Michael?"

"What? No, sorry, I was miles away."

"Marietta Edgecombe just said that Madam Hooch has agreed to run a dancing lesson tomorrow afternoon. Two o'clock in the Great Hall."

"Oh, good," I said, trying to muster enthusiasm.

The Unexpected Task

Chapter 5 of 21

Michael knows that something has been unfairly manipulated, but will he work out the nature of the hex in time to contain the mischief?

CHAPTER FIVE

The Unexpected Task

Terry and I spent Saturday morning in the library finishing our homework. We were rather late for lunch when we finally put our scrolls back in our bags. The only other person left in the library was Viktor Krum, who seemed to like sitting there without opening a single book.

"Let's get out," I said to Terry, "before Krum's wretched fan club breaks the place apart with their giggling."

"Pity, my heart always melts like wax before I can ask for his autograph," Terry commented.

Sure enough, the crowd of giggling girls swept past us as we moved out, avidly speculating on which of them Krum would invite to the ball. Even the boys in the corridors were talking about the ball. An Irish voice from just around the corner was saying:

"I was never so scared in me life as when I asked her. But at least she accepted, so I don't have to worry any more. What about you; have you asked anyone yet?"

"Two people actually," his Cockney friend replied. "Just this mornin'. And the first said no, but the second said yes. It took a lot of courage to ask that second one, I can tell you..."

"So who said no to your dashing personality and noble character?" asked the Irishman playfully. "No, it's all right; you don't have to tell me "

"I don't really mind tellin'; it was Ginny Weasley. Perhaps I'm too tall for her..."

The voices faded before I could hear who had accepted the Cockney. I looked at Terry. "Have you asked anyone yet?"

"No, I've been in fear and trembling with cowardice."

"You could ask Morag. I could ask Padma to fix it up if you don't want to ask her directly."

"Not Morag." Terry stood still for a moment. "I mean, I know she's your girlfriend's best friend, and she's all right. It's just that ... to be honest, there's another girl I like better."

"Ah. But you haven't asked her yet?"

"It's a matter of finding the courage, you see."

The Great Hall was almost empty by the time we finally arrived to help ourselves to tepid soup and half-stale bread rolls. In one corner of the Hufflepuff table, a small girl was weeping quietly into her mug. I recognised her as the same girl to whom Zabini had spoken twenty-four hours earlier.

"She might prefer to be left alone outside the camp," said Terry as I moved over towards her.

"I think I know what her problem is," I said. "It's " Suddenly I began to cough and choke. I clutched the table-edge so as not to overbalance and found that tears were streaming from my eyes. Terry thumped my back, and by the time I had recovered, the tearful girl was staring up at me with interest.

Terry still did not want to interfere with the girl's business, but I sat down next to her. "Can I help you with anything?" I asked.

The girl startled and pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve. "No," she said. "It's nothing."

"No, it isn't," I said. "You look as if someone has played a rotten trick on you, and you have every right to cry."

"How did you know that?" she choked. "Does *everyone* know about it?"

"No, no-one," I reassured her. But I could not meet her eye. "I mean ... no, I'm only guessing. But if it's anything to do with Blaise Zabini, he has his own reasons to want to keep quiet."

The first-year's eyes widened in speechless horror.

"So tell us the rest," I said. "Did that all-time stinker Blaise Zabini invite you to the Yule Ball?"

The girl nodded. "He seemed so kind yesterday. He said he said I had *noble* face and that he couldn't believe I didn't have a dancing partner already. And when I explained that I'm only in first year, he acted all surprised and said he wouldn't have guessed, I seemed so mature, and would I like to be his partner anyway? I was stupid to let myself be flattered."

"No, you're very intelligent to understand so quickly *how* you were fooled," I contradicted. "Some people take *years* to work out their own weaknesses." I'd read that line in a book somewhere, and I was glad it had come in useful. "He'd asked you to the ball, so why shouldn't you believe he really wanted to take you?"

"Because he's so good-looking. He's like a Renaissance painting. I should have known that a boy like that didn't need to resort to inviting first-years. At least, that's *what* he told me."

"What!" I was astounded. "He *told* you that he considers himself a painting?"

A ghost of a smile hovered around the girl's face. "No. Yesterday he only said he was honoured to have won my company so easily. It was like a fairy tale, thought he was like a painting. I spend a lot of my school holidays in the art gallery, you see. Anyway, today I overheard him inviting a girl in Ravenclaw to be his partner. I was so shocked, I just sat there, watching him every second, until he'd finished his lunch."

"Did you discuss it with the Ravenclaw girl?"

She was slightly surprised. "No, I didn't think of that. Maybe I should do. She ought to know that she wasn't his first choice, oughtn't she? But I'm afraid I don't know her name. ... Anyway, I followed him out of the hall and asked, very sweetly and politely, if he still wanted to take me to the ball. And he said ... he said ..." She dissolved into tears again.

I pushed my handkerchief into her hand, pulled her own soaked cloth ball off her, shook it out, and performed a *Scourgify* charm on it. The name *Laura Madley* was clearly monogrammed in one corner.

The girl wiped her eyes again, took a deep breath, and recited: "He said: 'Take *you*? You're imagining things! Do you really think a man like me needs to resort to inviting a *first-year* to be his partner?' I said, 'But you asked me! Three of my friends heard you!' And he stopped laughing, and turned quite cold, and said, 'No, I did not,' and walked off."

"A liar and a promise-breaker," I intoned solemnly. "And malicious too."

"And how am I going to tell my friends that it's all off?" she asked, still sniffing a little.

I had a moment of inspiration. "You say that *you* changed *your* mind, of course. That you chucked him because you found out that he was a liar. Because *you don't* want to mess around with boys like that, do you?"

She nodded, as if this option might allow her a slight face-saver. "So I suppose I won't be going to the ball after all," she said in a small voice.

For a second I almost wondered if I should try to fix her up with Kevin or Anthony. That would give her the last laugh on Zabini, all right. But then I came to my senses. Professor Dumbledore wouldn't want an eleven-year-old girl to be drinking mulled mead at a late-night party surrounded by ravening Slytherin boys.

"Laura," I said, as kindly as I could, "I really think your best option would be to step onto the Hogwarts Express next Saturday and spend Christmas with your family. They'll enjoy a fortnight of having you at home far more than you'll enjoy a few hours of a teenagers' party."

She nodded, not happy with my advice, but apparently recognising that I was right. Suddenly she swapped the handkerchiefs back and sprang to her feet. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you for showing me that not *all* boys are like Blaise Zabini."

As we chewed through the stale bread (the soup was now too cold to be considered), Terry asked, "What was her problem?"

Before I had even opened my mouth, I swallowed my bread the wrong way, and Terry had to thump my back again.

"Is the little girl going to be all right?" Terry asked.

I was about to launch into an explanation of Malfoy's bet with Zabini when suddenly my tongue felt stiff and dry. I found I couldn't speak.

Terry frowned. "What *is* going on, Michael? Has someone hexed you into dark and silence?"

This was a very perceptive question, and I almost wondered if it were the truth. "I don't think so," I said. "I'm speaking now after all. But, look, what I'm trying to tell you is " And, on cue, I began choking again.

Terry told me that I needed to see Madam Pomfrey.

"I think it must be some kind of spell," I said. "But I don't get it. No-one has waved a wand at me. And there doesn't seem to be any general curse that strikes me dumb all

the time. But when I try to talk about um certain things well, how could such a specific spell be cast behind my back?"

"If it's an object you find you can't speak about," said Terry sagely, "that's probably because it's the *object* that's charmed so that no-one can speak about it. Don't you remember Flitwick telling us about that kind of stuff last year?"

"Yes, but it's not an object; it's well, not an object. I don't see how anyone could put that kind of spell on something uh intangible. Which is what this is."

"Well, never mind. Do you *need* to talk about it?"

I was about to say that I did when I remembered that I had had no trouble at all discussing it with Laura Madley. So perhaps there wasn't a spell after all.

The food vanished off the tables while we were still swallowing our final mouthfuls. Some invisible spell from downstairs obliterated the scraps of food from the surfaces, and suddenly the bare table in front of us was gleaming, as if an invisible cloth full of polish had swept down its length. Terry and I pushed back our benches just in time to escape being drawn into the spell that was dragging the tables away towards the walls, leaving the centre of the hall empty. The clock was showing five minutes to two, and Madam Hooch was leading a crowd of students through the doorway, ready for the promised dancing lesson.

Sugar Quills and Squabbles

Chapter 6 of 21

And whatever is upsetting Padma?

CHAPTER SIX

Sugar Quills and Squabbles

"It isn't difficult," Madam Hooch promised us, "but there are a few tricks to remember. The most important one is to keep the rhythm." She placed a large metronome on the nearest table, and set it ticking at a loud four-beat. "Can you hear it saying 'fizz-ing whizz-bee, fizz-ing whizz-bee'? It can be at any speed " a flick of the dial, and the beat was racing "but if it says 'fizzing whizzbee' you have a four-beat. Now listen to a three." She waved her wand at the metronome, and the ticking altered. "'Sug-ar quill, sug-ar quill.' Again, any speed " she demonstrated "but, always, it says 'sugar quill'. Now, to practise the steps..."

After ten minutes of just stepping to the beats at different speeds, we spent another ten minutes using the correct foot in the correct direction. While the idea wasn't difficult, it certainly required practice, so I had my full concentration on my feet. It wasn't until Madam Hooch said, "Well, I think most of you have picked that up. Let's practise the ballroom hold now," that I realised something.

I scanned the hall while Madam Hooch instructed, "Find a partner! It doesn't matter if there aren't enough boys practising with another girl is fine for now. Don't be fussy, just take the nearest person."

Finally I grabbed Morag while Madam Hooch admonished me, "Gently, dear! You're dancing with her, not throwing her on the tip!"

After we had arranged our arms in the correct hold and were settled to a slow four-step, I asked: "Morag, where is Padma?"

"Fizz-ing whizz-bee... She's with her sister, Michael."

"Doing what?"

"I did not ask too many questions, but Parvati's seeming to be very very upset about something. They *wereboth* crying when I left to come here."

"Both? What's with Padma?"

"She's maybe only weeping in sympathy, but Parvati's in dire distress. I inferred it was something about a boyfriend. I was not liking to ask, I do not really know Parvati."

Padma had never mentioned that Parvati had a boyfriend, but I supposed there might be a new one lurking around. As Madam Hooch called, "We'll try it to triple time now! Switch to 'sug-ar quill'!" I wondered whether there really was a boyfriend in the picture, or whether Parvati Patil had simply become the latest Zabini victim.

I soon found out.

Madam Hooch stopped the metronome at four o'clock, assuring us that we had all done extremely well, and Terry, Morag and I headed back to the Ravenclaw tower. Roger Davies was holding court on the table nearest the door.

"I'm telling you, the Tornados *will* make a come-back. It can't happen later than June next year."

"Roger, have you ever *been* to Tutshill?" protested Eddie Carmichael.

"That's exactly the problem, if you ask me," said Roger. "Past Tornados managers have had too much sympathy for the ambitious local fan, and haven't taken the trouble to scout for real talent. It's not that I *like* the Tornados or anything. I'm just telling you as a fact, now that Hedonius has taken over the management, he'll be ruthless about whom he allows on the team, and the Tornados won't be able to lose..."

"The Canons haven't succeeded in their promised come-back for decades," Harold Dingle pointed out.

"Yes, but what's their strategy?" said Roger impatiently. "Nothing but work harder, try again, repeat the same old mistakes. The Tornados will actually have a new strategy to match their new line-up on the team..."

Morag took a seat near a straggly-haired third-year named Luna Lovegood. "Nice earrings," she said.

I was surprised, for Morag did not joke much. The earrings were supposed to be large blue sunflowers, but they were so awkwardly proportioned that Luna looked as if she had toadstools growing out of her ears. They also drew attention to the wand that she had tucked behind her right ear. Luna told Morag that the earrings had been her great-grandmother's.

"Was your great-grandmother a dear, dear person?"

"Oh, she's still alive," said Luna. "She has a huge collection of jewellery; what she's passed on to me is only about a quarter. She knows a lot of goblins, and they find her bargains with the sapphire mines in Pakistan..."

Terry avoided a sofa where Robert's conversation with Mandy was starting to sound like a Regency romance. He chose the fourth seat at a square table where Kevin was "helping" Lisa and Su with their Transfiguration essays, chiefly by making wisecracks about the usual social relations between weasels and adders. Both girls were laughing dutifully, and Kevin was watching them carefully, as if he had not yet decided which of them he would risk inviting to the ball.

"The answer's on page 58," Terry blundered. Then he winked at me, and I realised he hadn't blundered at all. If only Kevin had bothered to look at the girls, instead of politely pretending to listen to Terry, he would have noticed that Su had her full attention on her text book while Lisa had her full attention on Kevin.

At a far corner of the common room sat a whey-faced Padma. She jumped up as I approached. "Michael, I need to tell you something in private. Can we go somewhere else?"

"Well, if it's about Zabini, there's something *I* want to tell *you*."

"*Zabini*?" But she looked almost guilty at the sound of his name. "Don't be absurd! This is much more important."

I doubted it, but I let her lead me back down the corridor into the empty Charms classroom.

"Parvati's really upset," Padma began.

I hummed non-committally.

"It's about this boy. I promised not to tell anyone who he is, but the point is, she's liked him for ages and ages."

If the boy wasn't Zabini, then I wasn't very interested in his identity, but I supposed it might be Potter. He was famous, and a champion, so probably all the girls liked him.

"Michael, are you listening? Parvati likes this boy, and she always thought he liked her too. He was never an official boyfriend, but he's always treated her like a friend, and never shown any sign of fancying anyone else. So she just naturally assumed they would go to this ball together. But at lunchtime today she found out that he's invited someone else."

"Hmm, that's not good." I waited for the rest of the story.

Padma stared at me. "Well, is that *all* you have to say?"

I couldn't imagine what else there was to say. "It's very unlucky," I managed. "Parvati must be dreadfully disappointed. It's good that you were there to comfort her." But I could see that I had guessed wrongly.

Padma stamped her foot impatiently. "This is a *broken heart* we're talking about, Michael! She's been *expecting* this boy's interest for about eighteen months now. And it isn't just a crush on a random stranger, he's practically her best friend!"

"Yes, that's really bad, as you said. But did I miss something? It's not as if Mr Disappointing has actually done anything wrong. You said he was never an official boyfriend. So presumably he's free to take whomever he likes to the ball." I didn't get it. Did girls think they had the *right* to reciprocal interest from any boy they fancied?

"And you'll never guess who it is that he apparently likes so much better than my sister." Padma was on the verge of tears. "Eloise Midgen!"

I racked my brains. "Remind us? A Gryffindor?"

"No, a Hufflepuff! A spotty little third-year Hufflepuff! I mean, we could have understood it if Mr Stupid had gone for Fleur Delacour, or Cho Chang. But to pass over *my* sister for such an ugly little thing!"

Since Padma and Parvati are identical, I thought Padma showed rather poor taste to assume her sister's beauty like that even though it was perfectly true. "Well, looks aren't everything," I pointed out.

"But it doesn't make *sense*! And now Parvati has no-one."

"There's still nearly two weeks to go," I reminded her reasonably. "And, as you said, Parvati is *very* attractive. I'm sure she'll find some kind of partner in that time."

Padma glowered at me. "Do you think she wants to go with a boy who only cares about *hetooks*?"

"Talking of boys," I decided it was high time we changed the uncomfortable subject, "I want to warn you girls about Zabini. I overheard "

"Shut *up* about Zabini!" she screamed. "I don't care about silly gossip or vile Slytherins! I wanted your help about *a*problem, but you boys are all the same... You just couldn't care less about girls when you have no use for us!"

Right at that moment, I certainly felt that I didn't care much about Padma. She did not elaborate on how I could help her, so, after a moment of silence, I turned and walked out of the classroom.

Half an hour later, Terry pointed out that it was really pretty obvious what kind of "help" Padma had required. She had wanted me to help her find a Yule Ball partner for Parvati.

But if that was all she wanted, why couldn't she just say so plainly?

On Sunday morning I was in no great hurry to speak to Padma again. Terry and I took broomsticks out to the Quidditch pitch, where several Hufflepuffs were already playing.

"You can play Beater, Michael," said Zacharias Smith, who seemed to be in charge. "And, Terry, we're needing another Chaser over here. This is not a proper match, we're just keeping in practice."

So I Beat all morning. I wasn't used to this position (if I can't be Keeper, I like to Chase), so I was embarrassed to discover that we had an audience. And not just a few students who were hoping to join the game. In a far corner, Zabini was conversing earnestly with a girl from Durmstrang. But in a middle-level bench, watching Zacharias intently, and scowling at a missed goal, sat Viktor Krum himself.

Zacharias was not nervous about approaching celebrities. He swooped down to the stand, and said to Krum's ear: "How would *you* have done that? Can you show us?"

To my surprise, Krum did not seem to mind being addressed so familiarly. He Summoned a spare broomstick from the Durmstrang ship, soared into the air, and caught the Quaffle that Zacharias tossed to him. He demonstrated a long-range throw with slow arm movements, then wordlessly tossed the Quaffle back to Zacharias, and stared

hawklike while Zacharias tried to copy his movement.

When it began to rain, we put away the brooms, and Stephen Cornfoot fell into step beside me. "So," he said, "are you going to this ball?"

"Isn't everyone?" I returned. "Know whom you're taking yet?"

"Maybe. And you?"

"Maybe. Or perhaps I'll just go for the food."

"Are you reckoning," Zacharias interrupted, "that folks who are going only for the food will look like dorks?"

"I don't see why," I said. "Partners aren't compulsory."

"The girls think they are. They're so keen on partners that you'd think they'd make more effort to find them. They could at least let us know who's available and who's already taken."

"Dat is a real problem." Viktor Krum had been following us back to the castle, taking in every word. "A man finds a nice girl, he speaks to her for von minute, and suddenly her admirer is his enemy. Or she has no admirer, but de man finds dat *she* does not like *him*."

"But all the girls are wanting to go with you, Krum!" Zacharias protested.

Krum did not reply.

"So, are all the Ravenclaw girls taken, Terry?" Zacharias persisted.

Really unsubtle, I thought. And Zacharias might just walk away from this interview with enough information to make the job easy for himself, for Terry was handing him the facts on a platter.

"No-one had asked Morag by yesterday evening, and I don't think anyone has asked Su. I don't know about Lisa. What about in Hufflepuff?"

"They're all playing impossible to get," said Zacharias. "Not one has admitted to a definite plan. All I can advise you is, do not try for Hannah while Ernie's still living. But something Megan said this morning made me think that she was still up for grabs."

"No, she jolly well is *not*!" retorted Wayne Hopkins.

"Oh, you asked her, did you?"

"No-o, but... well, do any of you know the goss on the Gryffindor girls?"

"I think Lavender Brown's definitely taken," I said, remembering the way she had stared into Finnigan's eyes during dance practice yesterday. "But Parvati Patil's definitely free."

Krum glanced at me, as if hoping I would say more; but Zacharias turned abruptly away, as if he had heard enough. We had reached the Entrance Hall, and the Hufflepuffs disappeared through the door next to the stairs. Krum had his foot on the first step when Terry took a deep breath and pulled a parchment out of his pocket.

"Krum," he said, "CanIhaveyourautograph?"

Krum signed his name without a word.

"Thanks, that's marvellous. Where are you going now?"

"Library."

Spying on the Slytherins

Chapter 7 of 21

Malfoy and Zabini clarify the terms of their bet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Spying on the Slytherins

Terry muttered something about the common room, but I went into the Great Hall, although it was rather early for lunch. Some second-year boys were playing gobstones in the near corner, and a group of sixth-year girls were chattering at the far end. I spotted Padma sitting alone in the middle of the Gryffindor table, and I moved instinctively towards her before I realised that it was actually Parvati. However, she made room for me on the bench, as if glad of any company.

"By yourself, Parvati? What happened to Lavender Brown?"

"She's off somewhere with Seamus. As you said, I'm by myself."

"And without any silver lining in the great black cloud."

"I suppose Padma told you all about it. I'm actually better today than I was yesterday. Disappointed, but it's more that I want time to think it over than that I'm seriously broken-hearted. Only I'm not thinking very clearly by myself. Perhaps I should ask Professor Trelawney to read my cards."

Well, Padma has exaggerated before, I mused. "Will the cards help?"

"They usually do. If you knew Professor Trelawney you'd see that she's really gifted."

"But does knowing the future let you change it?"

"No, so the crystal only helps when the news is good. But tarot isn't only about the certain future. It's about advice and wisdom, and what traps to avoid, and what opportunities to notice. You should have taken Divination, it gives the most amazing sense of control over the future."

Privately I thought that Divination would be likely to remind me of my own helplessness in the face of inexorable destiny. What I said was, "But you don't need the cards. You're already dealing with your problem wisely."

"Am I?"

"Well, you're thinking quietly about what to do next. I can't think of anything wiser than that."

"That only shows that you're no wiser than I am. My 'quiet thinking' is telling me that I don't have a partner for the Yule Ball. That's the one part of the situation that seems unfair. It isn't directly related to my mistake. If anyone I mean, anyone *else* had asked me to the ball three days ago, I'd have said no. But no-one has asked me. So even if I hadn't made that mistake even if I'd been willing to say yes I still wouldn't have a partner for the ball. That problem won't go away just because I try to think about it differently."

"It might," I said suddenly.

She stared at me questioningly.

"I only mean, I know for a fact that lots of boys are still looking for dance partners. And if you 'think about it differently' that is, cheerfully then you're more likely to be asked."

"Are you *sure* there are still boys available?"

"Positive. Although some of them are worrying that all the *girls* are taken."

She did smile then. I was about to warn her that she ought not accept an invitation from Zabini, but we had break off the conversation when a hoard of other students came stampeding in to lunch.

Terry glanced at the Slytherin table during dessert. "Malfoy's letting the sun go down on his anger," he told me. "With Zabini. I distinctly heard him say the word 'cheat'."

I was alerted. "Can you hear what else they're saying?"

"Nah, too much noise and uproar. Wait that part was easy enough to lip-read. Malfoy said, 'We'll talk afterwards. People will hear us down here.' Does that mean they're plotting someone's destruction?"

I strained my ears. "... Back to the common room?" I heard Goyle asking Malfoy.

"Keep your voice *down*, Goyle," Malfoy hissed, none so quietly himself. "Of course not, it'll be full of girls down there. We'll go ..." But I didn't hear where.

"Michael! Wake up!" It was Terry. "Their tricks aren't our business. Whatever apple-cart they're upsetting, that doesn't mean we can spy on them."

"No ... no, I suppose not."

But on the way out of the hall, Crabbe stopped me with the words: "You're done for, Corner."

"What?"

"Your girlfriend was weepy all through dinner last night. We're onto her case. We have plans for her that will make you both very, very sorry."

A pause. Crabbe leered at me, so I said hastily, "Yes, I heard. I won't forget. Padma and I are going to be very, very sorry. I heard all right."

Malfoy was beckoning impatiently, so Crabbe did not pursue the dialogue. I wondered what his "plans" were. He probably only meant that the Slytherins considered Padma easy game as the next Zabini victim but what if it were something more serious? When a person of Crabbe's size threatens a woman's safety, every man has a moral duty to learn more.

"I've changed my mind," I told Terry. "I think I need to snoop."

Terry wouldn't have a bar of it, and I didn't blame him, but I trailed the five Slytherins up the stairs, hoping they wouldn't notice me as they turned the corners. Fortunately, Malfoy led them into an empty classroom half way along the first corridor.

"Close the door, Nott, and put a Silencing Charm on this room. This is private business."

I waited until Nott had finished the Silencing Charm before I waved my wand at the door and muttered, *Finite Incantatem!* Then I sat down cross-legged in front of the door, keeping my ears as close as I dared. Malfoy spoke, not troubling to lower his voice now that he believed the room to be soundproofed.

"You've been cheating, Zabini."

"Cheating? I have not!"

A silence.

"Your spell's a good one," Zabini insisted. "The stones only change colour if I touch the *girl* before she replies. And they don't work on boys I tested it out on Nott, just to make sure. I *can't* cheat on this bet, Malfoy. You worked it out really well."

"You're cheating with the spirit of it, even if you're not breaking any actual rules," said Malfoy coldly. "You've been inviting girls *in* third year."

"Explain that," said Nott sharply. "How is that against the rules?"

"Nott, Zabini, use your common sense," said Malfoy wearily. "You ask a third-year girl to the ball, and what's she going to say? *Of course* she'll accept you. If she doesn't, she can't go at all. The average third-year would accept an invitation from the Giant Squid rather than miss out on the Yule Ball. You just aren't proving anything, Zabini, when you invite the younger girls."

"Well, if that's what you meant, why didn't you say so at first?" demanded Zabini angrily.

"Because I thought you were slightly more intelligent than Goyle and wouldn't need to be told. But no matter. This bet is a binding magical contract. Since you haven't broken any formal rules, I can't disqualify you for the cheating that's happened so far. But *no more*. Do you understand? Hand me the bucket, Nott."

I heard the stones rattle as the bucket presumably changed hands. "Where did you find that spell, Malfoy?" asked Nott.

"It's been in my family for years," said Malfoy. "You can use it to charm any kind of object. My grandfather used it on perfume bottles. My uncle used it on ladies' underwear ... no, Goyle, I am *not* making this up. I'm explaining that the spell is flexible. I spent all Thursday evening writing a version that would work for invitations to a ball, and all of this morning working out the line that would exclude the third-years. Anyway, quiet now, while I say the spell."

Malfoy muttered quite a lot of Latin. I recognised something about "three" and "year" and "discounted". "That should fix it," he said finally. "By the way, those stones are awfully shiny, Zabini. What have you done to them?"

"A useful little bottle I picked up in Knockturn Alley," Zabini admitted. "Silencing Varnish. When people touch a varnished object the way we've all touched these they're hexed. They can't speak about anything to do with the object, except to other people who have also touched it."

"But that's cheating again!" exclaimed Malfoy. "Once you touch a girl with the stone, she won't be able to tell anyone that you invited her to the ball."

"She can probably still mention that she has a partner, but she won't be able to say who it is, or that she suspects me of changing my mind, or that she's heard I'm now going with someone else."

"What, you've found a way to stop girls gossiping?" Nott was impressed.

"Silencing Varnish is an old invention. It only lasts a couple of weeks, but that's all we need, and it does the job well."

"I do *not* like that," Malfoy interrupted. "It means the girls can only discuss your tricks with other girls whom you've already asked. They won't be able to warn off any future invitees, or complain to their boyfriends, or otherwise damage your reputation in the school community. There won't be any sticky situations to talk your way out of, because every girl you approach will be naïve to your tricks. That's another piece of cheating, Zabini! You've made it too easy for yourself."

"Come off it, Malfoy, the bet wasn't about how well I could worm my way out of trouble," replied Zabini. "It was about how many girls would fall for my good looks and charm. And six no, five already have."

"Well, I'm not reading the stones today," said Malfoy virtuously. "I'll read out the names on Christmas night."

"Was it five or six?" asked Crabbe. "Can't you count?"

"It was six, but Padma Patil didn't seem too sure. The stone only turned the palest shade of green, with dazzling gold letters. So I'm going to ask her again, and see if I can make her a little more grateful that I asked. The stone will work on the same girl twice, won't it?"

Apparently it would, but I lost concentration at this point. *What on earth was Padma playing at?* And with Zabini! She was no fool; presumably she had worked out that Zabini's invitation had not been a serious one; and presumably she had given him a frivolous answer. That would explain why the stone had not changed colour properly the spell probably worked by turning the charmed objects into a kind of litmus paper for human emotions.

But how could Padma be so stupid as to tangle with Zabini? She knew he was untrustworthy. Why hadn't she confronted him directly, or come to me to ask for help, or warned her friends of his games? How did Padma help anyone by pretending to play along with the Slytherins?

When I tuned in again, Malfoy was taking charge.

"Let's make a couple of other things clear. You had twenty stones, and there are twenty girls in fourth year. So it's obvious who your main targets should be. And if you really can't stomach inviting hags like Granger, there's nothing wrong with asking an older girl. However, since you've wasted some of your stones on inviting children, I'm entitled to place a few new restrictions."

There was an unfriendly pause before Malfoy continued.

"First, yes, you do try Padma Patil again, and you'll get a nice deep colour this time, otherwise I'll count it as a black stone. Second, you don't ask Bulstrode. She is not a woman. Asking her is like asking a second-year. Third, you leave Pansy alone. She's going with me, and you aren't interfering."

"How about Cecilia?" asked Nott. "Can you leave her out of the bet too?"

"No," said Malfoy coldly. "Cecilia is fair game, like the rest."

Zabini did not seem to resent these new restrictions. "Fair enough. Padma Patil again. Not Bulstrode. Not Pansy. But any of the other eighteen fourth-years. And any of the older girls, including the foreign visitors."

"Correct. And any white stones I find in the bucket on Christmas night, I can use to turn the whole deal against you," Malfoy reminded him.

"Agreed. But I'm not stupid. There won't be any white stones by Christmas night."

"Place your hand over the stones and bind yourself to the new agreement."

"But you've already said the spell!"

"I want a double bind. Because you've cheated, so I need double assurance."

Only at this point did Zabini begin to sound bored as he intoned: "I, Blaise Pascal Zabini, bind myself to thee, Draco Lucius Narcissus Malfoy, in the matter of our pact over the stones in this bucket."

As Malfoy muttered a *Finite Incantatem!* at the door, I rose to my feet, and I had the presence of mind to move to the middle of the corridor before the door sprang open.

"Corner! What are you doing here?" asked Goyle.

"Came to look for a book that I'd left here, but the door was locked," I said. "Were you lot really in that classroom? You were being very quiet in there."

Chucked

Michael finally remembers to invite Padma to the ball.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Chucked

The last week of term was pretty riotous. Robert built a tower of exploding snap cards on an empty chair during Transfiguration. McGonagall caught him and transfigured the cards into a china jug before taking twenty points from Ravenclaw.

We spent the Muggle Studies class bewitching a velly tision set so that it only brasscorded a reflection of the scene in the classroom in front of it, and we didn't listen when we were told that Muggles called this a "sozed klirkit V.T."

At lunchtime I saw Zabini approaching the Beauxbatons carriage. It wouldn't be too hard to attract one of the visitors, I thought. They had a duty to accept friendly overtures from Hogwarts students.

We didn't even open our books during Arithmancy. I played Hangman with Anthony while Padma played Battleship with Susan Bones.

Ancient Runes was cancelled for the rest of the term because, as the notice on the classroom door said, we had already reached the end of Chapter XIV.

Padma was still acting rather huffily towards me unfairly, I thought, since there was obviously something she wasn't telling me, and Parvati was now all smiles again. I couldn't tell whether Parvati really had cheered up or whether it was an act to make herself look and feel happier, but she and her friend Lavender Brown were finding plenty to giggle over.

Before dinner I noticed Zabini chatting up a Durmstrang girl in the corridor the same one with whom he had been watching our Quidditch practice on Sunday. He was evidently taking the Older Women Only business seriously. As we entered the common room, Terry commented, "That Durmstrang girl looked as if she enjoyed Zabini's attention. I wonder what flattery he uses to pick them up?"

"Pick-up?" Padma had overheard us. "What's the difference, then, between a pick-up and a simple invitation?"

"The intention," I said. "A pick-up is when the boy is only using you for some obscure game of his own when the compliments are hollow flattery when he intends to retract the invitation as soon as he has secured an acceptance "

"Which novel have you been reading?" she asked. "Talk about real people, in plain English, for a change!"

"Oh, do stop flying off the handle!" I exclaimed. "What's wrong with you lately? Everything I say makes you angry. What's *really* bothering you?"

"Nothing! Unless since we're talking about pick-ups and invitations when are you going to invite me to the Yule Ball?"

"I thought I already had."

"Rubbish, you've never mentioned it."

I realised I hadn't asked her directly, but I did think it was an unfair splitting of hairs. "Well, we've both talked about the ball on the assumption we're going together. There didn't seem to be any point in asking you once we both understood that."

"That isn't the same thing as being invited." She spoke softly, and for a wild moment I thought that perhaps this was the whole reason behind our squabbles. Perhaps that one little detail was a *big* detail to girls. Perhaps that was why she felt she had to trifle with Zabini in case there really was a danger that I wouldn't be inviting her.

"Fine. Padma. Will you come to the Yule Ball with me?"

To my amazement, she flared up. "After I've had to *drag* the invitation out of you? It's obvious to me that you don't really want to go with me at all! Thank you, but I'd rather go alone than with someone who only invites me to save face. Let's *not* go together!"

My mouth dropped open. Then I realised that half the common room was watching us, so I closed it again. Padma sprang out of her chair and flounced off to the other end of the chamber. Yes, we'd been squabbling lately, but whatever made her think I didn't want to take her to the ball?

It was a couple of hours later that I looked up from the book I had been pretending to read and saw that Morag had timidly seated herself beside me.

"You have to be very distressed about what happened earlier," she ventured.

"Understatement," I growled. "Don't girls *ever* say what they mean?"

"I'm imagining you're confused as well as angry."

"I'm *furious*. But I've worked out lately that no-one wins an argument with Padma because she never says what she means."

"It's seeming very unfair to you."

"Well, you explain it, Morag what's *wrong* with Padma? Whatever is she playing at?"

"I'm thinking the problem is that it cannot be explained," said Morag carefully. "Not logically, anyway. Padma was not knowing what she wanted. And when she's confused about what she's wanting, she behaves ... unpredictably."

I considered, beginning to calm down. "If you're putting it that way, Padma has never been exactly predictable. But I've never known her to be unfair or unkind."

"I'm not supposing she was setting out to hurt or humiliate you. It was just an impulsive outburst."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

"No, I'm not expecting anything would do that except an apology from Padma."

Morag was Padma's best friend, but she wasn't taking sides, and I could see that she was trying to help. I took a milder tone when I remarked, "So you agree that she should apologise?"

"I'm agreeing that she behaved badly."

I reflected a moment. "If you're saying the little scene wasn't premeditated, I'm glad of that," I said. "But you can't say it doesn't mean anything. When people are angry, they certainly mean *something*."

"Oh, it certainly meant something," Morag agreed.

She did not elaborate. I was completely calm now, and I asked her: "Do you have a take on that? Why would she demand that I invite her to the ball and then refuse the invitation in front of everyone?"

"You have to understand that her original intention was to accept. She told me that she did not realise until the moment you asked her that she ~~really~~ *really was not* wanting to go with you after all."

"But she accused me of being the one who didn't want to go with her."

"That's what she said. But what she *was meaning* was that she was not wanting to go with you. Yes, I'm knowing that's not logical. But Padma's never logical when she's upset. She just blurted out something angry, and you should not take too much notice of the exact words she used."

I began to grasp the point. I mustn't try to make sense of the quarrel because it hadn't been sensible. "You mean, the only really important thing she said was that we won't be going to the ball together?"

"Michael, I'm knowing this has to be painful for you, but that's pretty well it."

Morag's eyes were incongruously large and moist. Something didn't fit. Morag was in agonies *for me*. As if I were dying a thousand deaths. But it wasn't *that* serious. I wasn't as upset as she assumed.

In fact, I wasn't as upset as *I* had assumed.

"It's all right, Morag," I quickly broke the silence. "I'll live. But *why doesn't Padma want to go to the ball with me?* If she wanted to break up with me, why didn't she tell me days ago and quietly?"

"Because Padma was not knowing what she was wanting." Morag was speaking quite placidly, not at all annoyed at having to repeat herself. "She admitted it to me. She's still liking you as a friend. You've not behaved badly. And it's seeming to me that she's liking to think of herself as a girl who has a boyfriend. So she had no good reason to chuck you, and it took her a long time to realise that she was even wanting to break up. I'm sorry, Michael, but that's the way it is."

"Well, I'd worked that much out. She's *bored* with me, isn't she? Has been since since "

Morag lowered her eyes and said, "I've been noticing it since Hallowe'en."

"You didn't say anything to me or to her, did you?"

"It was not my business."

"All right, all right." My thoughts needed a great deal of adjustment. "The truth is, I'd rather break up with Padma than stay together with this constant bickering. And I understand that she only behaved badly because she was upset herself. But I *still* don't like the way she did it."

When I was finally left alone with my thoughts, however, they were neither angry nor particularly sad ones. To my own surprise, the idea that persisted in my head was: *There are plenty more fish in the sea!*

The Lotus Drowned

Chapter 9 of 21

The pressure to pair off before Christmas begins to resemble the call to Noah's Ark.

CHAPTER NINE

The Lotus Drowned

The next day no-one took seriously the correct process for desiccating cassia. Professor Sprout gave up and said, "I'm not having my cassia damaged by your frivolous handling ... Just copy the instructions into your notes, and we'll do the practical next term."

"She's an imbecile woman," muttered Malfoy to Crabbe.

I buried my nose in my exercise scroll and scribbled furiously because it gave me an excuse not to look around and meet anyone's eye. I was trying to avoid Padma.

Terry and I spent break flying around the Quidditch pitch on very old school Shooting Stars. Mine swayed through the air as nervously as an ancient horse that was too frail to be ridden. Reminding myself that broomsticks do not have feelings, I remarked, "I wish I had my own broom! One that "

But Terry was not listening. He was swooping down from the goalposts in a daring dive, apparently for the benefit of a group of Hufflepuff girls sitting in the stands. He realised in time that his Shooting Star would not be able to reverse into the sharp angle he had chosen in time to prevent a major crash. A mere seven feet from the ground, he had to leap off the seat and hang on with one hand, his toes dragging along the frosty grass. Fortunately, he hit safety at the precise instant that the broom tip slammed into the mud. The girls, who apparently believed he had performed this gymnastic feat on purpose, burst into applause. Terry bowed modestly.

Professor Binns had not noticed that Christmas was coming, but nor did he notice that no-one was listening to a word he said. No-one except Hermione Granger was still taking notes, and even she didn't seem to be paying attention to what she was writing. Among all the chattering and rustling, I noticed that Padma had her eyes firmly on her female friends. The only exception was when she launched a paper dart at Blaise Zabini who ignored it. When Padma realised that Zabini was not going to acknowledge her note in class, she pointedly turned back to Morag and Su.

It occurred to me that Padma was the one avoiding me. So I decided not to avoid her any more. She had set up this situation. She could be the one who made the effort.

Professor Sinistra dealt with the festive mood by concentrating on Major Theories about the Star of Bethlehem Arguments in Favour of (1) Halley's Comet and (2) a Conjunction. She span the stars in her model astrosphere to the presumed position and pretended not to hear when Lisa exclaimed, "They look just like fairy lights!" However, she did announce, "There will be no stargazing this evening. Merry Christmas!"

Professor Flitwick did not even try to teach. He suggested a competition in which a cageful of white mice were to be turned different colours. After Mandy had managed twelve colours in five seconds, he awarded her a box of sugar mice and after that we did nothing but eat sugar and throw colour-charms at one another.

With McGonagall's essay handed in, we had no homework, so we spent all evening playing cards and discussing magical or political theories. The common room had become very messy with papers that no-one bothered to tidy away and personal property to which people were always expecting to return. Not wanting to go to bed, I idly picked up a book that someone had left by the fire. It was Penelope Clearwater's book, *Wisdom for the Searching Heart*. It sprang open at a lemon-yellow page that bore the legend:

Happy is the man who can laugh at himself,

for he will never cease to be amused.

"Terry," I said, "can you make a joke about me?"

"A joke? You mean, like turning your hair blue? Or doing a Malfoy and telling everyone about how you're scared of vampires?"

"Not exactly. I mean, what is there about me that's ... er ... amusing?"

"Same as about everyone, I suppose."

"Everyone?"

"Well, we all make mistakes, don't we? Like me nearly crashing the Shooting Star this morning. And if we don't take a good laugh, we spend our whole lives worrying about not being perfect. ... Oh, I see, you're reading the *Book of Wisdom* again. It's all about salvation by works, you know. Did it call you stupid?"

I showed him the proverb.

"Well, that's hardly worth saying," Terry snorted. "Talk about stating the blindingly obvious!"

Obvious? Was it? "So what's funny about my situation?" I tried again.

"Depends what you think your situation is, I suppose. That you worked so hard on your Charms homework, only to find that Flitwick didn't glance at it? There's a sort of joke in that."

A furtive glance around the common room showed me that Kevin and Robert had joined the fifth-years for yet more Exploding Snap while the girls were so far down the other end that I couldn't tell whether they were discussing dress robes or dance steps. "I mean," I muttered, "what's funny about this business with Padma?"

"Oh. Tougher one. Well, perhaps it's ironic-funny that you had a girlfriend when you didn't need one, and then it all broke up just when you needed a partner for the ball. No, that's not funny. Forget that. Or maybe "

"Maybe?"

Terry swallowed. "I know this isn't you," he lied, "but just suppose you I mean, someone else had been thinking of it as a great transcendent love-affair. Obviously Transcendent Love Affairs don't break up over little things like the way you ask someone to a dance. So if this Transcendent Love Affair broke up so easily, it umm well, there would be a funny side."

And suddenly, I realised that Terry was right. Although I wouldn't have used an expression like Transcendent Love Affair, not in earnest, I had thought myself very serious about Padma. But the affair had crashed for no particular reason, and I couldn't honestly claim that my heart was broken. My own *seriousness* was funny.

I was laughing. Out loud.

Terry was puzzled. To change the subject, I asked, "Will it matter if we don't have partners for this ball?"

"It shouldn't," he said. "The man who takes a er partner does well, and the one who stays single does better." He didn't sound convinced.

The truth was that by now the boys as well as the girls were obsessed with the business of dance partners. I only realised how much during Potions on Wednesday. Snape told us to pair up to brew our Heartsease Potion, and Terry was nowhere in sight! He had moved over to a Hufflepuff table, and was helping Sally-Anne Perks to measure her edelweiss roots.

Then I saw that Robert was working with Mandy instead of Kevin, and Kevin was hovering uncertainly around Lisa and Su. Nearly all the boys were working with a girl: Ernie Macmillan with Hannah Abbott, Justin Finch-Fletchley with Susan Bones, Wayne Hopkins with Megan Jones, and Stephen Cornfoot with Morag (although that might not mean anything, since she was his first cousin). Even Anthony, whose nose was usually buried so far into a book that he hadn't noticed girls existed, had marched up to Kevin and was only hesitating a fraction before pushing past him. That fraction was enough for Lisa. She grabbed Kevin's elbow and swung her bag onto his bench, leaving Anthony to take her place next to Su.

There were only four of us without a prac partner: Zacharias Smith showed no sign of wanting to work with Sophie Roper, and I would have to choose one of them quickly if I didn't want to be landed with Padma.

"So," said Zacharias, as soon as I was cutting his roots and he was measuring my powder, "have you lot partners for the Yule Ball yet?" It was the kind of smug confidence that really meant, "I'm wanting you to know that I have a partner."

If Zacharias hadn't heard about Padma and me, I didn't see why I should tell him. And I didn't want to hear Padma explaining it either. Fortunately it was Sophie who replied.

"Yes, I'm going with Eddie Carmichael. What about you, Zacharias?"

"Parvati Patil," he said. "I asked her on Sunday. So who's this Eddie? Not in Slytherin, is he?"

"Oh, no," Sophie was slightly smiling. "Ravenclaw. You'd know him, Michael his Potions notes go all round your common room."

I did know Eddie Carmichael. He was in the year above us, and I had been saved from many a detention with Snape by swotting up on copies of Eddie's immaculate old Potions notes. "He's good fun," I agreed. I was saved from having to think of anything else to say by the hiss of Snape's voice.

"Miss Jones! Miss Perks! We *do not* require a lecture on sumptuary customs in a Potions lesson. Stop chattering, all of you, and pay attention. On Friday we shall be

having an antidotes test. I will select one of you that is, whichever person brews the worst potion today to take the poison, and the rest of you will be required to produce the correct antidote *without* the use of notes. Do I make myself clear? And the possible poisons that I might select are..."

Snape gave us a list of twelve poisons, three of them quite obscure. I was writing so intently that I did not notice the smell of burnt flowers from somewhere in the dungeon. Even when the fumes directly invaded my nostrils, I did not register that I should do something about it. Just as I lay my quill down after writing "*belladonna major*," there was a loud bang and suddenly black liquor was pouring all around my feet. Zacharias and I scaled the table in time to avoid scalding our legs and looked down to see that our cauldron had exploded.

"We all know now who will be ingesting poison on Friday," said Snape softly. "I suppose Corner and Smith were too busy boasting about their girlfriends to remember to turn down the fire before adding willow oil. You boys may take more ingredients from the store cupboard and begin your potion again *after* you have cleared up the mess. And there is no need for the rest of you to stop working you've all seen incompetent idiots destroying their potions before."

After a spate of cooling spells and scouring spells and gathering spells and a good old Muggle mop and bucket, we had dealt with the mess (Snape, we knew, could have banished the mixture in a second with a vanishing spell), but while our classmates were stoppering their bottles, we had to start again from the beginning. Snape glowered at us from behind his desk, as if we were stealing *his* spare time, while we chopped and filtered and mixed and poured and stirred and raised and lowered temperatures, all without saying a word. I never really knew what to say to Zacharias, and neither of us wanted to give Snape an excuse to fail our second batch.

Damsel in Distress

Chapter 10 of 21

Michael deals with being dumped.

CHAPTER TEN

Damsel in Distress

By the time we arrived in the Great Hall, lunch was finished, and only one student was left, a girl at the end of the Slytherin table. There was something dreadfully familiar about seeing a girl sitting alone in the hall, so I approached cautiously. It was Tracey Davies, and she was fuming rather than weeping at her empty plate.

"Hullo, Tracey," I said. "Having a hard time?"

"The same hard time you're having, if you really want to know," she said resentfully.

I was used to unexplained resentments from Slytherins, and Zacharias did not even seem to notice. "How is your problem the same as our problem?" he asked. "And how were you knowing about ours?"

"Not *yours*," she said pointedly to Zacharias. "*His*." She jerked her head at me so that her chestnut curls bounced.

"Oh. So you aren't in trouble with Snape?"

"This has nothing to do with Snape!" cried Tracey shrilly. "This *is* far more serious! Tell him about our troubles, Corner."

"*Our* troubles? I'm afraid I don't..."

"Fine, then I'll break it to you. Corner, you've been jilted. You and Padma Patil have Broken Up."

"Oh, I've known that for two days. In fact, I probably ought to have worked it out twenty days ago. That's not news."

"So you also know *for whom* she's jilted you?"

"She didn't leave me *for* anyone, we just "

"Then Padma Patil is a *very* fast worker. She has a new boyfriend now, all right. She's going to the Yule Ball with Blaise Zabini, the same boy who three days ago promised to take me!"

I felt sick. *Padma*. She should have had better sense. She didn't know about the bet, but she did know he was a Slytherin. She wouldn't go with me because I had asked her wrongly, but she'd go with Zabini because ... because he had eyelashes? If vanity had been a porcelain vase, mine would have just shattered into a thousand pieces.

Terry would have been able to dredge out the funny side of the situation, but I had no time to hunt for it.

I dragged my mind back to the immediate problem. Another girl jilted. I suppressed the unworthy thought, *She's only a Slytherin*, and tried to explain to her. "Tracey, I don't really believe that Padma will be going to the ball with Zabini. He's going to do to her exactly what he did to you jilt her for someone else within hours. He didn't *really* make a serious offer to either of you."

"You don't know what you're talking about," she insisted. "Blaise did ask me in the dungeon on Sunday. Ask Cecilia; she heard him. He s-said my face was sunshine and that snow would melt at my smile. Boys don't say that kind of thing to girls who are just friends. ... *Do they?*" she insisted when I maintained a diplomatic silence.

"Sounds cool." Zacharias was impressed.

But I was not. I had no interest in borrowing Zabini's pick-up lines. "I can only think of three reasons why a boy would use such over-the-top language," I tried to explain. "One, he's in love. Two, he's joking. Three, he's lying."

"Are you really suggesting," Tracey cut in furiously, "that I'm *not* the human face of Beauty? That my lightest glance *doesn't* inspire a volume of poetry? That my tornado of invitations to this ball *won't* drive me to Confundus?"

"No," I said at the same time as Zacharias began, "We-ell ... I'm sure some boy out there is liking you enough to invite you..."

Tracey shifted her gaze firmly to Zacharias, clearly liking him a great deal more than she was liking me.

Zacharias seized the moment and told her: "Zabini has a bet about how many girls he can persuade to accompany him to the ball. You've just won him a Galleon from Malfoy."

Tracey stared horror-struck for a second, her mouth wide open and wordless, then burst into fresh tears. "Liars!" she sobbed. "You're wrong! *He'd* like me. This is all Padma's fault Padma she must have said she's stolen " The rest was too incoherent to hear.

Rumbling stomachs brought Zacharias and me back to business. We helped ourselves to what was left in the Slytherin fruit bowl, speaking to each other in low voices under Tracey's sobs.

"Funny how we've not heard more complaints," said Zacharias. "You'd think the girls would talk among themselves and work out they're being cheated. I'm supposing girls are just too mean-spirited to warn each other to stay away from Zabini."

"Not quite," I replied and explained about the Silencing Varnish which, of course, Zacharias had touched on the day Zabini had bumped into him in the Entrance Hall.

Zacharias was impressed. "Goodness, that explains why I've not been able to say anything to the Hufflepuff girls! I stuttered so badly in front of Sophie that she fetched me a glass of water. Hannah and Susan changed the subject when I tried to warn them, and Megan just walked away. I did tell Sally-Anne, but I was too late she'd already accepted him."

"Did Sally-Anne believe you?" I asked.

"Yes, she said she'd really been wanting to go with Terry Boot and she'd only accepted Zabini out of desperation. When I told her she'd been duped, she seemed not to mind she said she ought to have known better than to accept a Slytherin and thank goodness she was well out of it."

Tracey looked up at us with a frown, as if she'd paid attention to that last remark. "Stop *pretending* to be friendly to me," she ordered sharply. "You're prejudiced against Slytherin House, just like the rest! If you think I'm useless, I don't want your insincere advice."

"Rubbish," said Zacharias. "Why would I be thinking you're useless before I even know you?"

"Just because I'm not an airy-fairy, loud-mouthed Ravenclaw "

I clamped my mouth shut and controlled myself.

" or a foolhardy, show-off Gryffindor or a stupid, boring Hufflepuff "

"I say!" exclaimed Zacharias. "Just because we finish our homework on time "

" Just because I'm trying to *get* somewhere in life just because I try to make the right friends and learn spells that will be practical after I've left school and bother to finish my homework "

"See, there's something to be said for doing homework," said Zacharias.

"Talking of which," I said, "I'm off to revise my antidotes. Coming, Zacharias?"

"Nope, I'm going to stay here a bit longer."

As it happened, I nearly crashed into Zabini in the Entrance Hall. He had waylaid Lavender Brown from Gryffindor, who was saying:

"Yes, I'm *quite* sure I like him. I'm flattered that you've asked me twice, but *I cannot* go to the ball with you."

"I am distraught," replied Zabini. I was disconcerted to see something like a tear hanging from his long eyelashes. He obviously knew how to act the part; Lavender looked sorry for him. "That ball will be *torture* if I can't attend it with you. Perhaps I should forget it completely and spend Christmas with my parents."

Lavender hovered between sympathy and suspicion. "Perhaps that would be the best way to console yourself," she agreed.

"I shall have no consolation if I cannot at least see you across the crowded hall," he smoothly recanted. "You will not deny me, at least, the right ~~to~~ look at you?"

And I had thought Robert and Mandy had sounded like a Regency romance! I didn't hear what Lavender said next, but as I began climbing the stairs, I did notice Zabini slipping a black stone into his pocket.

Hooray! One girl who had some common sense!

The half-hour that I spent with my Potions notes was not very productive. It wasn't enough time to swot up twelve different formulae. Besides, watching Zabini's manoeuvres had reminded me very forcefully that I did not have a partner for the Yule Ball. Padma was looking for someone new. I must look for someone too. Cho Chang? Millicent Bulstrode? Morag? That Durmstrang girl who didn't yet know that Zabini had jilted her? But as soon as I told myself that I must consider someone who was a *serious* possibility, no-one sprang to mind. Yet I couldn't stop thinking about it until I entered the DADA classroom.

Obviously there was no room for frivolous thinking in Professor Moody's lessons. For the next ninety minutes, he kept our full attention on counter-curses. And as soon as he released us, there was more urgent business at hand.

"Listen, Terry, I've found out which girl wants to go to the ball with you ..."

It took quite a long time to convince him that I wasn't joking, that Zacharias was unlikely to have been mistaken (which was tricky because, of course, I found myself forgetting how to speak English when I tried to repeat any part of the dialogue that had involved Zabini) and that Sally-Anne had had absolutely no reason to lie to Zacharias. But finally Terry remembered to ask me:

"Did you hear that Padma's found herself a new dance partner already?"

"Yeah, I knew."

"She won't say who."

"I've found out who, and I'm not surprised she won't say. The boy's in " I began to choke violently.

Terry thumped me on the back, exclaiming, "What, you're trying to say that her new partner's in Slytherin!"

I was able to nod before the choking began again.

"Surely you must be in dire distress about that," said Terry.

"Not as much as I thought I would be," I said honestly. "Life has been very quiet without Padma."

I wasn't ready to use words like "peaceful" or "relaxing" out loud, but already I was thinking them in my mind. Being optimistic about the situation now seemed much easier than it had been even yesterday.

Inferential Statistics

Chapter 11 of 21

Zacharias faces a moral dilemma. Anthony does his sums.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Inferential Statistics

Zacharias Smith accosted me at break the next morning with a cheery, "Mike, my boy, I'm thinking you're the only person who'll understand me!"

"What's up?"

"Can you send your friend away?"

Terry shrugged and walked across the courtyard. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him approaching Sally-Anne Perks and Sophie Roper.

"Michael, I'm wanting your opinion. When are you reckoning it's okay to change your mind about an appointment?"

I hadn't a clue what he meant. "Er ... whenever you can warn the other person in time, I suppose. Assuming you're cancelling because something more important turned up."

"Yes, but what counts as more important? You see, I've changed my mind about the Yule Ball." He paused importantly.

"You mean you don't want to go any more and you don't know how to tell Parvati Patil?"

"No, I'm meaning I'd rather go with a different girl, and I'm not knowing whether to tell Parvati Patil."

"Well, that would make you a bit of a Zabini, wouldn't it?" I was irritated that Zacharias couldn't see this. "I mean, assuming the girl hasn't behaved badly. If you liked her enough to invite her, you ought to like her enough to take her, even if you've found out she's really a second-best."

Zacharias drooped for an instant, then squared his shoulders defiantly. "I'm not like Zabini, Mike. When I first asked Parvati Patil, I was meaning to take her. Zabini's never meaning it, is he? So I'm not like him. But I've changed my mind about Parvati *since* asking her. Do you get the difference?"

"Yes, I get the difference, but "

"You see, I basically asked Parvati because she's good-looking. And it's pretty obvious that she accepted me because she was going to accept anybody who asked. Which are not the best reasons to go together."

"No, they're not, but they're okay reasons if both of you agree "

"And now I've got to know a girl whom I really, really like. So I'm asking you, as a person who despises Zabini, if you think "

"Zacharias, I thought I'd explained what I think," I cried in exasperation. "You put yourself in this situation. You should stick with it. Not that Parvati has to be your girlfriend, just that you should still go to the ball together. If the other girl's so wonderful, surely she'll understand that the two of you can get together *after* the ball?"

"And I suppose you're thinking your opinion is all-important in this matter that's not your business?" spat Zacharias angrily.

"Well, I suppose there is one honourable way out," I ventured. "Something Zabini would never do, but anyone I really respected would try."

He softened very slightly.

"You could tell Parvati the truth. Say that she's the one you'll be taking to the ball as a friend but that you've met someone you like better. And if Parvati has any sense of honour, it might turn out that *she* suggests that you take the other girl instead of herself."

Zacharias relaxed and half-smiled at me. "Brilliant advice! *That's* what I'll do. Thanks, mate!"

And he walked away, apparently not hearing as I called after him, "But say it *tactfully!*"

Great, I thought. Now we'll have Padma *and* Parvati desperate and dateless and dolorous. A rather surprising fate for the two most attractive girls in fourth year.

Dinner that evening was quite lively. It was the last term-time dinner, and spirits were extremely high. I arrived just as Filch was sending one of the Gryffindor Beaters out of the hall for letting off a firework at the dinner table. Plenty of people were wandering about at the wrong tables. Zacharias was at the Slytherin end, whispering to Tracey Davies, who was all smiles this evening. Zabini was with the Hufflepuffs, where Megan Jones was staring into his eyes and laughing at something he had said. At the Ravenclaw end nearest the door, Lisa was staring furiously at Zabini.

"Don't tell us," I said as I slid onto the bench next to Lisa. "Zabini invited you to the Yule Ball."

She was only mildly surprised that I knew. "I refused him, of course," she said. "But I can't *believe* Megan Jones. It looks as if she's accepted!"

"You know about this bet, then?"

"Bet? No!"

I explained, including the Silencing Varnish, and Lisa only said: "Well, I should have known it were something like that, love. I know for a fact that he asked Susan Bones this morning. She tried to tell me during History of Magic, but she didn't seem to be able to get t' words out. Then, after lunch that is, after Zabini had asked me too Susan tried again, and this time she had no trouble, she could tell me easy. Oh, don't worry, Susan refused him! But it looks as if some of t' others are daft enough to flatter his vanity."

I wondered who would be willing to flatter my vanity. Either Susan or Lisa would be as good a choice as anyone. "So," I said, "you're already going with someone, right?"

"Well, I weren't when Zabini asked me. But Kevin overheard what I were saying to Susan, and he invited me to be his partner on the spot."

"Did you accept him?"

"Yes, I like Kevin."

"What about Susan? Who's taking her?"

"No-one yet, but Justin Finch-Fletchley asked Kevin to ask me if he had a chance if *Justin* had a chance with *Susan*, I mean and I said yes, a very good chance."

"That's the trouble," I said to Terry in the common room. "All the nice girls seem to be taken."

"Oh, not all of them," said Terry breezily. "People exaggerate how embarrassing it is to ask a girl out, you know. You just have to choose your words in a way that leaves her free to answer either way."

"Oh, so Sally-Anne Perks accepted you, did she? What did you say to her?"

"I asked if she had a partner for the ball, and she said no. So I asked if she'd like to go with me and she said yes. And well, anyway, you get the idea."

"You cheated," I said. "You already knew she liked you."

"That isn't cheating, that's just common sense. Lots of boys research a girl before asking her."

"But I don't have anyone to research!" I complained.

"Rubbish, there are equal numbers of boys and girls and Hogwarts, aren't there?"

"Actually, there aren't." Anthony Goldstein looked up from his book. "Not any more. You've forgotten about the Durmstrang students. They brought nine boys and only three girls. So there are six extra boys running around the school and not enough girls to go with them."

I blinked. How simple! Why hadn't anyone thought of this? "Plus there's Penelope Clearwater," I remembered. "Her boyfriend from the Ministry will be coming to the ball. So actually there are *seven* girls too few."

"It's just statistics," agreed Anthony. "Anyone who can add up ought to know that. Obviously, the Durmstrang students will invite the seventh- and sixth-year girls. So the spare boys will invite the fifth- and fourth-year girls. That's why so many of the girls are going with older boys."

"So they are." I hadn't thought of it that way before. "Eddie Carmichael's taking Sophie Roper."

"And I heard that Sylvia Fawcett's going with Stebbins in Hufflepuff," recalled Terry.

"And that Gryffindor couple Hooper asked Emma Spinks," said Anthony. "There are probably other examples too. But hardly any of the boys are going with an older girl. Well, you get the point. There's only one thing for it "

"Go alone, and don't be embarrassed! At least six other boys will be in the same position! *Thanks, Anthony, I will go only for the food!*" I might as well, I thought. There was no-one I particularly wanted to take, and I couldn't be bothered going through the agony of asking if I was likely to be refused.

A group of fifth-year girls came and sat in the long sofa next to the fire. "I'll demonstrate your statistics, Anthony," I said, quite cheerful about the whole situation now. I addressed the most shatteringly beautiful girl in the group. "Cho, would you like to go to the ball with me?"

"I'm really sorry, Michael," she said, "but I've already promised to go with someone else."

"Marietta," I shifted my gaze to her pretty friend, "will you go to the ball with me?"

Marietta Edgecombe looked startled, as if she didn't know whether I were joking or not. "Thanks, but I'm going with Harold Dingle," she said.

"Sylvia," I moved to the next in line, "will you "

"Oh, this is a joke!" exclaimed Sylvia Fawcett. "These boys have some kind of plot to invite every girl who sits on this sofa."

Sylvia and Marietta exploded into deafening giggles while Cho jumped up and led the way over to a different seat. I watched them leave. Really, I thought girls were more or less pretty. And Cho Chang was probably the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my life.

"So are you taking anyone to the ball, Anthony?" asked Terry.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I struck lucky," said Anthony. "I'm going with Su. I was asking her about the ball while we were making that heartsease potion. She said that she had had a partner lined up she wouldn't tell me who he was but they'd changed their minds. So I asked her to go with me, and she said yes."

Well, it sounds as if I know who Anthony's rival was I thought.

"But, you know, I wasn't going to suggest that boys without partners go to the ball alone," Anthony continued. "What I was going to say was, you can always ask a third-year. It's statistics. Because third-years can't go to the ball at all unless someone older takes them. So third-year girls are quite likely to be available. And they're quite likely to say yes. They'd only say no to a boy whom they really hated."

And Anthony turned his nose back to his book. It was a Muggle publication called *Intermediate Inferential Statistics*.

I turned over in my mind whether I'd like to invite a third-year girl to the ball. I wasn't sure I wanted to find out that someone *really hated* me. But there must be one ... somewhere ... who could accept an evening with me as the price of attending the ball.

Crisis in the Greenhouse

Chapter 12 of 21

A Herbology lesson is wrecked by a confrontation among the girls whom Blaise Zabini invited to the ball.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Crisis in the Greenhouse

The next morning Professor Snape poisoned me with arsenic and Zacharias Smith with cobra venom. We thought it was very unfair of him to test us on ~~two~~ poisons. Anthony had produced a very effective cobra antidote, so Zacharias didn't even feel any pain during the three seconds before the venom fizzled to nothing in his throat. But no-one seemed to remember exactly how to deal with arsenic. Snape glared at the ten slim phials of antidote on his desk, each one gleaming a different shade of greenish blue, and softly announced that none of them was likely to work.

Doubled up in the chair, with sweat pouring out of my ears, I wondered how long it would take me to die. Arsenic was supposed to be fast; I would certainly be dead before anyone had the chance to brew up again. But how fast was fast? And how much had Snape given me? Death was evidently going to take minutes rather than seconds, and they were going to be excruciating minutes too.

Suddenly Snape jerked my chin out and poured a phial of something turquoise into my grimacing mouth. Instantly the stabs and cramps vanished, and I felt myself relaxing. It was all right. Snape had had the correct antidote in his pocket all along. He wouldn't kill a student just for a demonstration. Would he?

"I can't help remarking," said Snape softly, "that none of you dunderheads seemed to register that the cost of your stupidity was that your classmate nearly *died*. Since none of you has learned *anything* useful this term, I shall require three research essays of two feet each as holiday homework. You may tidy the laboratory."

As I replaced a jar in the cupboard, I noticed that Megan Jones was red-eyed and puffy, as if she had been crying for quite a long time. Wayne Hopkins was hovering around her very solicitously, saying something in Welsh.

We Ravenclaws were glad to escape to the fresh air and spend our break near the greenhouses. I inhaled long draughts, assuring everyone that I felt fine and that I was *very* relieved that it would be three weeks before I had to attend another Potions lesson. When the Slytherins approached, I saw that Zabini was in earnest conversation with a giggly Cecilia Rivers. *Here we go again*, I thought.

"It's funny," said Terry to me, "how ugly all those Slytherin girls are."

I knew what he meant. Pansy Parkinson was petite, with a classically regular profile, but her constant sneers and jeers had given her the permanent countenance of a pug. Daphne Greengrass's glowing complexion and cascade of butter-blond hair should have attracted a raft of male compliments, but her mannerisms were repellingly imperious her friends called her "Queenie". Cecilia Rivers had a perfect figure, slim, but curved in all the right places, set off by a sweet fluting voice and a sweetly alluring perfume, but I was usually too struck by her bland, superficial stupidity to notice anything else. Boys who bothered to look hard at Tracey Davies might notice her sapphire-bright eyes and full crimson lips, but these were not attractive in a person who was such a discontented, humourless bundle of complaints. As for Millicent Bulstrode, with her large frame, bulbous nose, poor complexion and lank hair, she would not have had any claim to good looks even if she had been sweet-tempered, which she was not.

"When I said that all girls are pretty," I told him, "I wasn't thinking about the Slytherins."

"You didn't say so," said Terry, "but you're more or less right."

"This is our last lesson," said Professor Sprout, "so we won't be learning anything examinable. I'll just show you a few preservation tricks for the hothouse flowers, and we'll use them to make floral displays to add to the Christmas decorations. Remember, the flowers will need to look fresh-picked for the next nineteen days, so be sure to measure your revitaliser carefully."

The girls all looked delighted by this project, but Terry and I exchanged a raise of eyebrows. We watched as Cecilia Rivers, her arms full of orchids and roses, skipped over to Tracey Davies, trilling, "Guess who's taking *me* to the Yule Ball!"

But once Pansy, Daphne, Tracey and Millicent had gathered round to ask her the desired questions, Cecilia suddenly found herself speechless. All she was able to tell them was, "Well ... someone from a wealthy pureblood family. And very good-looking, too!"

Pansy, Daphne and Millicent lost interest and moved back to their flowers, but Tracey, with a malicious gleam in her eye, said, "Go on, Cecilia you can ~~tear~~ *tear*."

Cecilia abruptly found her tongue and admitted that the boy was Blaise. Tracey shot a significant glance at me, and I hurriedly turned back to my workbench. None of the other Ravenclaw boys had heard a word: they were all discussing Quidditch. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle had heard enough to trigger a ripple of sniggers, although Nott was scowling and furiously ripping petals off a large daisy. Morag and Mandy were discussing dress robes, but the other Ravenclaw girls abruptly jerked their heads up when they heard the word "Zabini".

"Latest victim," said Lisa to Su.

"I wonder if he really will take anyone?" said Su. "After all, he can't take anyone he doesn't ask, and anyone he asks can be warned off."

"Who can be warned off what?" asked Padma.

Tracey had caught Padma's eye. She was still looking at Padma when she said loudly: "Tell us, Cecilia, what are you going to wear when Blaise takes you to the ball?"

That Silencing Varnish was strong. The greenhouse acoustics, combined with people's positions around the benches, somehow ensured that half the class Pansy, Daphne, Millicent, Mandy, Morag, Terry, Robert, Kevin, Anthony and Sprout did not hear a word of either the question or its answer. In fact no-one really heard the answer, for Cecilia's words were drowned in Padma's gasp. Padma stared around wildly for Zabini. But Zabini, looking determinedly only at the boys on his own bench, was saying something about vampires to Nott, while Goyle chuckled trollyshly.

Padma, still holding her horticultural scissors, advanced to Cecilia. Lisa and Su quietly followed Padma, while Tracey triumphantly stood her ground next to Cecilia. I watched, the Slytherin boys pretended not to watch, while Sprout explained to the other Ravenclaw boys how to colour-coordinate their bouquets, and Morag and Mandy continued their descriptions of dress robes. Padma spoke quietly and quite pleasantly.

"Tell us, Cecilia. What *are* you going to wear when Zabini takes you to the ball?"

"Jade silk and the family pearls," said Cecilia.

"And what will *he* wear?"

"He says he has a family antique too," babbled Cecilia. "A red velvet that his great-grandfather bought in Florence from the Machiavelli family auction in 1876."

"I've heard of that auction," said Padma adeptly. "Didn't the Machiavellis fall on hard times when a Muggle employee found out they were wizards, and they had to sell *everything*? And it was said that the very dust that touched their possessions would saturate the new owners with Machiavelli curses."

"That's the one." Cecilia still did not grasp the situation. "I don't suppose *you* have an antique, Padma. Who's taking *you*?"

"Oh, I'm going with Blaise Zabini too," said Padma, with an admirable attempt at carelessness. "Didn't he mention that? He clearly intends to make it a threesome."

Cecilia stared, then opened her mouth to howl. But suddenly she began to choke instead. Pansy and Daphne rushed forward to pat her on the back. Tracey patted too, with heavy blows. Cecilia pushed them away and tried to raise her voice again. But no sound came out, and tears streamed out of her eyes. Over on the boys' table, Crabbe and Goyle were speechless with mirth, while Malfoy scowled, clearly resenting that the author of the fuss was Zabini and not himself, and Nott was looking aloof and superior.

"Girls, that's a little too much chatter over there!" called Sprout. "I know you're excited about the holidays, but Mr Filch really is expecting all these flowers to be done by the end of today."

Cecilia sobbed through the rest of the lesson, to the complete mystification of Pansy and Daphne. Even Professor Sprout became concerned and offered her a St John's Wort tablet. When Cecilia only wept that she wanted to die, Sprout suggested that Tracey escort her to Madam Pomfrey.

"Oh, no," said Tracey. "Madam Pomfrey doesn't have what Cecilia needs. There isn't any medicine to make her brain grow to a normal size."

Professor Sprout stared in disbelief. She must have decided that she had misheard, because Cecilia eventually put the tablet in her mouth. Sprout patted her shoulder and walked away again. Cecilia spat the unchewed tablet into her revitaliser, muttering something about people who thought broken hearts could be cured with pills.

Padma, however, held herself together icily until Sprout dismissed us for lunch. Then she marched out of the greenhouse without a glance at Zabini; as she passed me, I saw that tears were very, very close to spilling out of her eyes.

Fortunately for Padma, Parvati and the faithful Lavender Brown happened to be waiting for her in the Entrance Hall. The sisters rushed into one another's arms and simultaneously burst into noisy sobs. Morag hurried up in concern, just as both twins wailed out:

"I've been stood up!"

You'll Bawl for Me

Chapter 13 of 21

Padma and Parvati are broken-hearted and lachrymose not to have dance partners.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

You'll Bawl for Me

The scene that followed was extremely wet. Morag and Lavender had the presence of mind to pull the Patils into the corridor to the left before the stampeding Slytherins noticed anything amiss. Fortunately the Slytherins were too preoccupied with the idea of taunting or comforting Cecilia Rivers to recognise that Padma had escaped them, and they merged with the crowd that was charging right into the Great Hall. I told Terry to herd the other Ravenclaws after them while I checked that Padma was really all right.

"I don't suppose she *is* all right," Terry commented. "Do you still consider yourself your sister's keeper?" But he didn't wait for an answer.

The four girls were all weeping in the first classroom off the corridor. Lavender frowned at me when I entered, but Morag shook her head at Lavender, and after that they both ignored me. I put a locking charm on the door (it wasn't strong enough to resist *Alohamora*, but it would give the hint to sensitive people that we wanted privacy) and a Silencing Charm on the classroom walls. Padma was sitting on a desk with her head on Parvati's shoulder, and Parvati had her head against Padma's hair that midnight blue-black hair that I had once thought so beautiful. Morag was standing with her arm around Padma, and Lavender was patting Parvati's arm. Through some very incoherent sobs, the girls managed to ask one another what "he" had done.

"He's going with someone else!" wept Parvati and Padma.

"Are you *sure*?" asked Lavender.

"Of course I'm sure!" said Parvati. "He came to me at break today and said he had something serious to tell me. And then he said he only liked me as a friend. And I was quite surprised and said, of course, that was all I'd expected. And then he said he'd met someone else whom he really fancied."

Silence. Padma prompted, "And?"

"And then he just waited for me to say something. So in the end I said, 'Do you mean you don't want to take me to the ball any more?' And he said, 'No, I'm still going to take you to the ball.' Then I said, 'So why are you telling me this?' And he said, 'Well, are you *wanting* to go to the ball with a bloke who'd rather be taking someone else?'"

I sat down in the far corner uncomfortably. I might have known that Zacharias Smith would botch this kind of conversation and probably tell Parvati to blame me for bad advice, too.

Parvati sobbed again for a while, then continued: "So I said I had to say I mean, he was *expecting* me to say 'Are you hoping that I'll be the one to jilt you?' And he said, 'Yes. Because if you do not, I'll take you to the ball. But I'm sure you're not wanting me to do that. So why do you not do the sensible thing?' I was never so *humiliated*. All I could say was, 'Fine, I release you. I don't want to go to the ball with you. Find someone else. Will that do as a jilting?' And he said, 'Yes, that was perfect,' and walked away. Can you *imagine* the cheek?"

After Parvati had sobbed some more, she remembered her manners and asked Padma, "So what happened to you? Who was taking you anyway? I thought you'd broken up with Michael?"

"Oh, I had. This was someone else. He asked me the day before yesterday after Michael and I were well and truly finished."

"Who was it?" Parvati repeated.

Padma looked very confused, made a few inarticulate sounds, and covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh, never mind who. A scum bag of an apology for a man."

Lavender suddenly looked enlightened. She crept over and whispered in Padma's ear.

Padma's eyes widened, and she nodded. "I can't believe I fell for his lines," she said. "B-but he was really very clever. He chatted me up several times. He didn't ask me to be his partner until our third or fourth conversation. And he went to town on how much prejudice there was against his House "

"Oh!" exclaimed Morag. "So the boy was in Slytherin!"

" and how his family had *no* Death Eater connections, unlike " Padma seemed to choke again.

"You mean that all four of the other Slytherin boys *do* have Death Eater connections?" asked Lavender with interest. "If I'd known that, I wouldn't have felt so guilty about disliking them so much."

"Well, he was maybe not being strictly truthful if his purpose was engaging Padma," Morag pointed out reasonably. "So when did Mr Treacherous tell you he'd changed his mind?"

"*Never*," said Padma. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. *He didn't say anything*. He just asked another girl to be his partner and left me to find out when she mentioned it to her friends."

Morag made a connection. "You're meaning the other girl was a Slytherin? *Is that* what all the fuss in Herbology was about? I was thinking it was just Tracey Davies insulting your dress sense. Tracey's the girl in question, I'm supposing."

"No," said Padma, but Parvati, still not thinking very clearly, wept, "Yes! *I'm sure* it's Tracey! I saw him talking to her at dinner yesterday. That means he actually asked her *before* he dumped me I mean, asked me to dump him."

I thought this was a rather long leap of logic, but all the girls seized on it at once.

"The cheat!"

"The sneak!"

"The two-timer!"

"If Tracey had said no," sobbed Parvati, "Zacharias wouldn't have bothered telling me anything; he'd have just taken me to the ball as if he'd never considered taking anyone else. Michael Corner, stop staring at us! Do *you* think this is the right way for boys to behave?"

"No," I said. That seemed inadequate, so I added: "I I suppose you were pretty keen on Zacharias."

"Not really," wailed Parvati, as if this were unimportant. "I just wanted to go to the ball."

"Well, what's wrong with going alone?" I asked. "I, among many, will be going only for the food."

Parvati and Lavender instantly dissolved into more tears, but Padma raised her head and looked at me sharply.

"Michael!" she exclaimed. "You don't have a partner. And I don't have a partner."

"Er so it would appear." I hadn't cottoned on.

"Well, we can go together! Just as friends, I mean. You and I. Going as friends is fine. So that neither of us has to go alone. That would work!"

"*NO*." I didn't feel I'd said that; the word just threw itself out of my mouth. "That would *NOT* work."

"Why not?"

"Because we've only just broken up. It would *not* be cool to go to the Yule Ball together, and have everyone think we'd reconciled, when really it would only be an arrangement of *convenience*. No, no, and no!"

Padma stared at me disdainfully. "You don't have to sound *quite* so rejecting. I heard you the first time, thank you very much."

During the rather dreadful pause that followed, it hit me very forcefully that I had *not* wanted to go to the ball with Padma. The opportunity had been there, and I had rejected it out of hand. And I found myself grinning from ear to ear.

"Michael, the rest of us are not quite in the mood for a joke," said Morag, far more gently than I would have expected.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be well, anything, really. I was just thinking about the difference between wanting a particular partner and wanting *any* partner. It's not at all the same kind of misery."

"Well, we're not likely to get *any* partners now, are we?" said Parvati. "Pretty well everyone is paired up."

"Oh, I'm sure there must be available boys," protested Lavender unconvincingly. "Michael, don't you know some available boys?"

"Yes, loads," I said. "For example " But I faltered. Although I trusted Anthony's statistics, no-one wants to dance with a statistic. When it came to real people, I couldn't think of anyone except myself who was still out of luck.

Lavender had a sudden inspiration. "We can read our cards!" she said. "Parvati, do you have a deck in your bag? Surely they'll lead us in the right direction."

Parvati's eyes flowed again. "I read mine on Sunday afternoon," she said. "I couldn't find Professor Trelawney, so I had to do it myself. And the cards said they said it was so clear! that I must keep an open mind because a man was about to make a proposal, and he would be my true love."

"Oh, *no*," sobbed Padma. "And the next man was Zacharias Smith!"

"Actually Zacharias was the second," confessed Parvati. "The *first* man to invite me to the ball practically the minute I'd put the cards away was Gregory Goyle. I wasn't desperate enough to accept *him*. But Goyle, Zacharias, what difference does it make? Zacharias has changed his mind, and Goyle well/*he* can't be my true love ... can he?"

She seemed so uncertain that I nearly laughed again. So much for trusting the tarot cards!

Morag, who was refusing to meet my eye, managed to say it more tactfully. "The cards are not magical objects, you know, Parvati. They only absorb the psychic energies of the Seer."

Parvati frowned, not following.

"Well, it's pretty firmly established that the cards never work for Muggles, is it not? And the real prophets the ones who are truly understanding Divination claim they do not work for ordinary witches either. You have to be a particular kind of Seer to be able to channel the future vibes into a pack of cards. Perhaps Professor Trelawney is one of those. But you, Parvati "

"Professor Trelawney always said I was a true Seer!" Parvati protested.

"But that was because you're good at the crystal," Lavender reminded her. "It doesn't follow that you're necessarily the card-reading type as well."

"I'd say not," said Morag with unusual firmness. "If the cards are telling you to marry Gregory Goyle, I'd take that as *positive* proof that the cards are wrong this time."

"Goyle probably only asked you because you were smiling at him," said Padma. "The good news on the cards must have made you look happy."

"I believe," I agreed, "that if you look cheerful and friendly, there would be a couple of boys out there who'd invite the two of you as *friends*. Otherwise, of course, you can always go to the ball *only for the food*."

None of the girls thought that was funny, but the bell for afternoon classes was ringing, so we un-charmed the classroom and drooped off to History of Magic.

End of Term

Chapter 14 of 21

Michael is still available, but all the girls seem to be taken.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

End of Term

As we filed into class, I heard Longbottom happily whispering to Hermione Granger, "Your advice worked, Hermione! I asked a third-year, and she said yes! Thanks ever so for the hint!"

I noticed that Padma, Parvati, Morag and Lavender were so exhausted that they slept on their desks. I wasn't really in the mood for mucking around either. I was mulling over what Anthony Goldstein and Hermione Granger had both said that the third-year girls were likely to be very, very available. Then something else occurred to me. Yes, I could ask a third-year to come to the ball with me. But I would have to do it *this evening*. Tomorrow all the younger students would be going home. The only third-years who would stay in school would be those who already had a partner for the ball.

I managed to throw a couple of good hexes at Moody in our final DADA lesson. He said there was some real passion in my aim. I didn't tell him that it wasn't hatred at all, just exasperation with silly girls. Finally the bell rang. We did not dare move until Moody had countered the last jinx.

"I will not waste my breath on 'merry Christmas'," were his final words. "My message for all of your holidays is *Constant Vigilance!*"

And the term was over.

As I scanned the courtyard after class and later the Great Hall at dinner, I wondered which of the girls were already taken and which one would be willing to change her plans at short notice in order to come to the ball with me.

It was too hard.

After dinner, I went to the library to return my overdue books. Madam Pince sniffed at me, even when I pulled a handful of Sickles out of my pocket to cover my fines. On the way out I nearly collided with a pretty girl with a dazzlingly clear complexion.

"Sorry," we both said. She saw the funny side of the incident and smiled at me.

"You're in Hufflepuff, aren't you?" I said. "I've seen you at their table."

"And you're in Ravenclaw," she said. "I know that because Hannah Abbott pointed you out to me. She said your name was Matthew no, Michael "

"Michael Corner," I supplied, flattered to have been talked about by two pleasant girls at once. "So you and Hannah are pretty good friends, are you?"

"Hannah did me a favour I'll never forget," said the girl, pulling a small jar out of her robes. "She mentioned my name to another fourth-year perhaps you know a girl named Hermione Granger? Anyway, last week Hermione gave me this, and when I tried to thank her, she said I should thank Hannah. But Hannah said I should thank Hermione. I thought it was simplest to thank them both. It may have been a small thing to them, but it made a *big* difference to me."

I looked down at the jar. It was labelled in handwriting, *Bubotuber Pus*. "That's rather nasty stuff," I remarked.

"Only if you use too much," said the girl earnestly. "Hermione had researched the exact quantity. This little jar will last me eight or nine months."

After examining the jar, I said, "You didn't tell us your name. Is it a state secret?"

She laughed and said, "Of course not. I'm Eloise Midgen."

I thought I had heard this name somewhere before, but I didn't register where. "Well, Eloise you're in third year, right?"

"Yes."

"Will I be seeing you at the Yule Ball?"

"You certainly will. I'll look out for you. I'm going with a boy from Gryffindor. Do you know Dean Thomas?"

"Not very well. We only have History of Magic together, but " Then it clicked. Now I knew where I'd heard of Eloise Midgen. "Is Thomas a long-standing boyfriend?" I asked.

"Oh, no, I hardly know him. I mean, he's nice, but I really only found out how nice after he'd invited me, and we started talking. It really restored my faith in the Hogwarts boys."

"We're not such a bad lot, are we?" I asked.

"Not most of you, but one or two oh, you'll think I'm really silly. The truth is, Dean was the second boy to invite me to the ball. The first was in Slytherin, just the day after the ball was announced, and "

" and his name was Blaise Zabini!"

"How did you know?"

"Oh, I lose count of how many girls Zabini has invited to this ball. It's all a game to him. I can't imagine whether he'll actually have a real partner this time next week."

"You must think me stupid to be fooled by him," said Eloise, her voice suddenly smaller.

"Not really," I said, having finished a swift calculation, "because I'm practically certain from other things that were happening before and after that you were the first one he invited. You can't really be considered a fool if you were the first, can you?"

I was going to explain about the bet and the Silencing Varnish too, but we had reached the door of the Hufflepuff corridor. "Well, bye," said Eloise, "thank you for explaining that. Oh, and I didn't tell Dean that he was my second partner you won't mention it, will you?"

"As I said, I am not on secret-spilling terms with Thomas," I promised.

I reached the Ravenclaw corridor just as Roger Davies was giving the password. He held the door open for me jauntily. "Evening, Michael. Planning on going to this dance-practice lark tomorrow?"

"Probably," I said. "What about you? You missed the first one, didn't you?"

"I had too much homework last week," he fibbed with broad smiles. "But I've realised my dancing isn't quite as good as it needs to be, so I'll be there with you tomorrow."

I was alarmed. "Did you hear that our dancing *needs* to be good? I'd hoped this ball would be just in fun!"

"I expect it will be for most people," said Roger kindly, "but a few of us will be more in the public eye than the rest. I'd hate to be er, to embarrass my partner just when everyone was looking at us." His pause was not long enough to let me ask the question. "You see, I shall be accompanying Miss Delacour."

My statement that this sounded very nice seemed a rather inadequate response to that Cheshire-cat grin; but Roger was losing interest in me. Over by the window sat a whole crowd of sixth- and seventh-year boys who did not yet know his good news.

Padma did not enter the common room until very late that evening, and she had lost all trace of tears. "It's all right!" she breathed to Morag. "Parvati just told me. She's fixed me up with a boy from Gryffindor!"

"Oh, excellent," said Morag. "You have to be so relieved. What about Parvati; has she a partner?"

"Yes." Padma plumped herself on a blue sofa. "She went up to the Gryffindor common room straight after dinner, and before she could even sit down, Potter himself walked up and asked her. Think, she'll be on the champions' table! Michael was right; we just have to keep smiling!"

"Goodness, talk about saving the best for last," said Morag. "Imagine a champion even being still available so late! I saw heaps of girls throwing themselves at Potter, and when he brushed off all of them, I was sure he already had a partner. But I'd never dreamed that he was keen on your sister! Parvati has to be pleased. Anyway, who is to be your partner?"

Padma frowned. "I'll be going with Weasley. You know, Potter's friend with the red hair."

"Well, that's sounding nice," said Morag.

"He's okay, I suppose." Padma spoke without enthusiasm. "I mean, I'm very pleased to have found *any* partner at this late stage in the game. And no-one says anything bad about Weasley."

"But?"

I supposed by this stage I shouldn't have been still listening in, for their voices had dropped right down to a low girls-exchanging-secrets volume, but I was seated in the neighbouring chair, and I had a book for camouflage. To be honest, I wanted to know how I might compare with Padma's new escort.

Padma bit her lip. "You see, Zabini was very good-looking, so going with him would have been fun. And Michael was a regular boyfriend, so going with him would have been comfortable."

Comfortable? Only *comfortable*? Merlin's beard!

"But Weasley ... well, all I really know about Weasley is that he's average-looking. Which is fine," she hastily and unconvincingly added, "we mustn't be fussy about superficial things. But, more importantly, the only other thing I know about him is that no-one else wanted to go to the ball with him. So why not? Is there a reason why he had to settle for a last-minute date with a stranger?"

"I'm understanding why that's a worry." Morag was using her soothing voice again. "You can never be sure. He'll *maybe* turn out to have bad breath."

Padma giggled. "So I'll take a pomander. Or perhaps he's just a crashing, crashing bore."

"Take a good book. Or he's maybe a hopelessly conceited show-off."

"I'll take ear-muffs. Or he could be a seducer."

"Lay a chastity charm on your robes. Or a pickpocket."

"I'll put a bulldog charm on my silver bracelets. Or a werewolf."

"The moon'll not be full at Christmas. Or a vampire."

"I'll wear garlic perfume ... No, that won't work; it'll smell horrible. Oh, you're right, Morag; it isn't very likely that Weasley has anything wrong with him. Probably he was just unlucky, like me. I'm being paranoid because I've had to settle for whomever I could get instead of having a real choice."

"You'll not be the only one," said Morag. "Stephen had not found anybody by yesterday, and he was very stressed about it. I told him that if he'd not found anybody by Christmas Day, I'd go with him myself."

"Morag, you fool! That commits you to him, but if he *does* find someone else, that will leave you high and dry with no-one!"

"I'm doubting it. He was very relieved that I offered, so I'm thinking that he'll give up on looking for anybody else and make the best of going with me. Never mind, I'm liking all my cousins. So, are you going to the dancing practice tomorrow?"

Fizzing Whizzbees

Chapter 15 of 21

Blaise Zabini is having no trouble at all persuading random girls to accompany him to the ball.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Fizzing Whizzbees

The next morning the younger students lugged their baggage into the Entrance Hall. Laura Madley waved at me as she climbed into the horseless carriage that was to drive her to Hogsmeade. I tried not to lose heart about finding a dancing partner, but it really did seem that I would be attending the Yule Ball alone, just for the food, as I had been telling everyone for days.

There were twice as many girls as boys at the dancing lesson, so that afternoon I began to hope again. Surely, among so many girls, there must *be* one who was waiting for an escort to materialise? At least it couldn't hurt to find out if anyone was still available. I held out my hand to Lilith Moon from my Muggle Studies class, and she agreed to practise with me.

Madam Hooch was teaching us the Gavotte, which was a far more complicated dance than last week's Fox Trots and Swings. "It's quite fast, but it's still a rhythm!" she called. "Fizzingwhizzbee, fizzingwhizzbee, don't let that beat out of your heads!"

The Gavotte apparently cut a wide swathe across the hall. By the time I had learned the steps enough to notice my surroundings, I realised that every couple was twirling practically in isolation. Certainly no-one could overhear as I casually asked my partner: "Are you going to the Ball with someone special, Lilith?"

Lilith stared at me defiantly. "I don't care what anyone thinks I'm going with Colin Creevey, so I am. And proud of it!"

Since I couldn't imagine what might be wrong with this, I stood still, lost for words. "Er," I began, "well, that's nice... you and Creevey..." But I couldn't even remember who Creevey was.

"You think I'm stupid, don't you?" demanded Lilith.

"No, I, er... well, what's so stupid about the situation, anyway?"

"My birthday's in *August*," she said, "and his is in *November*. The age difference is about *twelve weeks*. And Colin's *taller* than I am, so he is. No-one would say *he* was too old for *me* if *he* were the one who was twelve weeks older, would they now? Or if we were both six months older, so that he was in fourth year too, would they even *notice* that I was born eighty days earlier? It's just so *mean*, the way everyone looks at me as if I were a cradle-snatcher in a wheelchair, simply because my dance partner is a third year do you know what I mean?"

I began to have a dim understanding of what was upsetting her. "Oh, very mean," I agreed. "I hadn't even realised that Creevey was only in third year. After all, he's quite... mature, isn't he?" Obviously I had no way of knowing whether this were true, but Lilith nodded slightly and relaxed a little.

"And, honestly, the fourth-years in my House are so boring! You can't blame me for liking Colin better, can you?"

"Oh, not at all... well, I hadn't noticed whether they were boring or not. There aren't many Gryffindors in my classes."

"Seamus only talks to Lavender, and Harry and Ron only talk to Hermione, and Neville never talks to anyone. Dean talks to everyone, but only about that Muggle sport he's so keen on... do they call it legball? Whereas Colin is a really *interesting* person with so many hobbies, and he never says a bad word about anyone."

"Is Creevey here today?" I asked, for lack of anything else to say.

"He isn't; he needed develop some photographs. But he's a very good dancer; he learned most kinds of dancing at his Muggle primary school."

"And do the other Gryffindor girls all have partners?" I knew this was not subtle, but how else was I to find out?

"Lavender's going with Seamus no surprise and Parvati with Harry *big* surprise and Emma can't shut up about how she's going with Geoffrey Hooper *infifth* year. As if 'twere such a big deal! I don't know about Hermione; I heard a rumour that she was after having an invitation, but there doesn't seem to be a real man materialising out of the rumours. I think she's just pretending because she feels left out. Poor Hermione, everyone *says* she's a show-off, but really she's fine when you get to know her do you know what I mean?"

As soon as the metronome stopped, Zabini held out a hand and whirled Liliith away to dance the next measure with him. I suspected that he assumed Liliith to be my permanent partner and that he had selected her as a snub to me.

The next dance was a Minuet, which required us to keep in formation as well as memorise some complicated movements. This time I danced with Marietta Edgecombe, who really was a good dancer, which made it easy for me to learn the steps by mirroring her. Marietta paid me no attention: she minuetted so easily that she was able to talk to Cho Chang behind her at the same time. Minuet couples keep close together, so as soon as Madam Hooch stopped the metronome to re-form the S shape we were supposed to be making, I tugged Marietta through the crowd and jostled us into standing behind Zabini and Liliith.

"I can't believe I was too late," Zabini was saying. "I've been watching you *fordays*. I kept promising myself that you were the girl I'd take to the ball, but there didn't seem to be a good moment to approach you. Beauty is so intimidating, you know."

She can't swallow that line, I thought. *She can't.*

But Liliith was wavering. "We-ell. As I've said, *Ido* have a partner. He's not exactly a boyfriend, though "

And Zabini had whipped the little white stone out of his robes and was holding it in the right hand that rested against Liliith's back.

"Well, *can* you get out of it?" Zabini lowered his face towards Liliith's breathlessly. "If only you could take courage be a true Gryffindor, as they say and tell your friend "

Liliith was opening her mouth to reply. The stone was shimmering, flushing the palest possible shade of blue. I twirled Marietta gracefully under my arm at the same moment as Liliith twirled confusedly under Zabini's. I scowled at Liliith with a ferocious scowl.

She recoiled instantly, embarrassed to have been overheard. As soon as she was facing Zabini again, she declared: "Get up the yard! If you like me so much, you can tell me again *after* the ball now!"

And the stone turned jet black. As Zabini flung it back into his pocket, I saw that golden writing had appeared on the reverse side:

19. Liliith Moon

Apparently the Slytherins intended everyone to know in which order Zabini had invited the girls to the ball. Nineteen. Only one stone to go.

Liliith rounded on me furiously as soon as the Minuet was over. "You were spying!"

"I don't trust Zabini," I said. "I was spying *onhim*, not *you*."

"What's your excuse for that?"

"No excuses," I said. "Let me just tell you two things. One, I won't be mentioning this to anyone. If anyone else ever finds out, it's you or Zabini who has talked. Two, what do you think Zabini is saying *right now* to your best friend?"

Liliith gasped and raced half way across the hall, just out of earshot of whatever Zabini was saying to Emma Spinks. By the time I had caught up with Liliith, Emma was walking towards us, half-laughing, and gesturing with her hands in a way that was almost literally a push in Zabini's chest.

"No, no, no!" We saw rather than heard that. "Say no more, and I'll assume you were joking! But ask me again, and I'll give Geoffrey a reason to be angry with you!"

Zabini smirked as he replaced a black stone in his pocket. Emma may have thought she had brought the matter to a graceful conclusion, but Zabini couldn't possibly be afraid of Hooper's opinion.

"Himself tried it on with you, too, didn't he?" said Liliith.

"Yes, the fool!" said Emma. "Why does he think I'd want to go with someone like *him*? Him and his long eyelashes and his Renaissance nose! Oh, Liliith, look !"

There was a great flash at the door of the hall, and then a mousy-haired boy unslung a camera from his neck. "Liliith!" he shouted. "I've finished them all! Am I in time to join the practice?"

"Just one more dance today," said Madam Hooch. "Something easy. Let's have a go at the Congo. Not at all difficult, but much more fun when danced properly. You don't need a partner, just line up..."

Liliith flashed me a grateful smile before placing her hands on Creevey's shoulders. I knew that she knew she could trust my silence. I was glad that there was going to be one dance at the Yule Ball that didn't depend on this endless pairing off of male with female.

Zabini and Nott left the hall together. Nott was asking, "So are you going to ask Malfoy for more stones?"

"No way!" said Zabini firmly. "The last two said no, and I reckon that's because all the girls are taken now. Still, I had twice as many accept as refuse, so I'll quit while I'm ahead."

I hardly had time to be relieved that this was the end of it before I noticed Cecilia Rivers sitting miserably by herself, twisting her tawny hair around her fingers. *Another one who's only just found out*, I thought. I sat at a careful distance on the same bench.

"Bad hair day, Cecilia?" I asked.

"Ha ha, very funny." She dropped her hair quickly. "Did you see how many girls Blaise was flirting with this afternoon?"

"A few," I said.

"Cho Chang... Marietta Edgecombe... Emma Spinks.... Liliith Moon... Sophie Roper... Hannah Abbott... Queenie... even Millicent! He's meant to be with *me*, and he didn't practise with me once!"

"Well, I don't suppose he was exactly asking them all to the ball just because he chatted them up a little," I said cautiously.

"Queenie told me this morning that he's taking *her*. That he only asked me out of pity, because he could see no-one else would have me, but he thought he'd taken on more than he could manage, and he was going to dump me for her. What kind of a friend is she, to spread stories like that? But when I asked Blaise about it, he just said to use my common sense; did I *really* think he'd asked me!"

"Sounds as if he's not the right kind of friend either," I suggested.

"But he can't go with Queenie she's supposed to be going with Theodore!"

"So there's only one thing for it!" I said.

"What?"

"Wash your face, comb your hair, change into non-school robes and ask Nott whom *he* thinks he's taking to the ball!" It was lucky that I knew how Nott was likely to react to this conundrum. Otherwise I wouldn't have known what to say to Cecilia.

She considered this. "What if they *both* think they're taking Queenie?"

"Let them fight it out. Seriously, if Zabini can steal Daphne from Nott, I'm sure you can steal Nott from Daphne."

As we left the hall, we saw Daphne Greengrass just inside the dungeon corridor, practically in Zabini's arms.

"Queenie, you mustn't listen to silly rumours," he was telling her. "You know the other Houses gossip about Slytherins. Of course a lot of fantasy is talked about who's going with whom. But when their fantastic stories conflict, they don't have the honesty to admit it was all speculation. Instead, they accuse *us* of inconstant mind and foul play. Beautiful one, be as wise as you are charming (as some poet undoubtedly once said). If other girls claim to be going to the ball with me, that's their wishful thinking. They won't be able to keep thinking it once they see that *you* are the one waltzing into the hall on my arm."

This was the first time I had heard of Zabini dealing with his jilts in this way. It occurred to me that perhaps he really did have a serious dancing partner in mind. Daphne did not look totally convinced, but she nodded.

"There you are," I said to Cecilia. "Doesn't poor Nott *deserve* to know about this?"

She agreed that he did.

Transformation Scene

Chapter 16 of 21

The Yule Ball finally begins.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Transformation Scene

The next five days were comparatively uneventful. I researched my stinking Potions essays in the library in the mornings, went out for snowball fights as soon as the sun was high enough, caught up with other homework after lunch, walked around the lake or flew over the Quidditch pitch in the late afternoons, and rioted in the common room after dinner.

On Sunday I worked up the courage to hint to Hermione Granger that I didn't have a partner for the ball and to ask her if she were going with anyone. She replied that she was. If she wasn't telling the truth, I didn't want to know why not.

At Monday dinner the Slytherin table was empty. Zacharias Smith explained to anyone who would listen that they were all boozing up in the dungeons because it was Blaise Zabini's birthday. Sure enough, at Tuesday breakfast they re-appeared, bleary-eyed and even fouler-tempered than usual. Only Pansy Parkinson, when she finally entered the hall last of all, was fresh-faced and smiling. "Didn't any of you think to go to Madam Pomfrey *before* breakfast?" she asked scornfully and began handing out little packets of powder.

On Wednesday there was another dancing lesson, in which we learned the Bourée ("the most complicated dance there is"), before returning to a re-run of the Fox Trot, Swing, Waltz, Gavotte, Minuet and Congo.

I practised with Anne-Marie Lefèvre from Beauxbatons and asked her whether she had a permanent partner for the real ball. Anne-Marie misunderstood my question and reeled off *all* the Beauxbatons students' dance partners. Two of her classmates were a longstanding couple; she herself was going with a boy from Durmstrang; two of the boys had been unlucky (could I do the large favour of naming two very agreeable alone girls?); and everyone else was matched up with someone from Hogwarts.

I did ask Anne-Marie to point out the girl who had promised to accompany Blaise Zabini. But, alas, her poor friend was in bed with a head-cold and could not meet anyone today. They did all hope she would be well again in time for the Noël Ball, for it was to be a grand evening, not?

On Christmas Day I woke to find the usual pile of presents at the end of my bed. I had a new Cleansweep Ten from my parents, a bag of dungbombs from my younger brother, a new watch from my Muggle grandparents, a book about Quidditch from my wizarding grandparents, and a very gadgetty penknife from Terry. There was also a sticky wrapper full of soft toffee from the sixth-year girls, which had stuck to one bedpost and was making a terrible mess. Since I didn't really know those girls, I assume they were handing toffee bags out to everyone in Ravenclaw kind of them.

The morning was fun, what with looking at everyone else's presents, and avoiding Harold Dingle's practical jokes, and playing a series of clever word-games organised by Roger Davies. I nearly lost my new book, but in the end I realised that Anthony was borrowing it.

In the afternoon, a strange gloom settled down on me. The girls, and some of the boys, were shrieking with laughter, but I didn't feel like admiring my new possessions any more. I knew why, too. It was happening. The long-expected Yule Ball was upon us. It could not be avoided. Everyone else had a partner. And I was only going for the food.

"Want to go outside for a snow fight?" Robert was asking.

I peered out of the window. "I think someone else is using up all the snow," I said. A crowd of mad Gryffindors was screeching at each other, and one snowball smashed right on our window, up on the seventh floor.

"Yeah, let's just play Exploding Snap," said Kevin.

When I was bored with Snap, I picked up my book and opened it at random. As luck would have it, it was not my book after all, but Penelope Clearwater's. It had fallen open at a white page and stated:

If you were arrested for kindness,

would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Assuming the message had been for Penelope, I pushed the book away, but suddenly found myself wondering anyway *would* I be convicted? I had never considered whether I was a kind person or not. Did the Book of Wisdom have something to say to me after all? I flipped a few leaves at random and found myself staring at a pale blue page:

Make the people near you happy,

and those who are far away will come to you.

Far away? But why would I want far-away people to come to me? The book must be a fraud, I thought, or else the charm only worked for Penelope Clearwater.

"Oh, you're reading that preachy book again," said Terry cheerily. "Hand it over, then; let's see what it says. Ah, very good, just perfect for tonight!" He was looking at a lilac sheet whose letters bounced out of line like a child's handwriting.

Those who have worked hard deserve to play hard.

Don't waste your time on half-pleasures.

"It seems rather unnecessary advice," I pointed out, riffling the pages again. "Don't you find this book, well, trite?" This time I opened to another white page:

Great opportunities to help others seldom come,

but small ones surround us daily.

"Hard to argue with that," said Terry. He was in a very good mood.

"But I don't see how it fits in with me right now," I argued. I was in a less good mood.

"Oh, you've found my book, Michael!" Penelope was swooping down on us. "I'd hate to lose that; Percy gave it to me." She looked at me quizzically as she saw what the charm was telling me, then flipped over to another page. It was a pink one, and it warned in flourishing Edwardian script:

Infatuation demands everything now.

True love can wait.

At six o'clock the girls started to leave the common room. At seven o'clock the boys started to leave. I knew I should leave too. The Yule Ball was happening. I needed to put on my dress robes. But honestly, how long does it take to put on a clean robe and run a comb through one's hair?

By half-past seven, just as my new watch was reminding me I really should stir myself, the only other person left in the common room was Luna Lovegood.

"Luna," I said as I rose to my feet, "we must go and get changed."

"I'm not changing," she said.

I knew Luna had some eccentric habits, but this was ridiculous. "Luna, you can't go to a ball in school uniform! They won't let you in if you're not wearing dress robes."

"Oh, I'm not going to the ball," she said vaguely, as if she had said, "It isn't raining today."

I did a double-take. "Not going? You're staying at school all through the holidays, but missing out on the Yule Ball?"

"Well, I was originally going with Zabini, but he changed his mind. Unfortunately, I'd already written to Daddy to say that I'd be staying at school through the holidays. And he owed back that this suited him really well; now he could go to Poland with a clear conscience to check out a rumour of government corruption. My father edits a newspaper, you see, and unusual stories are our daily bread. You know who Fudge's Senior Undersecretary is, of course?"

"Er well "

"Not that her name matters, the point is that this woman *looks* the very epitome of respectability. But our contact in Warsaw has actual proof that she's at the centre of a black market ring. Not just a few herbs and broomsticks, but smuggling out Dark artefacts in exchange for gold. Our contact claims she's supplying the whole of Eastern Europe, although that's debatable ..."

I must have been looking sceptical.

"... Responsible journalists must have *proof*, you know, Michael. The part about other countries may be exaggeration. So Daddy needs to do some detective work. But the part about Poland is practically certain. It's an exposé begging to be written. Obviously I couldn't ask him to give up on an excellent story like that, so I never told him I wasn't going to the ball after all."

"But surely you don't want to sit here all evening and stare at the fire!" I was sure there was some Muggle fairy tale about a girl who sat staring at the fire while everyone else went to a ball, but I couldn't remember it offhand.

"Well, I can't go down to the kitchens and annoy the house-elves at a time like this," Luna replied calmly. From anyone else it would have been a wry joke, but Luna seemed deadly serious.

"Luna," I said suddenly, "you *can* go to the ball. You can come with me!"

"Oh, but..."

"Seriously. Why not? I don't have a partner, and I'd um rather have one than not. Wouldn't you like to come to the ball with me?"

Luna wrestled with her surprise for a very short time, but it was obvious what she wanted. "All right, then. But you need to understand, Michael, that just because we're going to the ball together, that does *not* make me your girlfriend. It's just for this evening, and only for dancing and conversation, all right?"

"Absolutely all right," I said, keeping my face as straight as I could. "Oh ... do you have anything to wear?"

"Yes, Daddy sent me a robe when he owled me about Poland," she said. "I'll meet you down here in ten minutes, then. Thanks!"

"...I thought you were never coming up!" said Terry. "I don't think I like my dress robe. Grandma chose it for me. It looks as if it's made of grass."

"Dress robes are always a bit weird," I agreed, tunnelling under mine. "But we'll all be looking weird together." My fingers fumbled over the buttons, and I picked up my comb. "What else do I need to do to get ready? I can't imagine why the girls think they need two hours each."

"You could try washing your face," suggested Terry. "But I agree; it's a big fuss about nothing they shouldn't be forcing us to rely on outward adornment like this. Right, ready to go?"

All the boys were downstairs in the common room before any of the girls. We waited. It was ten to eight before the door to the girls' staircase burst open, and a dazzling display swept in.

Su was resplendent in pumpkin-gold silk embossed with Chinese dragons. Mandy, with her unruly hair sleeked down and plaited up, was wearing deep lilac, while Lisa was almost unrecognisable in scarlet with her hair piled onto her head. Padma was dressed in hot turquoise, silver bangles jingling, while Morag wore a neat tartan with a Celtic-knot clasp in her hair. Behind them came a radiant, crimson-clad Cho, followed by Marietta, Sylvia, Penelope ... As their partners came forward to claim each one, I thought again how lonely it would have been to be attending a ball only for the food. For Anthony had been right about one thing: not a single girl in Ravenclaw was attending the ball unescorted.

Luna descended the stairs last of all, not even looking at anyone else. She was the only person in the room whose dress robes were white. She had probably combed her hair, but it somehow hung down long and straggly as usual. She was wearing huge dangly earrings, shaped like snowflakes, and a sparkly snowflake headpiece, which looked as if it belonged on a Christmas tree rather than on a person. Despite her obvious attempt to follow a seasonal snow theme, I was struck by how bridal she looked. I suppressed a smile as I came forward to take her hand.

"It's okay; I can walk without tripping," she said, misunderstanding my gesture. "Shall we go down, then?"

Babel and Table

Chapter 17 of 21

Can Blaise Zabini really carry off his deception now that all the girls he invited to the ball are face to face with one another and with him?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Babel and Table

The Hufflepuffs were already waiting in the Entrance Hall, grouped around Cedric Diggory. Diggory stepped forward at once to greet Cho Chang. William Stebbins and Stephen Cornfoot followed, apparently expected by Sylvia Fawcett and Morag, while Terry raced in the opposite direction, calling, "Hey Sally-Anne!" I was nervous, not really knowing what to do with myself, but Luna was dreamily gazing around, apparently content to watch the other students. Roger Davies had barely stationed himself by the front door before it flew wide open, and a beaming Madame Maxime was leading her students in. Fleur Delacour was in front, of course, and she took Roger's arm with a dazzling smile.

Then the Gryffindors tramped down the stairs, and the Entrance Hall became rather crowded. Amid the milling students waiting for the ball to begin, I noticed a Beauxbatons girl standing quietly near the stair to the dungeons, apparently waiting for a Hogwarts partner.

"He's here." Padma was scanning the Gryffindors for her partner. "He must be! Oh,*no*. I don't *believe* this..." She stared at Weasley incredulously.

"Ready, Padma?" It was Parvati. "Ron's waiting for you just over by the stairs."

"Parvati," Padma hissed, "what's he done to his *robes*? They look as if they're unravelling as he walks!"

Parvati shrugged. "Boys never take proper care of their clothes. But Ron's are probably just old. The Weasleys are poor, remember, and can't afford anything better."

I lost interest in Padma as Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies sailed past a really glamorous couple, I had to admit and there were footsteps approaching from the dungeon steps. Malfoy and a simpering Pansy Parkinson were leading the Slytherins up to the Entrance Hall. Yes! Daphne Greengrass was leaning triumphantly on Zabini, both looking as if they had stepped out of Renaissance Italy. The fifth-years were still entering when the Beauxbatons girl stepped swiftly towards Zabini and grabbed his free arm the one holding his bucket.

No-one, of course, could hear what she said. The Silencing Varnish was going to last another two hours yet. But everyone saw the wide-eyed shock on her face when Zabini spoke to her. She opened her mouth again and began to choke uncontrollably.

I tried to push my way forward. "Don't *push!*" exclaimed Penelope Clearwater irritably. Then I realised that there was nothing I could do even if I did reach the scene of the crisis, so I stopped trying.

"What's going on?" asked Malfoy with a nasty imitation of ignorance. "Do you know this woman, Zabini?"

"Never seen her in my life before," said Zabini which everyone knew to be a lie, since the girl had eaten three meals a day in the Great Hall every day for the last eight weeks.

"Oh, but but you 'ave forgetted a meestake, per'aps "

It was Montague, a Chaser from the Slytherin Quidditch team, whose opportunism saved the situation. He may not have understood why the Beauxbatons girl had no partner, but he had worked out that she was looking for one. Twice Zabini's size, Montague shoved his way up the stairs, waved a frog-shaped charm in the air, and spoke loudly, as if the girl were deaf.

"Kest moy kwee serra voh tree cavally-er ke soh-er."

Lisa winced. "That is a *useless* Babel charm that he's trying to use! Why can't he just speak to her in English?"

The girl from Beauxbatons certainly looked as if she would understand English better than whatever Montague had said, but it did give her a face on which to focus her attention.

"You are Innocence Trichée," he said. "Bother, this charm needs another shake." He shook. "Moy, jeh mappell Quartus Montague. Vows chair chezz un cavally-er. Kest moy kwee serra your partner this evening oh, *damn*."

Innocence seemed to understand the word "partner", even if she were mystified by the rest. She accepted Montague's outstretched right hand, then managed to pull the frog charm out of his left and slip it in her pocket.

"I have a krauty one too!" Montague called over his shoulder. "Anyone else want a go at getting off with the foreigners?" There was some enthusiasm in the crowd, and he threw a small cabbage-shaped charm to his friend Warrington.

"One reason they still teach Ancient Runes at Hogwarts, love," Lisa observed to Mandy, "is that in over a thousand years of trying, no-one has ever yet invented a Babel charm that actually works."

By now the Durmstrang students had entered the castle, a solemn Viktor Krum and his partner in the lead. The last Durmstrang student was a slim, pale-faced girl, robed in crimson, who walked straight up to Zabini with an enticing smile.

"Another girl who's forgotten who her date is!" yelled Zabini loudly. He didn't seem to have any trouble saying that much in public, presumably because it was such an outright lie.

Warrington was quick to take the cue. He shook the cabbage-charm thoroughly and was speaking to the Durmstrang girl before she properly understood that Zabini was ignoring her.

"Gutt enna bend, Kun Eej Nah," said Warrington. "Errin urn sigh sitch an mitch? Itch hace Kekkil Warrington. Itch bin eye-arr Tans partner."

Kun-Eej-Nah from Durmstrang made no attempt to understand Warrington's burbling, but she seemed to grasp better than Innocence Trichée that Zabini had lost interest in her and that an alternative offer was available. She smiled again and said:

"Verry happy, Wahrrrrington. Will dance gladly wid you."

At that moment the doors to the Great Hall opened, and Professor McGonagall called us inside.

The band was playing softly as I helped Luna to a chair at a small table. Terry and Sally-Anne Perks were already settled to our left, and Wayne Hopkins was chattering in Welsh opposite while Megan Jones corrected his pronunciation. The chair to our right clattered onto the ground before it was stamped back onto its feet, and a rather frightful blue-and-green tartan settled noisily into it.

"Hi, Michael thanks again for your great advice!" Zacharias Smith was smirking broadly at me while Tracey Davies slid into the vacant chair next to him.

"Good evening, Zacharias and Tracey," was all I could say.

"Happy endings, eh?" he continued. He hissed so that Tracey could not hear. "*Acertain young lady* has to be delighted she managed to get rid of me so easily!" He raised his voice to a normal volume as he told Tracey, "Did not Parvati Patil do well for herself? Look at her, up on the champions' table!"

Tracey stiffened. "Those people up on the top table who think they're so important because a champion invites them to the ball!"

Zacharias shrugged. "Why not let them show off a bit, if it's making them happy?"

"Because people ought to *do* something for themselves, instead of relying on reflected glory and accidents of birth, that's why!" complained Tracey. She was not looking at Parvati. Her eyes were glued to Fleur Delacour.

"Well, the Goblet of Fire did choose Fleur out of all the Beauxbatons students," said Luna serenely.

"But it didn't choose *my brother!*" Tracey gasped, as if fighting off tears. "Why does *he* think he deserves a spot up there with the people who matter?"

"I'm expecting that Fleur thought he was pretty," said Zacharias. "It makes *her* look good to have him hovering over her."

For some reason Tracey liked this answer and did not pursue the subject.

Odd, I thought. Roger Davies had dominated our common room every day for three and a half years. And Tracey Davies had been in our Herbology class for two and a half years. Yet I had never made the connection that they were siblings. Davies is a common name, of course; but Roger and Tracey really did look very alike.

"Is that Hermione Granger on Parvati Patil's other side?" asked Megan Jones suddenly. "She can't no, I don't believe it I think she must be with Viktor Krum!"

Krum did indeed appear to be watching Hermione Granger very intently. It didn't seem at all a likely pairing, but then, who would have thought that I would go to a ball with Luna Lovegood?

Food had already appeared on our golden plates when a very polite voice asked: "May we take these last two seats?" It was Longbottom from Gryffindor. He waited until we had all said yes before drawing out the chair next to Tracey for his partner.

She was the most ethereal vision in the world.

Her hair and eyes were made of fire, and her skin was made of snow. Her robes (rather faded) were rainbow-green. In fact I would have believed her if she'd said she had stepped off a rainbow a minute ago, her colours were so clear and soft and bright. I stared and stared.

I didn't register what she said to Tracey. I barely heard Tracey as she introduced herself and Zacharias, then added, "And that one's Michael Corner. He's with the resident Ravenclaw Loony."

I turned uneasily, but Luna was speaking across the table to Sally-Anne and Megan. Wayne Hopkins had engaged Longbottom's attention, and neither of them noticed when Zacharias heartily informed me:

"That's Neville Longbottom, your local Herbology expert, and he's with Ginny Weasley."

I knew it was Longbottom, of course, and I hoped Longbottom realised that he was the most honoured and fortunate man in the room. I was jealous of Zacharias and Tracey for sitting between me and the fire-maiden, and even of Luna for being in the same year. I wasn't hearing what Terry was saying into my left ear.

"Michael Michael! She's just a girl! Don't be so *obvious!*"

It was a very long thirty seconds before I understood what he had said and why. I tore my eyes away, and tried to think of something to say to Terry, stuttering while Sally-

Anne suppressed her amusement. Eventually I remembered that Luna was my partner this evening; I must pay attention to Luna. So I craned my neck and stared down at Luna's plate.

"Why are you only eating lettuce?"

"Cucumber and olives too," she pointed out reasonably. "But no dressing. Even the smallest spot of oil is disastrous to a white robe."

Invitation to the Waltz

Chapter 18 of 21

Michael Corner meets Ginny Weasley. Can he persuade her to dance, and what will their official partners think of that?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Invitation to the Waltz

The Weird Sisters were strumming up a mournful waltz. *Su-gar-quill, su-gar-quill*. The words ran through my head before I glanced up at Ginny Weasley. She was staring up at the champions' table, and she too was murmuring under her breath:

"Su-gar-quill, su-gar-quill... sorry, Neville, those dancing lessons must have got under my skin."

"Let's be hoping they did!" cried Zacharias, apparently not noticing that no-one had been speaking to him.

"I hope I didn't miss anything by not going to those practices," worried Longbottom.

"Probably not, it doesn't look difficult," Ginny reassured him.

Roger Davies and Fleur Delacour were gliding onto the floor, as if the whole hall belonged only to them. For a moment I could have believed it did, they melted so effortlessly into the music. But Diggory and Cho Chang glided after them, a little less expert, but a sublimely beautiful couple. Then came the flat-footed Krum, touching Hermione Granger's waist as lightly as if she were porcelain, and Parvati Patil, firmly locking Potter into precise circles.

As the teachers and exchange students followed the champions into the dance, Sally-Anne and Megan were tapping their feet impatiently. Only Luna remained in her chair, floating dreamily on the music. Professor Dumbledore was leading Madame Maxime out with great courtesy, but Professor Karkaroff, interestingly, had simply moved himself into a chair at the low end of the hall. The young Ministry employee was holding Penelope Clearwater in a tight embrace, and Ludo Bagman had whirled a surprised Madam Hooch into the thickening crowd. After the seventh- and sixth-year students had followed the teachers onto the floor, Zacharias whooped, "This is us, Tracey!" and pulled her into the dance. I ripped my eyes away from Ginny Weasley, now revolving in Longbottom's arms, and held out my hand to Luna, who moved into the ballroom hold.

It was impossible to tell whether Luna was accustomed to dancing. She moved faultlessly, but left all the steering to me. I found myself muttering, "Sugar quill, sugar quill," to be on the safe side.

"But it's just a dance, you know," said Luna. "It doesn't really matter if we lose rhythm."

That, I supposed, was a matter of opinion. A ballroom floor seemed to me a very public place to make a fool of oneself. I changed the subject to: "Is Ginny Weasley a friend of yours?"

"We do Herbology together. She's nice."

"Do you know Ginny's boyfriend too?"

"Her ? Actually, I'd be fairly sure he isn't her boyfriend. No, I assumed that *you* knew him."

"How can you tell he isn't her boyfriend?" I tried not to sound too eager.

But Luna didn't know how she knew, and in trying to pump her on that subject, I completely overlooked that she was expecting me to supply Longbottom's name. In fact, I think she came to the end of the evening without knowing it.

The music ended. The second dance was a lively Swing a whizzbee that properly fizzed. Before Luna and I could begin moving, we were interrupted by a blinding light. Creevey's flashiest camera was within a foot of our faces.

"Caught you!" He grinned. "Now, can you do us a little favour, Corner? I've been so busy taking pictures of everyone else, but I'd like just one of Liliith and me. Can you snap that for us?"

I snapped uncertainly, but Creevey seemed delighted.

"Excellent! Listen, I really do want to take pictures of everyone, but that won't be much fun for Liliith. So I wonder if you two could entertain her for ten minutes, and after that, I promise I won't take any more pictures for at least an hour."

"It's all right, Michael," said Luna. "Why don't you dance this one with Liliith, and I'll sit out? She dances better than I do anyway." I couldn't tell whether Luna was happy to make this offer or just being noble, but Liliith was very obviously pleased, so I took her hands, while Luna trailed back to the side of the hall.

Liliith certainly had learned something from Madam Hooch: she threw herself into the Swing with effortless verve, and I suddenly found that I was keeping in step with no effort either.

"Colin was snapping away all through the feast and all through that first dance," she told me. "He's hardly danced at all so far." But she didn't seem to mind.

"He's a pretty keen photographer, then?" was all I could think of to say.

"Oh, he's marvellous. His pictures always look right. He's already shot off three reels, just of me, during these holidays."

Lilith chatted happily about Creevey throughout the dance. By the time it ended, Creevey was back at our elbows, asking if I could place his camera on a table so he wouldn't be tempted. They both thanked me and walked off for the next measure as if no-one else existed.

Luna was gazing at the chandeliers, apparently in ecstasy, while her foot tapped out the new rhythm. It was a Fox-Trot, a whizzbee that fizzed slowly. She turned to look at me as I put the camera down.

"Colin's like that," she said, as if I had spoken. "He once spent the Herbology lesson taking pictures of students at work, and Professor Sprout took the camera off him. But after class she asked for a set of the photos."

"Shall we dance this one?"

"If you like."

As we were half way across the hall, Luna remarked, "I don't think Padma's enjoying herself very much."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Padma was sitting crossly next to Weasley, who was having some kind of argument with Hermione Granger, while Potter looked on in irritation. Parvati was nowhere in sight.

"She hasn't seemed happy all evening about having Weasley as her partner," I remembered. Weasley had always struck me as a decent sort, and I was surprised that the ever-poised Padma wasn't even managing to be polite to him. I swung Luna off in the opposite direction, and we found ourselves fizzing into an oval formation of couples who were rotating as regularly as satellites. Whoops, we were intruding!

"Good evening, Michael," said Justin Finch-Fletchley. "Come to join the solar system?"

"What, are we planets?" asked Susan Bones.

It was odd how Justin had perceived them as a stellar system too, as if he had read my mind. "Luna's a comet," was all I could think of to say, "never trapped in anyone else's orbit."

Luna giggled, as if I had said something terribly witty, but Susan looked bewildered, trying to work out the logic of the joke.

"It's all right; we are *not* talking sensibly," Justin reassured her.

Some people like Justin and Padma and the obnoxious Zabini always seem to know what to say, no matter how serious or trivial the situation. Other people like Zacharias and Tracey and Luna unerringly manage to strike the wrong note, even when they have the best of intentions.

Some of the other planets, I noticed, were quite outrageously dressed, yet they were all carrying it off with the most natural aplomb. Wayne Hopkins and Megan Jones, still flirting in Welsh, wore curiously matching designs, red dragons dizzily swirling on black and white backgrounds. Ernie Macmillan was a blast of red and yellow tartan, yet unlike Zacharias Smith he looked completely dignified, as if the Macmillans had worn nothing else since the founding of Hogwarts. Hannah Abbott was an April day, all fine white lace over pale blue silk, while Sophie Roper was sunshine, a shock of buttercup yellow against Eddie Carmichael's small-scaled, complicated blue-and-green squares. Stephen's red-and-green tartan ought to have clashed with Morag's red-and-black, and everyone ought to have clashed with Thomas's great flapping stripes of sky-blue and burgundy. Justin and Susan looked ordinary enough, but Finnigan's robes were embossed with huge four-leafed shamrocks, and Lavender Brown, nestling in his arms, looked like a sprig of, well, lavender.

I hardly had a moment to realise I was staring before Thomas winked at me. "Great colours, aren't they?" he grinned. "Mum ran it up on her old Muggle sewing machine because we couldn't find a wizarding tailor who'd do it. Madam Malkin claimed that no purebloods would ever buy from her again if she stitched up stripes like these."

"No! What snobbery!" exclaimed Eloise Midgen herself an ostentatious shimmer of peach satin. She didn't seem to find Thomas's stripes unusual. Perhaps those widely trailing sleeves and hems were what Muggles wore to play legball. None of them, in fact, seemed to notice the dress-sense of any of the others. They rotated on their own axes, as well as around the oval, with the rhythm of a single person.

When that dance ended, Luna trailed off to another table to speak to Lisa and Mandy. I returned to our table to check on Creevey's camera (it was still safe) and saw that Longbottom was bringing a tray of butterbeers. He poured for Ginny Weasley first and me second. "I wonder what Harry and Ron are shouting about?" he remarked. "I hope they're okay."

"They're fine, apart from their bad manners," said Ginny. "Ron's just confused about what he wants tonight... Neville, are you all right?"

"Stubbed my toe on the table leg. It's nothing." But Longbottom was wincing. "No, actually, I think I'd rather sit quietly for a while. Corner, could you do me *big* favour and dance the next one with Ginny?"

She looked into my eyes she had wonderful eyes, of the brightest amber-brown and smiled as she rose to her feet. And as the Weird Sisters struck up *allelegro*, Ginny Weasley was in my arms. *She's a rainbow. She's a snowflake. She's a fire. She's a dream...*

I must stop this, I thought, or she'll think I'm stupid. In fact the dance was too lively to allow much daydreaming. We needed to keep in formation as well as in step, and at quite a high speed, so no-one spoke at first.

"Your friend Longbottom seems to be the right sort," I said, when we had finally established the flow of the dance.

"He's a darling," she said. "I simply *hate* people who can't be kind to Neville ... oh, not many people. Mainly in Slytherin. What about Tracey and Zacharias, are they friends of yours?"

I didn't have to answer, because as I swung Ginny around to the other side of the hall, we came face to face with Padma! I knew it was Padma from the hot turquoise robes and silver bangles, otherwise I would have mistaken her for Parvati. Padma was no longer discontented, mustering her courage to perform an embarrassing duty. She was radiant with joyous energy, alight with graceful animation. Moreover, Weasley was nowhere in sight; Padma was dancing with Tahleb Tahseen.

I registered that Tahseen's friend, Émilie Beauvisage, was dancing with Parvati before we turned away. "Strange," I said, "I thought Padma was with Weasley... hey, is he your brother?"

"Yes," said Ginny. "All the Weasleys at this school are my brothers. All four of them!" She nodded at the red-headed Ministry official chatting to Ludo Bagman. "Four if you count Percy. He isn't usually at school, of course."

After that we talked about Quidditch. Ginny supported the Chudley Cannons, had aspirations to play Chaser on her House team, and had spent her childhood sneaking into the garden shed to borrow her brothers' broomsticks. By the time the dance stopped I felt I knew her well.

"Oh, look!" said Ginny. "That tells you all you need to know about Neville."

I followed her gaze. Longbottom was very politely holding out his hand to Millicent Bulstrode, even though she was twice his size and scowling ferociously. I bit back my instinctive comments about true self-sacrifice and nobility. Millicent might relax her scowl now that she had the opportunity to dance. But Ginny's eyes were laughing at me.

Luna was nowhere in sight, so I had a second chance to dance with Ginny. Unfortunately, the next dance was a progressive, so we had hardly danced four bars before Ginny and I had to cast off in opposite directions. After that I danced with half the girls in the room and Professor McGonagall and Madam Pince too! and had no real conversation with any of them.

As I said good-bye to my last partner (Alicia Spinnet of Gryffindor), I was standing next to Hermione Granger. She was talking to the pale-faced Durmstrang girl whom Warrington had rescued from Zabini. "Viktor says you're very good at Transfiguration. But, I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch your name."

"Cneajna Tepes. Am from Trrransylvania."

"Really?" Hermione sounded impressed. "Are you a direct descendant?"

"Yes," said Cneajna, "in de twenty-one generrrat-ion."

But I never found out from whom Cneajna was descended, because at that moment the clock struck ten. And Malfoy, hurriedly abandoning Hannah Abbott, called out:

"Zabini! Your time is up!"

Settlement Hour

Chapter 19 of 21

We find out who won the Slytherins' dastardly bet.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Settlement Hour

The Slytherin boys moved onto the table next to ours while Malfoy placed the bucket of coloured stones in the middle.

"Those people are watching us!" Nott complained.

"Well, let them. We have no secrets. They can watch Zabini make a fool of himself if they've nothing better to do," said Malfoy, briskly dismissing the audience that was accumulating around our table. Terry, Sally-Anne, Megan and Wayne were apparently still dancing, but Ginny and Longbottom had been distracted out of their discussion whether to dance, while Zacharias and Tracey had no pretence of being other than agog to watch the Slytherins.

Malfoy placed a bag of Galleons in front of Nott. "You do the reckoning," he said. "First stone. Blue. And the name is Eloise Midgen."

Crabbe and Goyle guffawed. Nott moved two Galleons towards Zabini.

"Second stone, also blue. Laura Madley!"

Nott moved two more Galleons towards Zabini while Crabbe and Goyle looked puzzled.

"Third blue stone Luna Lovegood!"

Nott joined Crabbe and Goyle in howling with laughter while he pushed over two more Galleons. I was glad that Luna was still nowhere in sight.

"Fourth stone a *black* one. Zabini's wiles give out and the girl says No. And the first girl to refuse his devilish charm was Ginny Weasley!"

Ginny flushed pink. Longbottom congratulated her while she explained that it hadn't been a very difficult decision.

"So much for the *cheating*," said Malfoy. "A spotty, a baby, a loony and a Muggle-lover! And that's how Zabini earns his Galleons. It gets better, though. Here is a red stone with *gold* writing. Look, everyone! Six Galleons for his first four attempts, and now another six for a single shot!"

Malfoy displayed the red stone bearing the copper-plate inscription:

5. *Cneajna Tepes*

"Why the colours, Malfoy?" asked Zabini. "Why am I getting six Galleons for Cneajna?"

"The gold writing means she had already agreed to go with someone else when she accepted you. A double triumph, you see she was willing to break promises for you. A blue stone means the girl liked you and really wanted to go with you. Green means she only accepted you reluctantly, when she preferred someone else, or because she was afraid she'd never find anyone. That's why I'm only handing out one Galleon for green."

"And red? Why three Galleons for red?"

"A red stone means she was willing to have sex with you."

Ginny's jaw dropped in horror. Even Tracey looked displeased by this revelation. But Zabini was coolly asking:

"So what's with the blue? That she only liked me as a friend? Or that she fancied me but was hung-up and uptight about it?"

"I didn't waste time on such artificial distinctions," said Malfoy. "Here's another blue one. Innocence Trichée. Had a good day with the foreigners, didn't you?"

"Well, they were easier game," said Zabini carelessly. "They were out in their ship and carriage, and the Hogwarts girls never saw me talking to them. In the end, though, the challenging girls were more fun."

"Well, you failed the challenge of number seven, all right. A black stone for Katie Bell. Number eight is Tracey Davies. Blue, so two more Galleons, Nott."

Tracey looked very uncomfortable. "You might have mentioned," she muttered to me angrily, "that he was keeping a record of his conquests! Now everyone knows who was fooled!"

"Number nine blue is Su Li. Number ten green is Sally-Anne Perks. Losing your touch, Zabini. Sally-Anne didn't like you as much as she pretended. Number eleven green, but with gold writing is Padma Patil!"

It was lucky I'd already known about Padma's accepting Zabini before she had officially dumped me. I was able to ignore Tracey's triumphant glance and Zacharias's bemused chuckle which, when I thought about it, might possibly have been intended sympathetically.

"So you enticed her away from her true love, but she only succumbed out of spite. Two Galleons for that little adventure. Now we come to a bad patch I believe." Malfoy shook the bucket, and pulled out three black stones at once. "Number twelve, Lavender Brown. In gold, so she refused you because she already had a date. Number thirteen, Susan Bones. She refused you despite the fact she *didn't* have a date. And number fourteen, Lisa Turpin. You must have despaired at that point, Zabini. And one pathetic little green " This one read:

15. *Sylvia Fawcett*

"Oh, well, one Galleon for Sylvia. What's the total now, Nott?"

"Twenty-two Galleons."

"Well, it picks up a little. Here's a *blue* one with gold writing."

16. *Megan Jones*

I was very, very glad that Wayne was not here to see this.

"Sally-Anne warned off Megan," said Zacharias. "Once Megan realised the game, she just changed her mind about Zabini and went back to Wayne."

Malfoy was holding up the next stone, another blue one.

17. *Cecilia Rivers*

"Traitor!" hissed Nott. "You knew that I "

"Traitor yourself," said Zabini. "On the contrary, I thought you had *already* invited Cecilia to the ball and that she would earn me double stakes with her gold writing. It was a dreadful disappointment to discover that she only accepted me because you hadn't asked."

Malfoy cleared his throat loudly and displayed another blue stone.

18. *Daphne "Queenie" Greengrass*

"With gold letters!" This was the first time Zabini had looked discomforted. "I don't believe it! Who ?" He caught Nott's eye and hissed, *Explain* this!"

"Well, you were trying it on with everyone. Including Cecilia. So I thought I should be allowed a turn too, even though no-one was paying me. And when I told Queenie that you didn't like her any more, she was very quick to accept me. What are you complaining about, Zabini? She accepted you in the end, didn't she?"

"It was much harder than it should have been, thanks to you," said Zabini sourly. "I spent *long* time trying to convince her that I had no previous commitments."

"Well, it paid off," said Nott. "Four Galleons for getting the girl you wanted. *And* she kept her promise to go with you, even though it looks as if you carried right on flirting after she accepted."

"Let's finish this up," interrupted Malfoy. "Number nineteen, Lilith Moon, and number twenty, Emma Spinks, both gold names on black stones. Slow learner, aren't you, Zabini? Not a single Gryffindor has accepted your advances! And finally, the last stone "

"That was the last one," said Zabini. "Emma Spinks was the twentieth, the last girl I asked."

"It's thirty-two Galleons," said Nott. "Not bad. Thirteen said yes; only seven said no."

"It isn't finished," hissed Malfoy. "Look, here's another stone in the bucket." He held up a blank white one.

"But there wasn't another one!" said Zabini. "That would make twenty-one."

"There were twenty-one stones," said Malfoy.

"There were *not*. Boys, didn't he say twenty?"

Nott agreed; Crabbe and Goyle began to agree until they saw Malfoy frowning at them.

"We agreed to 'stones in the bucket at ten o'clock on Christmas night'," Malfoy corrected them. "Well, here is another stone in the bucket on Christmas night. I dropped it in myself at half-past eight."

"That's *cheating!*" roared Zabini.

"No, it isn't. There was nothing in our contract that said I couldn't slip in an extra stone. Or anything to stop you taking it out again if you'd bothered to check on the stones and discover the extra. The contract only said, I could take any white stones found in the bucket and find out what girls *would* have said if you *had* asked them."

A dull flush suffused Zabini's bronzed complexion. I did wonder who was left who might accept him since all the girls seemed to be taken.

"I take the white stone," Malfoy said. "I choose any girl in the room any girl except these twenty, I mean and I ask, 'Would you have come to this ball as Blaise Zabini's partner if he'd asked you?' And if the girl says no, you get your thirty-two Galleons. And if she says yes, *you give me* thirty-two Galleons. Plus whatever else you owe me for the twenty-first girl's answer. That was our bet. A binding magical contract."

"Fine," said Zabini angrily. "You try it. Pick a girl. But they all have partners already. They're not going to be interested in me when I'm not there in person to turn on the charm."

Malfoy took the white stone and sauntered around the hall. He did not go far. Alone at a nearby table sat Millicent Bulstrode, gulping butterbeer, and scowling again. Probably she was disgruntled that no-one had asked her to dance. Apart from joining the progressive at Longbottom's invitation, she had been sitting there all evening.

Malfoy tapped her on the shoulder with the stone and asked her a question. Millicent looked surprised. But she said something.

The stone turned blood-red.

"Got you, Zabini!" cried Malfoy. "You owe me thirty-five Galleons!"

"What? No, I *don't*! We agreed that Bulstrode was off limits. She's out of the bet. It doesn't matter what she said!"

"We agreed that *you* couldn't invite Bulstrode to the ball. We never said anything about whether I could ask her at this stage of the bet."

Zabini sprang almost to Malfoy's throat. "That's *twice* you've cheated this evening!"

Malfoy shrugged. "Binding magical contract, Zabini. You give me your money or you suffer the curses."

This time Zabini yelled so loudly that Professor McGonagall appeared beside us and threw some kind of spell between him and Malfoy. Malfoy looked furious at the interference, but Zabini sulkily conceded, "It's all right, Professor. We'll sort it out tomorrow."

Fire and Ice

Chapter 20 of 21

There are many ways to enjoy a ball. One can listen to the music, talk to one's friends, research a journal article, take photographs, flirt, get drunk, deceive the naive, catch up on sleep or observe other people's antics. For Michael, however, true happiness lies in the realisation that Ginny Weasley is exactly what he has been looking for.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Fire and Ice

I realised I should find out what Luna was doing. A scan of the dancing couples indicated that she was not on the floor, although Hermione Granger seemed to be having a very good time with Krum, and two members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team were throwing themselves around so energetically that it was hardly safe to cross the hall. For several minutes I was distracted by the sight of Ginny Weasley, whose happy chatting to Longbottom was regularly punctuated by her grimaces as he trod on her feet. A glance at Longbottom assured me that he was not aware of his own clumsiness. They were holding each other so closely that I couldn't help wondering whether their relationship were more intimate than they claimed. But when I tried to lip-read, the only word I could make out was "Quidditch".

Remembering to mind my own business, I moved around the edges until I found Luna sitting in a chair, holding a Butterbeer that she wasn't drinking and listening in rapt attention to a boy from Durmstrang.

"Cun send guide, if your faather is huvving brrraveness," he was saying.

"Oh, Daddy's brave enough, all right," Luna replied. She pulled out a small notebook and said, "Can you tell me that address again?"

After she had written down the address of someone in Moldavia, she saw me, and indicated I should sit with them. "Bogdan, this is Michael Corner. Michael, this is Bogdan Poliakov, from Slovakia. He has the most exciting news he has an uncle who knows where the giants are! He was just telling me that he can help arrange an expedition to meet them and negotiate an interview. Daddy will be so pleased!"

"Giants ... uh ... are you sure that will be safe?"

"It is not safe, defin-yitly," said Poliakov, "but life of journalist is full of rrrisk. Best stories are coming from daangerrr." He slurped at a tankard of mulled mead. I noticed that he had gravy on his robes.

"I've had the most amazing evening," Luna enthused. "Lisa and Mandy saw the Loch Ness kelpie last summer. That's not really news Daddy has already run five stories on the kelpie. But I'd love to see it for myself, and Lisa and Mandy found the perfect viewing point to catch it out. Then William Stebbins joined the conversation and he has a photograph to prove that his parents really, truly saw a visible Demiguise in Korea last month. He's going to show me tomorrow. I don't know how I'm going to persuade him to let us publish it."

I vaguely remembered Sylvia Fawcett mentioning that Stebbins loved tall stories; I wondered what he would say tomorrow when he realised that Luna had believed him.

"Then Miles Bletchley arrived," she continued. "He met an alien on Ilkley Moor seven years ago. That story is well corroborated, of course it was even in the Muggle newspapers that a Muggle please-man photographed a green alien on Ilkley Moor at about that time but it's not so well known that the alien has made several visits. Bletchley saw it, and so did a witch named Gladys Gudgeon. Mrs Gudgeon described her experiences in a letter to the *Quibbler*. Anyway, the alien told Bletchley "

"What!" I exclaimed. "It spoke English?"

"Oh, yes," said Luna serenely. "The alien told Bletchley that it visits Ilkley Moor every seven years and sends a report on Earth back to the Betelgeusean System. Naturally, it had to learn English in order to understand what was happening in Yorkshire. So the Bletchley family became very interested and marked the alien's return date in their diary. And Bletchley received their letter three weeks ago his parents did see the alien again. They invited it to dinner, and took photographs, and everything!"

She looked so serious that I didn't have the heart to argue. And Bletchley was so large that I knew I'd never have the folly to tackle him either.

"It's an article dying to be written," said Luna happily. "If the Bletchleys don't turn out to be good writers, I'm sure I can polish up their information myself. And just now I've met Bogdan. His story will be the best of all. Daddy's already in Poland, so he's heading in the right direction to contact the guide in Moldavia and continue on to the Urals. I'm thinking we can get the giants' own version of why they left Britain and whether they'd ever return."

I had to concede that Poliakov might not be teasing Luna: there probably were giants living in the Urals. But I hesitated to congratulate her on her eagerness to send her father to visit giants in the middle of winter. I could only say, "Are you *sure* you've thought enough about safety?"

The music stopped as Luna placidly informed me, "Daddy's no fool. He wouldn't have survived this long if he weren't able to outwit giants and aliens ... Oh, here's Anne-Marie back again, Bogdan."

Anne-Marie Lefèvre from Beauxbatons was approaching, looking extremely relieved to have torn herself away from Vincent Crabbe. Crabbe was in hot pursuit, eager to grab her back, and looking alarmingly ready to switch his attention to Luna should Anne-Marie prove elusive. Anne-Marie clasped Poliakov's arm before she had stopped walking while Luna turned abruptly to me.

"I expect you'd like to dance," she said quickly. "Thanks for your help, Bogdan. Thanks for sharing your partner, Anne-Marie. Good evening, Vincent. Do you know how to do the Minuet, Michael?"

It was lucky I did, for Luna did not. We managed it because it was very slow. But the Gavotte was a hopeless mess. I managed to keep calm about that by realising that no-one was looking at us: the only people who were finding it easy were those couples where *both* had attended Madam Hooch's lessons. Madam Hooch herself was throwing herself around with Professor Flitwick, who looked as if he had charmed his own shoes with a Gavotte pattern.

"I suppose such a charm could exist," Luna replied in all earnestness when I mentioned it to her, "but we could never learn it in time. It's the Bourée next; that's said to be more difficult still."

In fact half the guests felt they could not tackle the Bourée. Luna and I sat down to watch, as only the best and most experienced dancers formed themselves into squares and prepared to hurl themselves dizzy. The steps were complicated, the formations varied, while the rhythm kept alternating between quills and whizzbees but was always fast. Zacharias Smith and Tracey Davies were soon tripping over their own feet. Padma whirled around in Tahseen's arms while most people in the central square seemed to follow the dance by keeping their eyes firmly on Diggory and Cho Chang.

I became confused simply watching and gazed around at the non-dancers instead. In a far corner Potter and Weasley were deep in conversation, apparently with no further thought of dancing, while Longbottom was collapsed in his chair, too exhausted even to think of conversing. Ginny had given up fussing over him and was watching the dancers with an animated smile. Creevey was unabashedly snapping more photographs while Liliith Moon watched her friend Emma Spinks dancing with Hooper. Terry and Sally-Anne were sitting near me, but paying attention only to each other. Luna was not paying attention to anything: she seemed lost in a daydream.

When the Bourée finally ended, we in the audience applauded loudly the valiant souls who had attempted the ordeal. Roger Davies, without missing a beat, bowed down to his knees and kissed Fleur Delacour's hand. Cedric Diggory whispered something in Cho Chang's ear, and she, oblivious to her audience, laughed out loud.

Fortunately, the Weird Sisters had had enough of teasing us with difficult dances. They next announced a Congo.

"We can all do this!" I leapt to my feet. "Come on, Luna!"

"I won't be dancing any more," she said. "I have too much to think about. You go and enjoy yourself, Michael."

Since we didn't need partners, there was no point in arguing, so I followed Terry and Sally-Anne onto the floor. Terry had his hands on Ginny Weasley's shoulders, but Longbottom was still half asleep in his chair. By this late stage in the evening, and with no need to oblige one's partner, it was clear that some people really had had enough. Weasley and Potter, for example, did not even glance up from their conversation, and Padma and Parvati, having long since given up on expecting otherwise, were totally absorbed by the attentions of Tahseen and Beauvisage.

I wasn't tired. I could have gone on all night. I was holding onto Sally-Anne, but the person I was watching was Ginny Weasley. Ginny's hair was a flaming ball of fire. Ginny's fingers were lightly touching the fortunate Stebbins. By the time the Congo ended, my head was so full of Ginny that I had forgotten she couldn't have been thinking of me. I held out my hand and asked:

"Has Longbottom deserted you?"

"Poor Neville, late nights never suit him."

"So will you dance the next one with me?"

Ginny's eyes flickered to Luna, who was scribbling something in her notebook, and then back to me, with a smile.

The compère from the Weird Sisters was saying something about this dance being the opportunity for those who had come to the ball with someone special. "You'll never forget this moment, so select your partners carefully!"

I have, I have! I thought. Then the music began, a steady Strathspey, and Ginny Weasley was gazing up at me.

There were diamonds in her eyes, swimming somewhere in the amber. This time I didn't worry if she thought me stupid. I stared and stared. When I did remember that I was supposed to be speaking to her, I couldn't think of anything clever to say anyway. I only asked the obvious.

"So why isn't Longbottom your boyfriend? You seem terribly fond of one another."

"We are. Very. But I'm quite sure he doesn't want I mean, he only asked me to the ball because he was certain we couldn't misunderstand each other. What about you, do you have a girlfriend?"

"No, not at all. I brought Luna this evening because as you said we both knew we couldn't misunderstand one another. But I can't believe a girl like you doesn't have a boyfriend hidden away somewhere. Surely there's someone you like?"

She missed the beat of the dance for a second, as if the question had thrown her. *I had been tactless. She would despise me.* But she regained her composure with a resolute shake of her head.

"No. No-one who counts for anything. I'm on my own." She laughed. "You see, a minimum requirement for any boyfriend of mine is that I'd have to like him and he'd have to like me more than I like Neville."

"Well, I couldn't begin to compete with anyone as heroic as Longbottom." I realised at once that I'd given myself away, but she chose not to comment. When she smiled, I knew that admiring Longbottom had been a wise move.

"You can call him by his first name, you know. Heroic ... yes, you're right ... people often don't notice what a hero Neville is."

I felt we had only begun to float into a living dream when suddenly the music died away. Students around us were applauding the band. I clapped too, not registering why, until the applause also died, and the clock finished striking midnight. People began to make their way towards the oak entrance doors.

The Yule Ball was over.

I inclined to Ginny. "Thank you for those two dances," I said. "Will I see you again tomorrow?"

"I enjoyed them too," she said. "I'll be around, I expect."

And with this non-committal answer and a final dazzling smile, she plunged into the crowd to awaken her friend Longbottom. Luna had given up her notebook and was wandering out to the Entrance Hall with no apparent thought of waiting for me. Terry was still speaking to Sally-Anne.

I moved out with the crowd, past embracing and hand-squeezing and cheek-pecking couples saying good night to one another, past Warrington and Montague supporting an immobile Bletchley (who had apparently drunk too much mulled mead), through giggling girls and boasting boys, and up the stairs to my dormitory.

Kevin and Robert thought the ball had been a laugh. Terry was humming happily, and Anthony grinned without words. I burrowed myself into my bed without listening to any of them.

Ginny ... I had met Ginny ... and all I could think about was a pair of amber eyes.

Reverie

Chapter 21 of 21

Michael has turned a corner in his life ... Perhaps he'll be able to help Ginny turn one in hers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Reverie

No alarm bells rang on Boxing Day. I slept until I was slept out, descending from a happy dream at about a quarter past nine. I took a long hot shower, whistling "Richmond Hill" and "The White Wheat" to myself. I finally ambled through the common room and down to the Great Hall without noticing whether Terry was there or not.

A few students were sitting around the long tables eating a mince pie brunch and drinking coffee. Most people, I supposed, were still sleeping or lazing around their common rooms. What action there was seemed to be centring around the Gryffindor table. I swept my eyes up and down the Gryffindors, but Ginny was not among them. I bit into a pie, not really caring what anyone else was doing.

Presently Padma came to sit next to me. "I've come to say I owe you an apology," she said.

"Apology accepted," I replied. "It isn't really a big deal any more, is it?"

"I'm sorry I didn't behave better when we broke up," she said.

"Well, people don't really expect the person they fancied when they were fourteen to be the one who lasts forever," I said. "Of course we were going to break up sometime."

"That time ought to have been at least a month ago," she said ruefully. "I behaved badly by letting you think I still cared when I didn't – just so that I could keep on having a boyfriend. And I behaved badly in the way I chucked you, all angrily and in public, instead of telling you quietly."

"I expect it's difficult to remember how to behave well when you don't even know what you want – which I suppose you didn't. Have some coffee?"

"No, I've had all the breakfast I want. Thanks for being so nice about this, Michael. I'm just... as I said... sorry that I wasn't nice about it too."

But it was easy to be "nice". What was the point of picking quarrels when everything was turning out so well for everyone? "I expect we'll stay friends," I said. "After all, we have three and a half more years together. So tell us about Taieb Tarzan. Is he a serious boyfriend?"

She winced at my pronunciation, but did not try to correct me. "I don't suppose so," she said, "because he'll be going back to Paris this summer. And, of course, he's three years older. But we did arrange to meet in the village on the next Hogsmeade weekend."

I didn't want Padma asking me about Luna or anything else, so I asked if she knew what the Gryffindor table was so excited about.

"Creevey, of course," she said. "Everyone wants to see his pictures. Why don't you go and look?"

I put down my empty mug and went. Sure enough, there were hundreds of photographs – mainly portraits – spread all over the Gryffindor table.

"I was way too excited to sleep," a ring-eyed Creevey was explaining to his friends, "so I didn't go to bed at all. I stayed up all night to develop this lot. My brain just wouldn't shut up until I'd printed out every last one. Hi, Michael! I have a great one of you and Luna over here!"

I picked out the portrait of me and the snowflake-garbed Luna, but my eyes stopped over another shot, which showed me and Ginny dancing the Strathspey. We were revolving slowly, staring into each other's eyes, and the photograph-Ginny was laughing softly, as if swaying in my arms were the happiest place in the world.

"I'll take both of these," I said. "And this one too – " I indicated one that I had conveniently just noticed, showing Terry and Sally-Anne and me at our table, apparently at the point of finishing the feast. "How much are you charging?"

"Three sickles each, a real bargain. That's okay, Dean." He turned to Thomas. "Take as many as you want. I've already removed the ones I'm keeping for myself, and I can make more copies if they're needed."

I slipped two of the pictures into my robe pocket. I would send them to my parents to show them that my friends and I had enjoyed the Yule Ball. But I would keep the one of Ginny for myself to remind me of the night I first met her.

She would appear in the Great Hall eventually. Everyone needs to eat, and if she didn't want brunch, there would be afternoon tea or dinner. And when she arrived, she would find me waiting for her. I would wait all day if need be.

Ginny. My rainbow. My fire-maiden. My dream-come-true and laughter. The girl with amber in her eyes.

THE END