

Daniel Blank

Sherlock Potter



A Study in Jade

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A Magical Detective Adventure by Daniel Blank

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Imprint

Information according to Section 5 TMG:

Daniel Blank

Sollner Strasse 7

82049 Pullach im Isartal

Email: sherlock.potter.official@gmail.com

Responsible for content according to Section 55 (2) RStV:

Daniel Blank

Sollner Strasse 7

82049 Pullach im Isartal

A Foreword

Dear witches and wizards, dear Squibs and Muggles; it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the very first adventure of the legendary Sherlock Potter. A Study in Jade marks the beginning of the many glorious deeds of my friend, which I had the honour of recording in writing. I sincerely hope to offer you further adventures very soon.

During the investigations, I, Ron Watson, did not merely serve as a chronicler. Many times, I took an active part in solving the cases, just as I did in the following account. Throughout all these experiences, a deep friendship grew between Sherlock Potter and myself. How often did we stare death in the face together? How often did we escape danger only through each other's help? And how often could Sherlock Potter solve his cases only with my modest support?

Yet not all the cases we solved led to a happy ending, and at times we even argued about which solution best served the cause of justice. Nevertheless, it is precisely these extraordinary experiences that wove a strong bond of friendship between Potter and myself. The very first case I wish to recount here, too, had a rather tragic nature. And although we were able to solve it together, it would be wrong to speak of a happy ending.

The Flying Scotsman

The Flying Scotsman was a tavern beloved by witches and wizards, nestled in the eastern part of London and offering a splendid view of the River Thames. Named after the famous sailing vessel of the Ministry of Magic, its walls were adorned with countless paintings of the same. The interior paid full tribute to the world of the sea and seafaring. A gentle sound of waves could be heard throughout the rooms, soothing and rhythmic. The air was filled with the scent of saltwater mixed with the aroma of seaweed. Now and then, a foghorn sounded – distant, almost dreamlike. Old ship wheels, anchors, and thick ropes hung on the walls, whispering tales of high-seas adventures.

Comfortable chairs stood around wooden tables where witches and wizards sat with their wands set aside. From the ceiling hung lanterns reminiscent of old seafarers' lamps, casting a warm and welcoming glow that bathed the pub in golden light. Naturally, no such place would be complete without a large aquarium, in which pearl-guardians, coral dragons, sea unicorns, and other magical marine creatures swam and glimmered.

I myself used to take breakfast at The Flying Scotsman on a regular basis. Such was the case on that particular morning in the autumn of 1859 – the very morning on which this story begins. It so happened that I had recently stepped down from my service at the Ministry of Magic. For more than ten years, I had worked as an Auror, fighting against followers of the Dark Arts. In fierce battles I had faced witches, wizards, trolls – even dragons and giants. But my career as an Auror came to an abrupt end when I was gravely injured in the battle against the Trolls of Kanthar.

As a member of an Auror unit, I had been dispatched by the Ministry of Magic to Kanthar – a land in the Orient unknown to Muggles. It was suspected that followers of the Dark Arts had gathered there. Indeed, in the faded ruins of a long-abandoned oasis, we encountered witches and wizards who, through dark magic, were plotting an uprising against the wizarding community of Kanthar. But that was not all – using the Imperius Curse, our adversaries had taken control of several sand trolls. A fierce battle broke out.

As fate would have it, it was there that I suffered the injury which brought my career as an Auror to an end. In the midst of the fighting, a sand troll wounded me on my left arm with a poisoned axe.

To this day, I recall with horror the dreadful sound of my forearm bones shattering and the sensation of the toxic substance seeping into my open wound. I barely survived the cruel effects of the poison, but it was of such a rare kind that a complete cure proved impossible. I still bear the ugly scar of that wound – visible as a patch of greenish shimmering tissue on my arm. Though the bones eventually healed, the poisoning left me unable to channel magic through a wand.

With my magical abilities thus impaired, it was, of course, unthinkable to continue serving as an Auror. The Ministry of Magic did offer me a position in the Department of Magical Transportation upon my return from Kanthar, but I had no intention of spending the rest of my life pushing parchment across a desk. And so, I decided to resign, left the Ministry with a modest disability pension, and began looking for new work within the wizarding world.

I also needed to find a place to live. During my time as an Auror, I had been constantly assigned to field missions and had therefore never settled in one place. But as I studied the housing listings in the Daily Prophet, I quickly realised how difficult it would be to find a place to live within London. The pension I received from the Min-

istry of Magic was modest, and, as I have mentioned, I was unemployed. Most lodgings were simply beyond my means. It was in precisely this situation that I found myself one rainy morning in September 1859, seated at The Flying Scotsman with a cup of Ocean Grey tea.

Spread out before me lay the Daily Prophet. As so often before, I had already gone through every housing advert to no avail. Resigned, I stared at the large aquarium behind the bar and watched a particularly colourful pearl-guardian – a type of crab said to breed pearls with magical properties. It was snapping its large claws at a coral dragon. I was enjoying the pleasant scent of the sea that filled the tavern when suddenly it was overlaid with the sharp smell of something badly burnt.

Startled, I turned my gaze from the aquarium. A tall, gaunt wizard had stepped up to the bar beside me. He was, quite clearly, the source of the smell, for his cloak was singed, as was his scruffy black stubble. His narrow face was smudged with soot and ash. The man heaved a large box onto the counter in front of him, filled with all manner of equipment used in potion-making. Glass flasks, petri dishes, and other vials clinked ominously inside. This thin figure – who stood half a head taller than me – sat down on the stool next to mine. The wizard gave a wave to the innkeeper, a large, round, bald man, who brought him a cup of tea. As my new neighbour reached for the cup with his long fingers, the tavern's owner eyed him keenly and then asked, "My dear Sherlock Potter. Don't tell me you've been thrown out of your lodgings again because of one of your experiments?"

The man addressed gave a small nod, eyes cast downward, and took a sip of his tea. After a brief pause, he said, "Yes, that's exactly what happened. I ought to have known that adding Erumpent horn to Baruffio's Brain Elixir would have explosive consequences."

My interest in my neighbour was growing, and I listened curiously to his exchange with the innkeeper. The latter prodded further: "Not the first time you've been thrown out, is it? And knowing you, you've already found somewhere new?"

The wizard beside me smiled mischievously, his expression brightening. "Quite right. And this time, I shouldn't have any trouble continuing my experiments."

"How so?" asked the innkeeper. "Wasn't your lease always terminated the moment your experiments left half the house in ruins? Don't tell me you plan to stop brewing potions?" He looked at his guest in disbelief.

"Not at all," came the reply, as the wizard gestured with his long, blackened fingers. "I've found a place with a large rooftop terrace. It sits higher than the surrounding buildings, so I can brew in peace – no Muggles or nosy onlookers to worry about. And in the event of a minor, insignificant explosion, the furnishings won't suffer. Any noise, I can easily suppress with a few well-placed Muffling Charms."

I eyed the wizard next to me with envy. His name, it seemed, was Sherlock Potter. I reckoned he was a little younger than I was. Despite this, strands of grey already ran through his long black hair, and his stubble too showed the beginnings of silver. I couldn't help but wonder how he managed to find a place to live so effortlessly – especially considering his slightly dishevelled appearance. The innkeeper seemed to think the same, as he raised both eyebrows and said, "You seem to have more luck than sense, Potter. I don't know anyone who's been thrown out of as many flats as you have and still manages to find new lodgings straight away."

"There is a small catch," my neighbour at the bar added, "because the lodgings I have in mind are actually too large for a single wizard. I won't be able to afford it on my own, so I'll likely have to look for a companion."

I could hardly believe my ears. This might be a rare opportunity for me – perhaps I'd find a new home sooner than expected! I cleared my throat noticeably. The

innkeeper and his guest turned toward me. They both looked at me as if I had just Apparated onto the stool from thin air. Awkwardly, I began to introduce myself and eagerly expressed my interest in the lodgings. At once, the look of surprise vanished from Potter's face, and his expression brightened.

He said, "I see you've served as an Auror. And your last deployment was quite clearly in Kanthar. But now you're no longer working for the Ministry of Magic, correct?"

"How do you know—" I began, but Potter waved the question away with a mischievous smile.

"To begin with, your posture while seated is strikingly upright – almost military. And your moustache, like your hair – both of which are a strikingly beautiful shade of fiery red – are immaculately groomed. From that, I deduced that you are, or were, in the service of the Ministry of Magic.

"So then, either an Auror or an inspector working within London. But there's more. You have an unusually sun-kissed complexion – the sort that only develops after spending time in southern climates. It's hardly a tan one acquires in London. This suggests that you've not recently been in England, but rather stationed abroad as an Auror. From reliable sources, I know of only two such foreign operations carried out by the Ministry of Magic in recent times: the aforementioned mission against the sand trolls in Kanthar, and the battles against the frost giants in Greenland. The latter, however, would hardly have left you with such a tan – and so, my conclusion naturally fell to Kanthar.

"I also noticed that your left shoulder hangs ever so slightly – from which I deduce that you returned from the mission with an injury to the shoulder or arm. You are left-handed, as is clearly evident from the way you hold your teacup. The injury to the arm with which you wielded your wand likely means that your spellcasting is now limited

or perhaps even impossible. Your magical abilities, therefore, are severely impaired – which, for an Auror, inevitably means the end of a career. Taken together with your interest in securing permanent housing in London, it becomes clear that you are no longer in the Ministry's service as an Auror."

Utterly dumbfounded, I stared at Potter, then glanced toward the innkeeper, who simply waved a hand and said, "He does this to my customers all the time. You wouldn't believe how many clients Mr. Potter has scared off with that sort of thing." Amused, he turned away and went to serve other guests.

"Well then," Potter continued. "I'm pleased you're interested in sharing the lodgings with me.

One more thing I should mention – the house is located right in the middle of a Muggle area, in the district of Marylebone, more precisely in Baker Street. Which also explains the remarkably low rent."

You must know, dear reader, that homes located in districts inhabited exclusively by witches and wizards were considerably more expensive than those situated in Muggle neighbourhoods. Only those with a high income could afford to live in such magical quarters.

"I had naturally expected as much and have no objection," I replied.

Sherlock Potter said, "In that case, the rent is particularly attractive: only eleven Sickles a month – for each of us."

"That's remarkably affordable!" I said.

"Well, Mr Watson," Sherlock Potter continued, "since that is settled, we should get to know one another better. It is most helpful to speak openly about our habits and characteristics in advance. Allow me to begin. What could I say about myself?"

He paused for a moment, then said, "To begin with, I am passionately devoted to potion-making – which you may have already gathered. I also enjoy working on new and unusual spells – nothing illegal, of course."

At these words, I thought I saw a glimmer of something deep and hidden flash through his eyes – but I assumed I was imagining things and said nothing.

"From time to time," he went on, "I fall into melancholy moods and may speak very little for days. During such phases, I usually take out my easel and paint to distract myself. It is best to simply leave me be during these times. Would that trouble you much?"

I replied, "No, that would not be a problem at all. I too am a character who values peace and quiet – especially after the events in Kanthar. And I have always admired witches and wizards who can create art using magical paints and enchanted brushes."

"There is one more particularity I should mention," continued Potter. "From time to time, I will be receiving clients at home and conducting confidential conversations with them. For those appointments, I would kindly ask that you leave the sitting room to me."

I nodded, wondering how exactly Potter earned his daily bread. But I didn't want to appear too intrusive – and after all, it was none of my business.

Sherlock Potter then asked me, "I believe those are the most important things you should know about me. Is there anything you would like to tell me about yourself? Any good or bad habits I ought to be aware of?"

"Well," I began, "first, I should mention that I regularly smoke Talsker herb. Would the smell bother you?"

Potter shook his head and added that he himself was an avid pipe-smoker.

I went on, "Since the events in Kanthar, my nerves have been quite frayed, and I've developed poor sleeping habits. I tend to stay in bed until the early afternoon and am in a foul mood before my first cup of tea. Best not to speak to me until then."

Potter smiled. "That should pose no problem."

"Since leaving the Auror Corps, I've grown rather sluggish. I lack a fixed daily structure, but I am currently looking for new employment to restore some order to my life."

"But your disability pension will cover your share of the rent, I assume?" Potter asked.

"Certainly," I said, and added, "Other than those few traits, I'm a fairly agreeable fellow. And, come to think of it, I'm actually looking forward to sharing a home with someone."

"Then nothing should stand in the way of our plans," said Sherlock Potter. "Are you available tomorrow morning to view the apartments?"

I agreed, and so we arranged to meet the following day in Baker Street.

"Farewell, and until tomorrow, Mr Watson." Potter left the pub with his box full of belongings.

I remained at the bar, reflecting on this most unusual encounter. What luck it was to find new lodgings in such a way. Just then, I caught the innkeeper's eye, and he returned to my end of the counter.

He said, "An extraordinary wizard, that Potter. A bit odd, certainly, but not with any ill intent."

"Do you know how he earns his living?"

The innkeeper shook his head and said, "All I know is that Mr Potter experiments with a variety of potions and elixirs. As he's mentioned himself, he also dedicates time to studying new spells. From what I've heard, he's even fascinated by the creation of

magical contraptions. But to my knowledge, all of these are private pursuits. Come to think of it, I haven't the faintest idea what Sherlock Potter actually does for a living, or how he earns his money. But you can ask him yourself tomorrow."

With that, he turned away to serve a group of newly arrived witches and wizards.

I finished my now-cold tea and fished five Knuts from my pocket, which I placed on the counter. Then I, too, left The Flying Scotsman.

Baker Street 121B

The next day, I met Sherlock Potter at the agreed time to view the apartments at 121B Baker Street. I was immediately taken with the place, especially as it offered ample space for the two of us. In addition to two large bedrooms, there was a very spacious sitting room with a fireplace. The rooftop terrace Potter had mentioned provided a splendid view of the surrounding buildings. The flat was already furnished with simple pieces – an immensely practical detail, as neither Potter nor I owned any furniture of our own.

The house was overseen by Mrs Penny Pomfrey, who took care of our meals. Naturally, we were nowhere near wealthy enough to afford a house-elf. So we considered ourselves fortunate to be able to rely on the services of a magically skilled housekeeper. Mrs Pomfrey, a small, round witch, always wore her grey hair tied tightly in a bun. Over her plain yet well-kept clothing she wore an apron with numerous pockets, in which she kept a variety of small magical tools. She had a particularly keen sense of cleanliness, constantly directing self-cleaning brooms and magical dusters with her wand. Our housekeeper lived in the flat directly below ours. We did not meet the other tenants of 121B Baker Street on the day of the viewing.

Mrs Pomfrey provided all residents with a delicious breakfast, a hot midday meal, and tea with pastries in the afternoon. In the evenings, she served a cold supper and made a point of looking after the well-being of everyone in the house. All this – and, not least, the comparatively low rent – led us to sign the lease on the spot. We moved into 121B Baker Street that very same day, bringing with us our few belongings.

Before long, I began to appreciate the advantages of our shared living arrangement. Potter and I often took breakfast together, during which we would discuss the latest news from the Daily Prophet. In the evenings, we would sit by the fireplace – it was, after all, autumn, and an unusually cold and rainy one at that. We would end the day with a butterbeer and a pipe of Talsker herb. I had yet to overcome my sluggishness and was still occasionally plagued by unexplained pain in my arm. But I could already feel how much good the move to 121B Baker Street was doing me.

As he had mentioned, Sherlock Potter received visitors from time to time in our sitting room, which I gladly left to him. I used those moments for strolls through autumnal London or to drop into one of the many taverns for witches and wizards. By then, the city was cloaked in the endless greyness of the season, and the fog was pierced only by the dim glow of the streetlamps, which cast me into a melancholic, almost romantic mood as I walked.

One evening, however, I found myself alone in our quarters, as Sherlock Potter had gone out. A light drizzle tapped ceaselessly against the windows. Mrs Pomfrey had brought me tea with a plate of pastries. I turned my attention to a painting Sherlock Potter had completed the day before using enchanted brushes. Fascinated, I studied his work. With rough brushstrokes, he had captured the image of a weathered graveyard on canvas. Beneath a pale night sky streaked with dark clouds, tombstones rose from a fog-drenched earth. Magical paints caused the mist to swirl eerily across the cemetery, and the clouds above shifted restlessly. The piece radiated a sombre menace that made me feel uneasy.

Eventually, I turned away from the painting and sat down to enjoy my tea. For quite some time, my thoughts lingered on why Potter would choose to create such a bleak and haunting image. Later that evening, I retreated to my own rooms. In a drawer of one of my cabinets, I kept a few items from my time as an Auror. From among

them, I retrieved my wand – the same wand I had not used since leaving the Ministry of Magic. Returning to the sitting room, I sat down by the fire and ran my hand wistfully along the grain of the vine wood from which it was made. The wand felt pleasant in my left hand, and yet, at the same time, strangely unfamiliar.

Just then, the door opened, and Potter's slender figure appeared in the doorway.

"Good evening, Watson. At last, you've brought out your wand again! I had been wondering when you might use it. Ever since we met, you haven't cast a single spell. You must feel like a Squib!"

That was true. The fear of casting a spell and failing paralysed me. In truth, it had taken great effort just to retrieve my wand, for I associated it with so many glorious – but also painful – memories from my years of service.

"Come now," urged Potter. "If you take it slowly, the spells will come back to you. Start with something simple."

So I raised my wand and murmured, "Lumos."

The tip of my wand lit up timidly, but nothing else happened. Instead, a tingling sensation began to spread unpleasantly across my scar.

"Again!" Potter prompted.

This time, I called out a little more forcefully, "Lumos!"

With a loud crack, sparks burst from the tip of my wand, flying wildly across the room. They scorched my armchair, the carpet, and the wallpaper. A burnt smell began to fill the air. To make matters worse, I felt a sharp pain in my left arm and dropped the wand. Dejected, I hung my head.

"Chin up, Watson," said Potter. "It's only a matter of time before your magic returns properly."

We paused as hurried footsteps echoed from the stairwell. Moments later, Mrs Pomfrey entered our room.

"Gentlemen, really! What sort of peculiar spells are you performing that shake the entire house? I'll have you know that I had every room in the house fitted with soundproofing charms by a professional magical contractor. But with this level of noise, the Muggles in our neighbourhood will catch on sooner or later!"

"I assure you," Potter replied, "I've placed additional protective charms over our quarters. The original soundproofing, in my opinion, was rather amateurishly applied. But thanks to my magic, the neighbours will hear nothing of what goes on in this flat. That goes for the rooftop terrace as well."

Mrs Pomfrey remained somewhat suspicious, but seemed at least moderately reassured. Just then, the doorbell rang.

Potter turned to me. "Are you expecting anyone this evening?"

I shook my head. Mrs Pomfrey hurried down the stairs to answer the door.

Shortly thereafter, we once again heard hurried steps approaching from the stairwell. A moment later, a man appeared in the doorway of our sitting room. I recognised him at once. The tall, broad-shouldered figure belonged to Inspector Lestrangle, whom I had met during my time at the Ministry of Magic.

"Good evening, Lestrangle!" Potter greeted, and I followed suit.

The inspector looked exhausted. His beard – usually neatly curled beneath his long nose – now drooped unevenly to the left, giving his otherwise stern, egg-shaped face an almost comical look. Water dripped from the narrow fringe of hair that encircled his bald head, landing on his heavy raincoat. Beneath it, I could make out a cloak that clearly marked him as a Ministry official.

"What brings you to me?" asked Sherlock Potter, and to my surprise, I detected a note of eagerness in his voice. The inspector's eyes turned to me with a questioning look.

"This is my flatmate, Mr Ron Watson," said Potter. "Until recently, he was also in the service of the Ministry and is completely trustworthy. You may speak freely in front of him."

Now Inspector Lestrangle recognised me as well. He gave me a curt nod. "I remember you now, Mr Watson. I wasn't aware you were no longer serving as an Auror." Then he turned back to Potter.

"Well then, Mr Potter, I'm facing an extremely puzzling case. I urgently require your assistance."

He cleared his throat. "Preferably at once."

"Is it truly that serious?" Potter asked.

"Well, the victim had a certain public standing. You even knew the deceased. It is your former Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher – Professor Daniel Deere."

A sudden silence fell. I noticed how Potter's eyes narrowed and his lips pressed into a thin line.

"I see," he replied coolly. After a few moments of silence, he said, "Very well. Let's go. Would you care to accompany us, Watson? You must remember the professor from your time at Hogwarts."

That was true. I remembered Professor Deere all too well – he had taught me Defence Against the Dark Arts. He had been a strict but fair teacher, and I couldn't understand why Sherlock Potter reacted so coldly to the mention of his name. Granted, I had always had a particularly good relationship with the professor, not least because, like me, he was a great fan of Quidditch. He had frequently refereed the house tournaments and was widely known as a promoter of the sport both at Hogwarts and beyond.

Sherlock Potter asked the inspector, "Where was the professor's body found?"

"In his apartments at 403 Brook Street."

Potter stood and reached for the vase above the fireplace to retrieve some Floo powder. The inspector stopped him.

"You can't use the Floo Network to travel to the professor's residence. I'll explain the reasons once we arrive at the crime scene. A carriage is waiting downstairs. Brook Street is only a few miles from here; you'll be there in minutes."

At this point, dear readers, I should mention that it is impossible to Apparate to or from a crime scene – unless one is a witch or wizard in the service of the Ministry of Magic.

Aurors cast protective enchantments over such places, allowing only themselves to travel there by magical means. Naturally, it is forbidden to Apparate openly on the streets of London in full view of Muggles. And you may well know that at the time, flying by broomstick was still an uncomfortable business – it wasn't until 1879 that Elias Grimstone revolutionised broomstick flight with his newly developed ash handle. So when the Floo Network could not be used, witches and wizards of that era generally preferred to travel through London by carriage, much like the Muggles did.

Inspector Lestrangle added, "I shall Apparate to the scene and instruct the officers there not to disturb any possible evidence."

"Very commendable," said Potter. With a loud crack, the inspector Disapparated and was gone. We dressed in haste and took the carriage to Brook Street .

In the coach, Potter seemed in a dreadful mood. He stared out the window, muttering darkly,

"Professor Deere, then..."

At first, I refrained from conversation and likewise gazed out of the window. The fog had given way to rain, and fine droplets tapped against the glass in the darkness. After a while, I ventured to speak, hoping that a change of subject might improve his mood. "Tell me, Potter – how exactly do you earn your living? Today a high-ranking in-

spector from the Ministry of Magic turns up at our flat to ask for your help. Are you a covert Auror in the Ministry's employ?"

Sherlock Potter turned away from the window. The bitterness in his expression gave way to a gentle smile.

"Well, I prefer a somewhat different title." With these words, he pulled a business card from his cloak. It read:

Sherlock Potter – Investigator of Magical and Enchanted Crimes.

"I admit, the phrasing is a little clunky. I'm still working on something snappier."

"But why would Inspector Lestrangle consult you?" I asked. "There are highly trained witches and wizards working at the Ministry."

"I possess sharper powers of observation than our colleagues at the Ministry," replied Potter. "Inspector Lestrangle is, without question, a capable investigator – but he often lacks the attentiveness required to consider every angle of a case. Too frequently, he seizes upon the most obvious conclusion – running the risk of convicting the innocent while letting the real culprits slip away. And he certainly doesn't share my knowledge of elixirs and enchantments – particularly when it comes to the possibilities within the Dark Arts."

At this last remark, I thought I saw a glint of something ominous in Potter's eyes. But I dismissed the thought as a trick of the light, or my imagination.

"Lestrangle calls on me when his investigations reach a dead end. I've also developed a few magical tools and procedures – known only to myself – that have proven quite useful in such situations. No doubt I'll soon have a chance to give you a demonstration."

Impressed, I nodded. Just then, the question that had lingered in my mind earlier returned.

"Potter, why do you speak so coldly of Professor Deere?"

My companion's expression darkened once more. Grimly, he replied, "That's a long story. And besides – we've arrived."

Indeed, the carriage came to a stop just moments later, at the scene of the crime.

Professor Deere

As we stepped out, we were greeted by pouring rain, splashing coldly onto the cobblestones. The entrance to 403 Brook Street was guarded by a Muggle constable. He appeared to be under a strong Confundus Charm, staring dreamily into the distance and letting us enter the house without question. Professor Deere's apartments was on the second floor, where a puzzled-looking Inspector Lestrangle awaited us. At his side stood two younger wizards, most likely trainee Aurors.

"There you are at last!" said Inspector Lestrangle, his expression brightening. He dismissed his associates with a feeble excuse—I suspected he didn't want to risk being shown up by Potter in front of his colleagues.

"Well then, to the scene of the crime," said the Inspector, and we followed his tall figure into the sitting room of the flat.

In the middle of the room lay the lifeless body of the professor. At first glance, I could detect no external wounds. His body lay on its back, arms and legs stretched wide. His hair stood on end in all directions, and his face was contorted in a dreadful grimace. The position of the body suggested that he had been facing the fireplace before his death. At the sight of the professor, Potter's face darkened further. He asked the Inspector, "Who discovered the body?"

"The housekeeper," he replied. "She was bringing the retired teacher his dinner. When he failed to answer her repeated knocking, she gained access to the rooms, which took some time. Upon finding the deceased, she immediately contacted the Ministry of Magic by owl post. She's downstairs in her own rooms and still in shock. Would you like to question her?"

"Later, Inspector. First, I'd like to examine the crime scene."

While Sherlock Potter carefully examined the victim's sitting room, the Inspector added, "I already have a theory as to how the professor was murdered. We can rule out any Muggle involvement. And we found no signs of poisoning either. It seems likely that a Killing Curse or other form of dark magic was used."

"How did the murderer gain entry to the lodging?"

"That's the strange part. As a former Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Deere had his flat exceptionally well protected against intruders. He suffered from near-paranoid fears that followers of the Dark Arts might come after him. He had placed every imaginable protection charm around his home. One of our Aurors attempted to Apparate into this room and had to be rushed to St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. They're currently trying to reassemble his splintered legs. We've since managed to remove some of the protective enchantments."

The Inspector paused and pointed over the professor's body to the fireplace. "He was so paranoid that he even disconnected his own fireplace from the Floo Network."

There were still traces of charred ash in the hearth. The professor had likely lit a fire the previous evening, given the cold time of year.

"Well done, Lestrage. You've done your homework this time."

The Inspector looked proud of the compliment. Despite Lestrage being a head taller than him, it was Sherlock Potter's lean frame that seemed to command the room.

Potter's gaze swept the sitting room, closely scrutinising the professor's furniture and belongings with his eyes. Time and again, his eyes paused on an item he examined closely before moving on. Just as I was about to ask a question, the Inspector, having noticed my intention, gave a subtle shake of his head. He signalled for me to stay silent. It was clear he was well familiar with Sherlock Potter's ritual of analysing a crime scene in complete silence. So I held back and waited impatiently. I disliked be-

ing merely a spectator in such an intriguing case. Little did I know I would later play a decisive role in solving it.

Potter's eyes first wandered to the numerous protective amulets hanging on the walls. Professor Deere had no doubt hoped they would ward off dark magic—clearly a futile effort. In a display case stood trophies and certificates from Quidditch matches. On a writing desk lay a signed Quaffle beside a team photograph. From the orange robes, I easily recognised the Chudley Cannons waving from the picture. Potter's gaze lingered on one of the two windows facing the street. He strode toward it with quick steps.

"Inspector Lestrangle," he asked, "did any of your Aurors open this window?"

The Inspector shook his head. Potter then pulled something from his coat that looked like a magnifying glass—except that several tiny wheels were attached to the frame. Noticing my curious glance, he explained:

"This is a magical magnifier with rather special properties. I designed it myself, and it has served me faithfully on many occasions. I call it the Magoscope."

He carefully adjusted the small wheels. A soft humming and clicking sound arose. Runes on the frame began to glow faintly. Potter leaned over the windowsill and examined it closely using the Magoscope. Moments later, he straightened up, a look of utmost satisfaction on his face, and turned to the fireplace. There, he began inspecting the ashes, again with his magical device. While he held the Magoscope over the cinders, he drew his wand and murmured a series of incantations unfamiliar to me. Moving his wand in slow circles, he caused the ash to rise gently, forming a hovering cloud.

"Do any of you gentlemen happen to have an envelope?" he said. "I believe I've discovered some important evidence."

Inspector Lestrangle stepped forward promptly and handed Potter a parchment envelope.

Using his wand, Potter extracted several chunks of ash from the floating cloud and deposited them into the envelope. Then he tucked his wand away, and the ash cloud gradually collapsed in on itself. Potter walked over to the table with the envelope in hand. He emptied its contents—two larger clumps of soot and a dark powder—onto the tabletop and held out the Magoscope to the Inspector and me.

“Take a look, gentlemen. You’ll find tiny black pellets. Can you guess what they are?”

Both the Inspector and I peered at the powder through the lens. It was composed of minuscule dark beads with an oily sheen.

After our examination, we both looked back at Potter, clearly puzzled. A self-satisfied smile crept across his lips.

“By Merlin’s beard! Don’t keep us simmering in suspense, Potter. What is it?” the Inspector demanded.

“This is Black Floo powder,” replied Potter. “I found faint traces of it earlier on the windowsill, along with some dried water spots. As you know, this substance is illegal. It temporarily connects fireplaces that are not part of the Floo Network. Its use is strictly prohibited. But in this case, it tells us how the perpetrator entered the sitting room.”

Potter paused, and we all glanced at the fireplace as he continued. “By connecting the professor’s fireplace to the Floo Network with illegal black Floo powder, the killer was able to enter the lodgings. And I can also explain how the professor received the powder.”

He pointed to the windowsill he had examined before. “It was delivered by owl post. The bird must have got wet on the way here. That’s what the dried water spots

on the sill indicate. The rain likely soaked the envelope, allowing some of the powder to spill out."

Inspector Lestrangle and I nodded in agreement. I was thoroughly impressed by my companion's deductions. Potter went on."So the murderer was known to the professor—or at the very least, they had been in contact before. And now we come to the most interesting discovery I rescued from the ashes."

The Inspector and I were beside ourselves with astonishment. Sherlock Potter fixed his wand on two larger chunks of soot. They rose slowly and hovered in mid-air above the table. Once again, Potter reached for his Magoscope and examined the fragments in detail.

"Here we have another crucial clue. This appears to be a seal. Because it was made of magical wax, it wasn't completely destroyed by the fire. The seal was broken when the letter was opened, which is why we find two separate pieces here. Please, gentlemen, take a look for yourselves."

Inspector Lestrangle and I leaned in curiously to examine the fragments through the magical lens. In the centre, I could make out a column or a tower. It struck me that it might also be a letter—perhaps an I or a T. From the top of this elongated shape, additional lines spread out across the seal. I couldn't make out more, as some of the finer details of the imprint had broken off when the letter was opened.

Potter said, "Thanks to the Magoscope, we can view the imprint as it originally looked. I believe we'll be able to match this seal to a specific wizarding family. This is our most important lead so far. Allow me to summarise everything for you, Lestrangle."

He cast the Inspector a look that implied he doubted his comprehension.

"I suspect that the letter which contained the black Floo powder bore this seal. The victim therefore knew exactly who had sent him the powder. As a former Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, he must have trusted the sender, which is why he al-

lowed them access to his home. He used the powder despite its prohibition. This is unusual, as Professor Deere was otherwise a law-abiding wizard and extremely wary of intruders. But during his meeting with the unknown sender, something must have happened that he hadn't anticipated. As for the exact sequence of events and the motive—those remain unclear."

"That sounds plausible," said Inspector Lestrangle.

Potter continued, "The first thing we must do is determine which wizarding family this seal belongs to. Lestrangle, do you have a witch or wizard at the Ministry who specialises in reconstructing imprints from fragments?"

"Certainly. One of my Aurors is an expert in such reconstructions!"

With a wave of his wand, Sherlock Potter returned the remnants of the seal and the black Floo powder to the envelope and handed it to Inspector Lestrangle.

We took our leave and returned to Baker Street late that rainy night. Upon arrival, we each went straight to bed.

The next morning, I awoke at dawn, eager for more revelations in the case. I felt positively electrified. As I entered the sitting room, I found Potter already at the breakfast table.

"Good morning, Watson! Don't tell me you've abandoned your usual morning sluggishness?"

"I'm quite interested to see how the case of Professor Deere unfolds!" I replied.

I took a seat at the table, which Mrs Penny Pomfrey had already laid out with various jams, freshly boiled Fwooper eggs, and toast. The scent of Frimint tea filled the air.

After pouring myself a cup, Potter asked me, "Watson, you read the Daily Prophet every day—and the society section too, don't you?"

"Of course," I replied.

"Excellent. Can you recall whether Professor Deere was mentioned there recently?"

I furrowed my brow, for I did recall seeing his name in the Daily Prophet not long ago. Then it struck me. "Indeed! He was mentioned in last week's issue about the opening match of the national Quidditch championship. He was invited to the Royal box in honour of his services to the sport."

With that, I turned to the pile of newspapers stacked beside my armchair. At this point, it must be noted that our sitting room had, to my dismay, swiftly turned into the image of a bachelor's apartment: Potter's various experimental contraptions cluttered the place, paintbrushes left colourful smudges on the furniture, and my own scattered reading materials lay all around. Yet on this occasion, our disorganisation and hoarding tendencies proved fortuitous. I began searching for the relevant issue and soon found the Daily Prophet with the article in question. Above the column was a large photograph of the royal box, with Professor Deere clearly visible.

"Here's the article on the opening match," I said.

"When exactly did the game take place? I'm not terribly interested in Quidditch," said Potter.

As a devoted Quidditch fan, I wrinkled my nose slightly and replied, "The Tuesday before last. The Chudley Cannons versus the Holyhead Harpies. A spectacular match—thrilling right to the end."

Potter scratched at his three-day stubble. "So at that time, the professor was still employed at Hogwarts. He only retired last week. Please be so good as to read out the relevant passage."

I obliged and began: "The opening match of the British-Irish Quidditch League treated fans to a breathtaking tournament in which the Chudley Cannons narrowly lost

to the Holyhead Harpies. Experts agree it was one of the greatest Quidditch matches of all time. Especially noteworthy were the plays of team captain—

“Watson,” Potter interrupted sharply, “please refer to the part about the important guests. The sporting details are of no interest to me!”

I frowned until I found the section. “The opening match also drew many of the most prominent figures in the world of Quidditch. Patrons such as Professor Daniel Deere, Mr Ivan Popa, and Mrs Faast Flanc were in attendance, along with numerous goblins from Gringotts Bank, the primary patron of the Holyhead Harpies. Nearly the entire Department of Magical Games and Sports from the Ministry of Magic had turned up to witness the launch of Britain’s most prestigious Quidditch league.”

While I had been reading, Potter had got up and leaned over my shoulder to get a better look at the article. His long hair fell over his brow. After I finished, he pulled out his Magoscope and examined the photograph above the text. The image showed the royal box. In the front row, we could make out witches and wizards from the Ministry of Magic, all wearing Chudley Cannons jerseys. Behind them sat Professor Deere, easily identifiable by his large orange hat and matching pennant. Next to him were several goblins from Gringotts, their grumpy expressions starkly out of place among the exuberant Quidditch fans.

Suddenly, there was a rattle at the window. We both jumped. An owl was tapping the pane with its beak to get our attention. Potter let it in and took the letter from its leg. After rewarding it with a few kernels of owl treats, the bird cooed softly and departed from our lodgings.

“Well, that was quick,” said Potter. “Inspector Lestrangle requests our presence at the Ministry of Magic. It seems he has already identified the seal. I presume we can travel there via the Floo Network, my dear fellow?”

“Of course,” I replied. “My injury doesn’t hinder me when using the Floo Network.”

Potter fetched a pouch of Floo powder while I took a final sip of tea. After such a hearty breakfast, I felt well prepared for another adventurous day. My companion tossed a pinch of the powder into the fireplace, which burst into green flames, and said, "After you, dear friend."

"Ministry of Magic," I declared, stepping into the flames and feeling myself instantly pulled into a spinning vortex. A brief moment later, I found myself standing in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic.

A First Suspicion

I looked around the entrance hall, so familiar to me. During my time as an Auror, construction had begun on a new, majestic statue in the Atrium. Judging by the scene, they were now in the final stages of the work, even though most of the sculpture was still shrouded in white sheets. At that moment, Potter stepped up beside me.

"We'll probably have to announce our visit," he said, glancing toward the porter's desk.

I nodded. As an Auror, I had passed through these halls countless times without ever having to sign in, but now I was visiting the Ministry of Magic as a guest for the first time.

On the way to the porter's desk, Sherlock Potter studied the statue with a critical eye. Even though most of it remained covered, the outline of a wizard with a commanding presence was already visible—one to whom a centaur looked up in admiration. Frowning, Potter said, "It seems we've learned nothing from the Goblin Rebellions. Placing ourselves above other magical beings will always lead to conflict among wizards."

We stepped up to the counter and registered as visitors for Inspector Lestrangle. A young Auror led us to his office, located on Level Two in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. As we took the lift upward, Sherlock Potter turned to me and asked, "You must know your way around the Ministry quite well, mustn't you?"

"Well, I did serve the Ministry as an Auror for five years," I replied, "though mostly in the field. But I was also here regularly for briefings. For you, however, this must be your first time visiting the Ministry, correct?"

"You're mistaken," Potter replied. "I've been here before—by summons. I had to endure a hearing in the Wizengamot courtrooms."

I raised an eyebrow but said nothing in return. Still in the corridor, we came upon Inspector Lestrangle, who was in a heated discussion with several goblins. They were visibly agitated, talking insistently at the Inspector, who in turn seemed determined to get rid of them. When he spotted us, he waved the goblins off with an impatient gesture, turned his back to them, and approached us. The goblins walked away, grumbling darkly.

"Goblins! Nothing but trouble," he muttered.

"What did they want from you?" asked Potter.

"They demanded to see Professor Deere's body," Lestrangle replied.

"Why would they do that?" I asked, just as surprised as Potter.

"They want to be absolutely certain that the professor is truly dead and hasn't faked his own murder."

Potter watched the retreating goblins with a contemplative gaze as they left the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

"Do you know these goblins?" he asked Lestrangle.

"I know at least two of them work for Gringotts," the Inspector replied.

Potter turned to me. "Watson, we should take another look at that issue of the Daily Prophet that covered the opening match. I'm quite sure there were goblins pictured in the royal box."

"Oh, the opening match," said Inspector Lestrangle with a dreamy look in his eyes. "I was lucky enough to attend. A brilliant game! Such a shame the Chudley Cannons lost."

"Indeed, very unfortunate. In my opinion, the Chudley Cannons were clearly the better team," I agreed wholeheartedly.

"Gentlemen," Sherlock Potter interrupted us sharply, "I doubt we came all the way to the Ministry just to reminisce about trivial sporting events." The Inspector and I nodded, somewhat sullenly.

"Lestrangle," continued Potter, "I assume you summoned us here because of new developments in the case."

A glimmer returned to the Inspector's egg-shaped face—he was clearly pleased to finally share what he believed was a triumph.

"Exactly, Mr. Potter. We have definitively identified the seal you rescued from the ashes. Please, follow me." As he spoke, he smoothed the tips of his immaculately groomed moustache.

We followed the Inspector into an adjacent office. The room was filled with a soft bluish glow emanating from various magical instruments neatly arranged on shelves lining the walls. In the centre stood a large table cluttered with parchment scrolls, ink bottles, and what looked like complicated magical drafting tools. Leaning over them was an older, gaunt witch with steely-grey hair. A compass was currently floating above a piece of parchment, turning slowly under her spellwork. As she noticed our entrance, she looked up, and the compass came to an immediate halt. Her sharp eyes, magnified behind a pair of half-moon spectacles, scrutinised us intently.

"Allow me to introduce Mrs Elvira Plotley," said Inspector Lestrangle.

"Sherlock Potter, and this is my assistant, Ron Watson," Potter introduced us. So now I was his 'assistant'!

The witch greeted us, though somewhat reservedly. She led us to a table where the remains of the seal Potter had recovered from the ashes were laid out.

"I needed several attempts to reconstruct the seal," said Mrs Plotley. "As you know, it was broken into two pieces. Let's first examine the lower fragment. Here, you can clearly see a pillar that appears to stand on solid ground. It continues up into the top

part of the seal, where a circle is visible behind it. From this circle, lines radiate outward in all directions—resembling sunbeams.”

The Inspector and I nodded at the coherent explanation. But Sherlock Potter pulled out his Magoscope and leaned closely over the remains of the seal. Elvira Plotley looked irritated, and frowned. Clearly, she wasn’t used to having her conclusions questioned.

After a brief moment of inspection, Potter challenged her findings.

“Did you notice that none of those lines are actually straight? In fact, they seem irregular—organic, even.”

The witch snapped, visibly annoyed, “Of course I noticed! Reconstructing magically damaged evidence happens to be my area of expertise! The irregularities are due to the fire’s effect on the enchanted sealing wax. If you’d be so kind as to let me continue—I don’t meddle in your work, do I?”

Potter raised an eyebrow but said nothing, allowing Mrs Plotley to continue.

“I created several magical renderings of the seal using my instruments, and finally, on the sixth attempt, I succeeded.”

With a triumphant flourish, she pulled out a sheet of parchment. Upon it was a detailed drawing of a family crest. At the centre stood a tower, silhouetted against a sun. Sunbeams extended outward evenly in all directions.

“And now we know which wizarding family our murderer must belong to!” added Inspector Lestrangle with pride.

“Please enlighten us,” said Potter dryly, sounding less than convinced by the Ministry’s conclusions.

Inspector Lestrangle said, “We compared Mrs Plotley’s rendering to the seal imprints stored in our archives. After an exhaustive search, we finally located the seal that

matches the fragments in question." He produced a thick, leather-bound tome and opened it.

"This is the one," he announced.

We leaned over the book. The resemblance between the imprint on the page and Mrs Plotley's drawing was unmistakable.

Sherlock Potter asked, with a hint of scepticism in his voice, "And to which wizarding family does this imprint belong?"

"It is the seal of the Montard family. There's no doubt about it," replied Lestrangle.

Potter furrowed his brow. "Have you formed any theories regarding the motive? As far as I know, the Montards have an impeccable reputation and are regarded as a most honourable wizarding family."

I nodded in agreement. "I, too, recall that this venerable family has repeatedly supported the wizarding community with generous donations. Just last month, they contributed a substantial sum to St Mungo's Hospital."

Lestrangle waved his hand dismissively. "The evidence is clear. That donation could easily have been a diversionary tactic."

Once again, Sherlock Potter bent over the fragmented seal and turned one of the dials on his Magoscope. It gave a short whir, then clicked. My companion's face took on an expression of surprise. "You see, Lestrangle, this seal was originally green! That rules out the Montards entirely—their seal is always cast in scarlet sealing wax!"

Now clearly irritated, Lestrangle retorted, "Mr Potter, your self-developed magical instruments are all well and good, but we at the Ministry of Magic conduct investigations according to our own standards. Your magical magnifier is not an admissible form of evidence for us."

"I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree, Inspector," said Potter. "Mrs Plotley's illustration doesn't match the broken seal. You're clearly accusing the wrong family."

Elvira Plotley gave my companion a frosty glare through her spectacles. I thought I could even hear her teeth grinding.

Inspector Lestrangle remained undeterred. "I'm convinced we're exactly right, Mr Potter. And I don't believe we'll require your assistance in this matter any further. Your expertise at the crime scene will, of course, be noted favourably in my report to the Ministry, and you will receive an appropriate fee."

"Best hold off on that report, Lestrangle," urged Potter, "or you may find yourself writing it twice."

"Not a chance," the Inspector replied. "The Ministry expects a swift and thorough resolution in an important case like the murder of a former Hogwarts professor." His words carried more weight as he shifted his large frame to gesture toward the door.

"As you wish," said Sherlock Potter. "But rest assured, Inspector, you'll be hearing from me again in the matter of Professor Deere. If I may, I'd like to quickly trace the outline of the two broken seal fragments."

Without waiting for a response, Potter drew a blank sheet of parchment from his cloak. He placed it over the two seal pieces and whispered a spell I did not recognise. As if by magic, the precise contours of the imprint were traced onto the paper. He tucked the drawing away and said, "Come, Watson, we have work to do."

Then he left the room without another word. I, in turn, gave my farewells to Mrs Plotley and Inspector Lestrangle and followed Potter into the Atrium of the Ministry. From the entrance hall, we returned to 121B Baker Street via the Floo Network.

Back at Baker Street, Potter turned to me and said, "Watson, I need your help."

"Whatever you require, Potter."

"I'm no longer permitted to travel to Hogwarts—but you could go in my place."

"To Hogwarts?" I asked, surprised.

"The School of Witchcraft and Wizardry holds the most extensive magical library in the country," Potter explained. "There are volumes there you won't find anywhere else. I hope you'll be able to identify a family seal that matches the outline I've copied from the fragments. If you agree, I'll send an owl to Hogwarts this evening to announce your visit."

I agreed without hesitation and was genuinely pleased to contribute to the investigation. In my excitement, I forgot to ask why Potter himself could not make the journey. I was so thrilled by the prospect of an adventure that I immediately began packing my small travel case. When I returned to the sitting room, Potter had vanished. He didn't return to Baker Street until late that evening. I tried to coax from him where he had spent the day, but he remained tight-lipped. Eager for the adventure ahead, I went to bed early.

Return to Hogwarts

The next morning, I made my way to King's Cross to board the Hogwarts Express from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. We were fortunate: due to the autumn holiday, the train was running only once a week between London and Hogwarts. I hadn't taken the Hogwarts Express since my school days. As the scarlet steam engine pulled into the station, I boarded one of the carriages, and memories of my youth as a student wizard came flooding back.

However, our departure was delayed. We had to wait for a shipment that was scheduled to be transported to Hogwarts. A guard stalked down the corridor, grumbling, "Not my fault we're late! We were meant to deliver Ever-Burning Candles to Hogwarts, but the supplier just didn't show up."

Not wanting to incur the guard's wrath, I retreated to my compartment. Once the train finally left—with considerable delay—I found myself drifting back into memories of days long past.

I thought of the countless lessons held in the dungeons, towers, and halls of Hogwarts. The endless hours spent cramming in the library, the difficult prep assignments. It felt as though the train wasn't just gliding through the countryside—but also through time, carrying a piece of my youth with it.

Naturally, I also thought of my days as a Keeper for the Gryffindor house team. I had loved Quidditch from my very first year. One school year stood out in particular, when Gryffindor won every match and was celebrated as the best team in decades. I gazed out the window, nostalgic for those carefree times and the joy they had brought

me. After a simple lunch in my compartment, I became drowsy. Lost in memory and lulled by the passing scenery, I slowly drifted into sleep.

I was jolted awake as the compartment door slid open and the conductor barked, "Hogwarts! Final stop! Everyone off!"

Still a bit dazed, I grabbed my suitcase and stepped off the train. It was already dark. Just like in my school days, a carriage drawn by Thestrals awaited me. The silent coachman asked only for my name and drove me wordlessly to Hogwarts.

At the school's front gates, I was met by a stern-looking witch. I immediately recognised her as Professor McKinnon, my former Potions teacher. She held a letter from Potter in her hand and scrutinised me.

"Mister Ron Watson, I presume? I am Professor McKinnon."

Apparently, she hadn't recognised me. Her silver-threaded hair was pulled into a strict bun, and her sharply defined features radiated the same unshakeable authority I remembered from my school days.

"That's correct. I'm assisting Mr Potter in the investigation of—" I began, but she cut me off briskly.

"I know, I know," she said in her usual decisive manner. "It's all in the letter. You need access to some works in our library. I'm aware of that." She waved the letter slightly. "But tonight it's too late to visit the library."

I nodded. Despite having dozed on the journey, I felt tired and drained.

"You've also missed dinner in the Great Hall," Professor McKinnon added. "You'll find something to eat waiting in your room."

She escorted me to the vicinity of the Ravenclaw Tower. I knew from my days as a pupil that guest rooms were located here—usually reserved for visiting professors from other magical schools. As I walked through the familiar halls and corridors, I was immediately wrapped in the comforting atmosphere of my school days: the winding,

mysterious walls, the scent of old, musty books—and somewhere in the distance, the unmistakable stench of a burnt cauldron. No doubt, a potion had gone terribly wrong during lessons today.

Professor McKinnon said, “You will be granted access to the library tomorrow, including the Restricted Section. Needless to say, you are not allowed to remove any books from Hogwarts. Borrowing is restricted to pupils only.”

Once in my guest room, she wished me good night. A modest sandwich and a glass of warm mooncalf milk awaited me. I went to bed shortly thereafter and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next morning, I was awakened by the school bell. It took me a while to rise from bed—my old morning sluggishness had returned. By the time I made it to the Great Hall, the young witches and wizards had already dispersed to their first lessons. The high table was also nearly empty, save for Professor McKinnon.

I seated myself at the Gryffindor table—the house I once belonged to and still felt deeply connected with—and had a quick breakfast. Just as I finished, Professor McKinnon entered through the large portal and hurried toward me.

“Good morning, Mr Watson. Please follow me—I’ll take you to the library. We must make haste; I have another lesson to teach shortly.”

I followed the brisk professor as she strode ahead at a determined pace. Along the way, she said, “You should know that solving this murder case is particularly important to me. Professor Deere was a dearly respected colleague.”

She gave me a closer look. “But tell me, didn’t I know you during your time at Hogwarts? Ron Watson is your full name, isn’t it? Weren’t you, like Professor Deere, an avid Quidditch fan?”

I confirmed with a nod, and she went on, “And how is it that you’re working with Sherlock Potter of all people?”

"It happened by chance," I explained. "We met while searching for lodgings. He asked me to assist in his investigation and conduct some research in the Hogwarts library."

Professor McKinnon pondered for a moment. I sensed she had more to say but held her tongue.

Once in the library, we encountered an elderly man hunched over a book. As we approached his table, he looked up lazily. Before he could even greet us, Professor McKinnon announced, "This is Henry Dangalf, our librarian. You might remember him from your school days."

A musty scent with a hint of sherry wafted from Mr Dangalf—just as it had back when I spent hours studying in the library. His bald head gleamed, and his snow-white beard spilled over his lap. The librarian greeted us sluggishly.

"I hear you're investigating Professor Deere's death," he said in his slow, drawn-out voice. "You know, I'll be retiring soon myself. I do hope I'll get to enjoy my retirement a bit longer than the professor did." Mr Dangalf gave a sly grin, but neither the professor nor I returned it. Realising his joke had fallen flat, the librarian quickly adopted a more sombre tone.

"And what exactly are you looking for? Perhaps I can recommend some relevant volumes."

I explained my task, and Mr Dangalf rose with visible effort to show me the section of the library dedicated to wizarding family seals. At this point, Professor McKinnon took her leave, visibly relieved to hand me over to the sluggish librarian. I was led to a shelf containing nothing but large, heavy tomes.

"These are the most important seals and crests of wizarding families," Mr Dangalf explained, gently brushing a hand over the weighty volumes. Then he shuffled off in haste, likely hoping to avoid being asked for further help.

I must confess: inwardly, I groaned at the task Sherlock Potter had left me. I pulled the first book from the shelf and found a table away from the musty librarian. I placed the parchment with the traced outline of the seal on the table and opened the book. A fine layer of dust rose and shimmered in the pale autumn light. I began comparing the seals of various wizarding families to the tracing, one by one.

But the book showed only crests and imprints that bore no resemblance whatsoever. Since I was determined to examine every page thoroughly, my progress was slow. After finishing the first volume with no success, I pulled the next tome from the shelf. And so the entire morning passed: book after book, with no match in sight. Gradually, the work wore me down.

Just as I was about to begin another volume, the school bell rang for lunch. Suddenly, Professor McKinnon appeared beside my table.

"The headmistress would be pleased to welcome you at the high table for today's lunch."

I hadn't expected an invitation from Professor Vitena Enter and was quite delighted. I pushed aside my frustration—convinced that the morning had been a complete waste of time—and followed the professor down to the Great Hall.

To my surprise, the headmistress had even saved a seat right next to her. The small, elderly witch looked exactly as she had the day I left Hogwarts: her grey hair flowed in soft waves over her shoulders, and she wore a traditional but modest robe that reflected her grounded and deeply caring nature. A pair of round spectacles perched on her nose, and through them she studied me with a warm gaze. As she had in my school days, Professor Enter held a tabby cat in her arms. There was a rumour she had granted the animal nine extra-long lives. When she greeted me with a hug, the cat voiced its displeasure with a disgruntled meow.

Then Professor Vitena Enter began the lunch for the students. As we ate, she asked me many questions about my life since Hogwarts and my time as an Auror. Eventually, the conversation turned to how I came to be assisting Sherlock Potter in his investigation. She showed a keen interest in my flatmate. After I told her everything I knew—which, in truth, wasn't all that much—she said:

"What a shame it was with Sherlock Potter. We saw great promise in the young man. But his obsession with experimenting in the Dark Arts...we had no choice but to put a stop to it."

I was taken aback. I hadn't known Potter had come into contact with Dark Magic during his school years. I had assumed he only became involved with the forbidden arts later in life.

Professor Enter continued. "We warned him repeatedly, but he wouldn't stay away from Dark Magic. We never believed he meant harm, but his experiments led him deeper and deeper into dangerous territory. In the end, we were forced to act. We had no choice but to expel him in his seventh year."

"Potter was expelled from Hogwarts?" I asked, stunned. I was completely caught off guard.

Professor Enter nodded sadly and added, somewhat helplessly, "An unprecedented event. Nothing like it had ever happened before. Of course, we tried to keep it quiet and covered the incident up as best we could. Even the other pupils were told very little. But we had to come up with a convincing excuse—especially for the Slytherins. If I recall correctly, we claimed he had transferred to Beauxbatons Academy of Magic for an exchange scheme."

"Potter was in Slytherin?" I asked, still incredulous.

"Indeed," said Professor Enter. "That alone gave us reason to worry how far his interest in the Dark Arts might go."

She stood. "Excuse me, I must return to my duties."

I got up as well. Just as she was about to turn away, she asked, "Did you know Professor Deere was responsible for Sherlock Potter's expulsion?"

In that moment, I finally understood why Potter held Professor Deere in such contempt. I could hardly imagine what emotions he must have wrestled with while working on this case.

After my conversation with the headmistress, I saw my companion in a new light. I wondered whether I should confront Potter with this information. It was difficult to predict how he might react. Perhaps it would be wiser to keep this revelation to myself for the time being. I was still pondering silently when a voice drew me back to the present.

"Ron Watson—is that you?"

I turned around and found myself staring into the face of Scarlett Zink. My heart skipped a beat. A rush of warmth and nervousness flooded me. Scarlett Zink had been the objective of my childhood affections during our time at Hogwarts.

"It's been a long time," I said, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice.

"It certainly has," she replied with a warm smile. "How are you?"

"I'm... well... surprised to see you here," I stammered.

"And I you," she answered kindly.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. My question came out more bluntly than I had intended.

"Well, I'm the Potions professor now. So it's not all that surprising to find me in Hogwarts, is it? But what brings you here?"

Her gentle tone helped ease my nerves. I explained that I was conducting research in the library related to the murder case.

"Ah yes," said Scarlett Zink, her voice turning thoughtful. "Poor Professor Deere. We're all hoping the culprit will be found soon."

"Certainly!" I replied. Yet as I spoke, I couldn't help but think that I'd made no progress in my investigation that morning. I quickly tried to steer the conversation toward a lighter topic.

"So, how long have you been teaching Potions?"

"I started three years ago. I really enjoy it. Working with young witches and wizards is a delight—even if things occasionally go wrong."

"Like last night, perhaps?" I said teasingly. "When I arrived, the corridors smelled distinctly burnt."

Scarlett Zink flushed crimson. "No, that was my fault. I was experimenting with a new potion recipe."

We both laughed. Soon, we were reminiscing about our school days, our adventures, and the many examinations. As we spoke, I looked at Scarlett Zink more closely: her naturally pink hair, sleek and styled into a neat bob, shimmered softly. Her deep blue eyes sparkled, drawing me in instantly. She wore an elegant cloak that matched the shade of her hair and fell gracefully over her slim frame. I was once again utterly taken by her presence. A bittersweet feeling overcame me—I had never dared to speak to her as a shy pupil, and after school, she had simply vanished from my life. All the more delightful it was to now see her again so unexpectedly.

Just then, the school bell rang, signalling the start of afternoon lessons.

"Duty calls," said Scarlett Zink with a smile as she stood. "It was wonderful seeing you again. Perhaps we can continue our conversation later?"

"I'd like that very much," I replied, watching wistfully as she left the Great Hall. I returned to the library—but found it difficult to focus on ancient family seals.

After lunch, a few students had also returned to the library. They looked at me with curiosity, but the young witches and wizards otherwise left me undisturbed. Only Mr Dangalf occasionally broke the silence, calling out things like, "No Chocolate Frog cards in the library!" or "That book belongs on a different shelf!"

Still, my search remained fruitless. None of the seals in the books I now examined bore any resemblance to the tracing. I worked my way through book after book on the shelf recommended by the librarian. By late afternoon, fatigue began to overtake me, and the reading room gradually emptied. Eventually, as darkness had already fallen outside, I found myself alone in the library. Mr Dangalf had left for the day.

At some point, I must have dozed off while researching. I was startled awake by a gentle tap on my shoulder. I jumped and looked up to see Professor McKinnon standing before me.

"Mr Watson, you're still down here. I take it you haven't found what you were looking for?"

Still groggy, I shook my head. Professor McKinnon glanced at the book before me, then at the tracing. "Are you searching for this seal?" she asked.

"Exactly. But I simply can't find it."

"If it's not here, perhaps you should consult *The Book of Black Seals* from the Restricted Section. That particular volume is only available here at the Hogwarts library."

My ears perked up. If the book existed solely at Hogwarts, that would explain why Inspector Lestrangle had been unable to access it. I followed the professor to the Restricted Section, which—like all staff members—she could unlock with a key. She led me unerringly to a shelf filled exclusively with works on ancient wizarding families who had succumbed to the lure of Dark Magic. There, she retrieved a thick volume with a velvety black cover. With a mix of nervousness and hope that I might finally uncover a vital clue, I took the book from her hands.

Professor McKinnon also needed a volume from the Restricted Section, and since she had to log our names into the borrower's register, I accompanied her to the entry desk. She stopped in front of a shelf and frowned.

"How odd—there's a book missing," she said, pointing to a gap between two hefty tomes. "It's the very one I intended to borrow. Let me check who last took it out."

We returned to the front of the Restricted Section, where a large book lay on a table—the official log of all borrowed materials. Professor McKinnon opened it and ran her fingers down the page until she suddenly stopped, her eyes widening in surprise.

"The last person listed for this missing book is Professor Deere," she said.

Stunned, I asked, "Are you absolutely sure?"

"See for yourself."

I looked down at the register. Indeed, Professor Deere's name was written clearly on the page.

"Look here, Mr Watson—the book was signed out on the professor's last day of teaching at Hogwarts," she added, pointing to the date next to his name.

I was about to return to my desk when another question occurred to me. "Can you tell me which book is missing?"

"Of course. It's *The Balance of Death*, a work written over two hundred years ago by Cristof Quincy."

I decided I would inform Sherlock Potter of this discovery as soon as I returned to London. So, my trip to Hogwarts hadn't been in vain—even if I had yet to identify the seal. Professor McKinnon left to report the missing book, and I returned to my work table. Once again, I was completely alone in the library. A heavy silence settled over the rows of bookshelves. Candles floated above my desk, but all else was cloaked in darkness. Carefully, I laid out *The Book of Black Seals*, its title embossed in red on the black cover. When I opened the volume, I read the following lines:

*In this book from days of old
Are secrets once by kinships told.
Their honour lost, their names erased,
By Dark Magic they were disgraced.*

On the next page was a large table listing wizarding families who had fallen into the Dark Arts. Alongside the names were their respective seals. I studied the imprints with care, and my heart leapt as I finally found one resembling the tracing. It appeared to belong to a family I had never heard of before: the House of Darkshire. I hastily turned the pages to the corresponding chapter. The seal was shown in full detail, and I could now clearly discern its features: just as Sherlock Potter had suspected, there was no pillar in front of a sun. Instead, the seal depicted a tree whose branches extended in every direction near the top. What Lestrangle and Mrs Plotley had assumed to be sunbeams were in fact twisted limbs. The “sun” behind them? Merely the tree’s crown.

“By the holy Quaffle!” I exclaimed in delight—for I had finally uncovered a vital piece of the puzzle in this murder case.

I immersed myself in the chapter on the Darkshire family, who had, for decades, carried out their wicked deeds in Boscombe Valley. Along a popular travel route that wound through the deep forest, they had planted an avenue of Whomping Willows. Only the family knew the secret knots that could pacify these aggressive trees. Whenever Muggles passed through, the Darkshires would untie the knots, causing the trees to lash out in a frenzy. The panicked travellers fled in terror, leaving behind their belongings, which the Darkshires would then seize—enriching themselves for many years.

Outwardly, the family presented themselves as respectable and refined. Their stately manor in Boscombe Valley was the site of lavish balls and charitable events. For

a long time, they deceived the wizarding community with their glittering façades and generous gestures, all the while continuing their dark deeds in secret. But in 1799, the truth came to light. Ministry officials discovered the Whomping Willows and the malicious scheme. Aurors raided the manor and arrested several family members. But Count Tylar Darkshire—the family patriarch—resisted capture and fled into the forest.

There, he engaged in a fierce battle with the Aurors. Although outnumbered, the Count knew how to turn the Whomping Willows to his advantage. Eventually, however, the trees caught fire from the sparks of spellfire. The blaze spread quickly through the entire avenue of enchanted trees. All the Whomping Willows were destroyed in the flames. Count Tylar Darkshire perished as well.

The remaining family members were taken to Azkaban and subjected to intense interrogation. But due to a lack of conclusive evidence, the Count's widow and their two sons were ultimately released—a decision that caused public outrage in the wizarding world. Hounded by protests and scorn, they withdrew from society. Though they remained in the family manor, the glamour of earlier times faded. Over time, as the controversy died down, the surviving members resolved to retire the family seal—so as not to remind the world of the Darkshires' infamous past.

And that was where the chapter ended.

I stared into the library's surrounding darkness. No wonder Inspector Lestrangle and Mrs Plotley had failed to identify the imprint—it hadn't been used in over fifty years. Surely, with help from the Ministry, it would be easy to trace the remaining members of the Darkshire family.

Having jotted down a few notes, I closed the book and made my way back to my room. My mind buzzed with thoughts and questions, but the moment my head touched the pillow, I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The next morning, I was once again awakened by the school bell. On my way to the Great Hall, I encountered no students. Only Professor McKinnon was still seated at the high table.

"Good morning, Mr Watson. Did you have any luck yesterday?" she asked.

"Good morning," I replied. "Yes, I actually found what I was looking for. I'm quite certain it will bring us a significant step closer to solving the case."

"I'm glad to hear that. Now that your research is complete, I assume you'd like to return to London—the Hogwarts Express will be departing shortly. After all, the holidays are beginning. But you'll need to hurry if you want to catch the train."

Of course—half-term! That explained the school's eerie emptiness. I quickly drank a cup of Earl Grey and ate a slice of toast with orange marmalade. I was filled with melancholy at the thought that I hadn't had a chance to say goodbye to Scarlett Zink.

Then Professor McKinnon handed me an envelope and said, "This letter is from Professor Zink. She asked me to give it to you. I have a feeling she'd be delighted to receive a letter in return!"

She winked mischievously—a rare expression for such a stern witch. I tucked the letter into my suitcase and hurried to Hogsmeade to catch the train .

As expected, the Hogwarts Express was packed with young witches and wizards. These spoiled brats made no effort to offer me a seat. Even the prefects passed by me with bored expressions and left me standing in the corridor instead of offering me a place in one of the compartments.

I grumbled inwardly about "today's youth," but my irritation faded quickly as I watched the pupils trade Chocolate Frog cards, argue passionately about their favourite Quidditch teams, and devour shrieking sugar mice.

That evening, we arrived at King's Cross, and my short return to Hogwarts was over.

Lord Ventus Darkshire

I took a cab back to Baker Street, where Sherlock Potter greeted me, pipe in hand, from his armchair.

"Watson," he said, "a pleasure to see you again!"

"Good evening, Potter," I replied. "I'm glad to be home—but I must admit, it was a special feeling to return to Hogwarts after all these years."

My thoughts drifted wistfully to Scarlett Zink. I sank into the empty armchair and helped myself to a pipe as well.

"Well then," said Potter, "I assume you've discovered something about the seal, or else you wouldn't have returned so soon."

I reported what I had learned in the Restricted Section about the Darkshire family's seal. As expected, Potter was quite pleased with the results.

"Very good, Watson," he concluded. "This information brings us significantly closer. And I haven't been idle either. What I've uncovered will help us put the pieces together."

He took a thoughtful puff from his pipe before continuing.

"You surely remember the confrontation between Inspector Lestrangle and the goblins? Their rather odd, even bizarre demand to confirm that Professor Deere was truly dead? That's where I started. As Lestrangle mentioned, one of the goblins works at Gringotts. So I went to the wizarding bank and found the goblin in question at the counter. When I brought up the dispute with the inspector, he tried to brush me off. But I persisted. Eventually, he agreed to meet during his lunch break at the Copper Cauldron in Diagon Alley. And now—guess what I discovered."

"Out with it!" I exclaimed, utterly captivated. But Potter made a show of taking another satisfied puff on his pipe before continuing.

"Professor Deere had accumulated substantial gambling debts with the goblins. To pay them off, he placed yet another bet. For the final match, he wagered everything on the Chudley Cannons—and lost a considerable number of Galleons."

"Unquestionably bad luck," I interjected, for like any true fan, I still believed the Cannons were destined for glory.

Potter frowned at my enthusiasm for the sport, then went on. "In any case, the professor was deeply in debt and evidently unable to repay what he owed. I learned that the goblins gave him an ultimatum—settle the debt or face the consequences. That deadline? It was the day he died."

"Do you think the goblins were involved in the murder?"

"No, I don't believe so. But they clearly placed the professor under tremendous pressure. He felt compelled to take desperate measures to find the money. Consider the use of black Floo powder—highly illegal, and yet he resorted to it. That says everything."

"What do you suppose would've happened once the ultimatum expired?" I asked.

"The goblin wouldn't tell me," said Sherlock Potter. "But mark my words, Watson—those creatures are capable of much. Even if I were Minister for Magic, I wouldn't want to owe them a Knut."

His gaze wandered into the distance.

I could almost see his mind at work, attempting to fit every puzzle piece into its place. I dared not interrupt. At last, he returned to the present and said, "We need to determine what role the Darkshire family plays in all of this. I suspect the murderer is among them. I plan to investigate further tomorrow."

Potter rose and made his way toward his bedroom. Just then, I remembered something I'd been meaning to ask him.

"You never told me you were in Slytherin."

Potter stopped in the doorway, then smiled at me.

"The Sorting Hat gave me the choice between Gryffindor and Slytherin. But I've always been drawn to the Dark Arts," he said. After a short pause, he added, "My interest is purely academic, of course."

I nodded silently.

"Well then, Watson. Sleep well."

After he left the room, I sat for a while in my chair. During my time as an Auror, I had often fought against witches and wizards who had been in Slytherin. No other house had produced so many practitioners of the Dark Arts—so many who had done terrible things with their power. With such heavy thoughts on my mind, I nodded off in my armchair and drifted into a restless sleep.

I dreamt I was still in the Restricted Section of the library, trying to steal valuable books. But no matter what I did, I couldn't pull a single volume from the shelves—they seemed stuck as if glued in place. Suddenly, Inspector Lestrangle appeared beside me and attempted to arrest me. And then goblins arrived.

They began arguing with the Inspector over whether a public execution would be the appropriate punishment for my attempted theft. To make matters worse, Sherlock Potter then entered the library, cackling madly: "I stole the books! It was all me!"

At that point, I jolted awake from the nightmare. I looked around our sitting room in confusion. Groggy, I made my way to my bedroom and finally fell into another restless sleep, from which I didn't wake until late the next morning.

Sherlock Potter greeted me cheerfully at the breakfast table.

"Watson, good morning! Did you sleep well? I was just about to wake you—we need to visit Inspector Lestrangle at the Ministry. We must find out where the remaining members of the Darkshire family are living."

I mumbled something incomprehensible in reply.

Potter remained undeterred by my grumbling. "Sit down and enjoy this excellent breakfast Mrs Pomfrey has prepared. You'll feel better afterwards."

Indeed, my mood quickly improved at the sight of the delectable spread our housekeeper had laid out: butterbeer pancakes, elven bread with fairy-fruit jam, pumpkin pasties (a seasonal favourite), and a fresh pot of druid tea. I couldn't help but compliment her cooking. Pale autumn sunlight streamed into the sitting room. While I ate, I picked up the Daily Prophet.

The front page displayed an image of Inspector Lestrangle in a heroic pose.

The headline read: Inspector Solves Hogwarts Professor's Murder in Record Time

Beneath it, a subheading announced: Official Statement from Inspector Lestrangle Expected Today at the Ministry.

"Potter, have you read the Daily Prophet yet?" I asked.

"No, this morning I was engrossed in a book about magical inks. Fascinating topic. Why—something about the case?"

I handed him the newspaper so he could read the headline. Alarmed, he snatched it from my hands and cast his eyes over the article beneath the image.

"What a troll-brained fool!" he exclaimed. "Watson, we must get to the Ministry at once. Inspector Lestrangle is about to destroy his career! Perhaps we can reach him before he makes his statement."

He jumped to his feet, and to my dismay, I had to abandon the rest of my glorious breakfast (and scolded myself for not having shown him the article sooner). I dressed quickly, managing to throw on my cloak just as Potter tossed a pinch of Floo powder into the fireplace. Green flames roared to life.

Moments later, we stepped into the entrance hall of the Ministry of Magic. We hurried to the porter's desk to request a meeting with Inspector Lestrangle. But the witch

at the counter said apologetically, "I'm afraid the Inspector isn't available at the moment—he's currently giving a statement to the press.."

Potter paused only for a fraction of a second, then replied, "Ah yes—that's precisely what we meant. We'd like to attend the press conference."

The witch pulled out a list and asked suspiciously, "And which publication are you with?"

Sherlock Potter leaned so far over the counter that he nearly brushed against the witch, giving him a clear view of the list. He ran his finger up and down the names.

"Let's see, where are we...?" he muttered.

The witch, flustered, didn't stop him—and before she could say another word, he had spotted a publication whose representatives had not yet checked in.

"Ah yes, here we are! We're from the Magical Morning Post. Our names are Alaric Wrodly and Thaddeus Presscoff."

He spoke slowly and clearly. I heard a faint scratching sound from within his cloak. The witch eyed him sceptically.

"Then may I see your press passes?"

"But of course." Potter rummaged in his cloak and produced two identification cards. I just barely caught sight of a magical quill finishing the last strokes on one of them.

He waved the passes quickly in front of the witch's nose—probably hoping the ink would dry fast enough.

"Here you are."

She examined them with a frown. "Press passes usually include a photograph, don't they?"

"Budget cuts," said Potter smoothly—and to our great luck, she let it go. Perhaps she was simply relieved to be rid of us.

"What was that all about, Potter?" I asked my companion as we stepped into the lift.

Potter smiled mischievously. "Just a little sleight of hand, my dear fellow. I always carry a charmed quill and fast-drying ink in my cloak."

"So I take it these weren't your first forged passes?"

But Potter didn't answer. Instead, he asked, "You know where the address archive is located, don't you?"

"Of course. We need to go down to Level Ten. The archive shares the same floor as the Wizengamot courtrooms."

"Very well, Watson. Since Lestrage is currently throwing his career into the nearest cauldron, we might as well continue our investigation on our own."

We exited the lift at Level Nine and took the stairs down to the very bottom floor. The address archive was a vast, elongated chamber lined with towering cabinets that reached all the way to the ceiling. Drawers opened and closed as if moved by invisible hands. Index cards floated in and out, and memos—folded like paper darts—unfolded above the cabinets and neatly filed themselves away.

These were the address notifications that witches and wizards were required to submit whenever they changed residences, using the infamous Form A38. Potter and I had filled out that very form when we moved into 121B Baker Street.

On the wall beside the entrance hung a large map of London, which we now approached.

I said to Potter, "All you have to do is tap this city map with your wand while saying the name of the family you're searching for."

As I gave him this instruction, I was once again painfully reminded of how much my injury limited me. I could no longer use a wand—and in the magical world, that restriction weighed heavily.

Potter followed my directions, tapped the map, and said, "Family Darkshire."

Immediately, two glowing dots appeared on the map: one in Serpentine Avenue, St John's Wood, labelled Residence of Lord Ventus Darkshire; the other at the very top edge of the map, marked Boscombe Valley, 43 miles – Residence of Lord Tremor Darkshire.

"Great Merlin," said Sherlock Potter. "Since the map shows only two male names, I presume they must be the Count's sons. Their mother must have died. Let's head to Lord Ventus's residence in Serpentine Avenue. If we don't find anything there, we'll have to journey out to Boscombe Valley."

As we returned to the Ministry atrium, we passed Inspector Lestrange, who stood surrounded by a swarm of reporters. The murder of Professor Deere had clearly made headlines beyond London—alongside reporters from the Daily Prophet and the London Oracle, we saw journalists from several surrounding counties.

Though Lestrange was doing his best to focus on the questions being hurled at him, his towering stature gave him a clear view across the atrium—and he couldn't help but notice Potter and me hurrying past. His expression faltered mid-sentence, and confusion flashed across his face. His perfectly curled moustache twitched briefly. I also spotted the witch at the porter's desk arguing with two very disgruntled representatives of the Magical Morning Post.

We left the Ministry in a hurry. I was relieved—our little excursion had most certainly crossed several legal lines. Moments later, we were seated in a cab. Outside, the weather looked to be turning for the worse. Heavy clouds piled on the horizon, promising rain. When we arrived at Serpentine Avenue, we found ourselves standing before an expansive estate surrounded by a tall wall. A light drizzle had begun to fall, dampening our cloaks and hair.

We rang the bell, but no one came to the gate. As we lingered in front of the grand residence, a curious neighbour called out to us over the adjoining garden fence. What followed was a veritable torrent of words.

"Good morning, gentlemen! You're here to see Lord Ventus, I suppose? I noticed he's been away for a while. You see, he usually invites me over for a butterbeer every week so we can discuss the latest Quidditch results. But I haven't received an invitation this week, so I assumed he had left town. He has connections all over the country and even on the continent, you know. He's quite the charming fellow—very courteous, very civil. Quite unlike his older brother, the old sourpuss. I only saw him once, but when I greeted him over the hedge, he snapped at me most rudely. That was years ago, but I still remember it clearly. So—what brings you to Lord Ventus's house?" he finished with transparent curiosity.

Potter gave me a meaningful look, and I immediately understood.

"We have an appointment with Lord Ventus," I said, "to discuss Quidditch over tea. Especially the Chudley Cannons' recent loss—it was quite a dramatic game."

"My thoughts exactly!" the neighbour agreed. "Lord Ventus would have said the same—"

Sherlock Potter interrupted him abruptly. "Why do you refer to him by his Christian name and not his family name?"

The neighbour paused, thinking. "You know, I've never really thought about that. He's always introduced himself simply as Lord Ventus. What is his surname, anyway?"

Potter ignored the question. "When did you last see His Lordship?"

"Two or three days ago, I think..."

Potter leaned toward me and whispered, "Let's get out of here. With this nosy man around, we won't be able to investigate properly."

It took quite an effort to extricate ourselves from the overly chatty neighbour, who would've gladly continued talking for hours.

"We'll return later tonight," Potter assured me as we walked away. "Once that busy-body has gone to bed."

"And if Lord Ventus Darkshire still hasn't returned?"

"Then we'll break in."

I was startled, but Potter tried to reassure me. "Don't worry, my good man. I'm quite skilled at this—I've done it before."

That didn't reassure me in the slightest. What dark energies still lingered in my companion? I tried to maintain my composure and asked, "What will we do until night-fall? Return to Baker Street?"

"No. Let's visit the Hogwarts Club—it's close by. You know it, of course?"

"Of course. What Hogwarts graduate doesn't?"

"Not just graduates—dropouts, too," Potter muttered through gritted teeth.

The Balance of Death

Before long, we arrived at the Hogwarts Club. The rune-engraved double doors swung open to reveal a magnificent hall, lit by flickering candles and chandeliers floating beneath a lofty ceiling.

Dear reader—should you have never visited the Hogwarts Club, allow me to give you a brief overview of this remarkable establishment. I strongly recommend a visit, though I must inform you that entry is restricted to adult witches and wizards. The main hall was divided into four sections, each dedicated to one of the Hogwarts houses.

The Gryffindor section was bathed in warm, golden light. The walls were adorned with portraits of former heads of house, and rich crimson banners and emblems bearing the proud lion. Above the fireplace hung a stately portrait of Godric Gryffindor himself, greeting guests with a bold smile. The tables, made of dark oak, were draped with deep red velvet cloths.

The Hufflepuff area featured soft yellows and earthy browns. Banners with badgers set in natural surroundings hung along the walls, and flowering plants stood on every table, spreading a calming fragrance. No other section felt quite so cozy and inviting.

In the Ravenclaw corner, a cool, intellectual elegance prevailed. Bookshelves full of ancient tomes and scrolls lined the walls, and a magnificent antique globe spun in one corner. The mahogany tables and silver-inlaid chairs created a contemplative atmosphere—ideal for those who preferred to read or peruse the Daily Prophet.

The Slytherin section was shrouded in mysterious darkness. The walls were dressed in deep green and black, with tapestries embroidered with silver serpents. A large portrait of Salazar Slytherin gazed sternly down at the guests. The ebony tables were covered with emerald cloths, and the high-backed chairs were upholstered in rich green velvet.

Above all these sections stretched a ceiling enchanted like the one in Hogwarts' Great Hall, displaying the current weather. I looked up to see black-grey storm clouds sweeping across London. The rain would likely worsen soon.

Guests at the Hogwarts Club were free to sit in any section they liked, but each area featured its own menu. Only in the Gryffindor section, for instance, could one order the famous Lionheart Sandwich (not made from lion meat, of course, but spiced with a fiery sauce best enjoyed with copious amounts of butterbeer), or the sweet and tangy Sliproot Pudding.

Instinctively, I turned toward the Gryffindor section, but Potter took me by the arm and steered me firmly into the Slytherin area. After we sat down and ordered lunch—I chose the delicious Nightshade Casserole with a butterbeer—I picked up the Daily Prophet from the table, as I hadn't read beyond the front page that morning due to our hasty departure.

While I ate and read, Sherlock Potter sat in deep thought, his gaze fixed on nothing in particular. His mind was clearly at work on the case. After a while, having combed through the paper several times, impatience began to rise within me. But I dared not disturb him.

Finally, he began to speak—more to himself than to me. "Isn't it curious that Lord Ventus Darkshire's neighbour only refers to him by his first name? I suspect he's trying to conceal his family's disgraceful past. From what we've heard, he places great value on friendships and social ties."

I nodded. "His brother seems to be cut from a different cloth. From what we've heard, he's a surly and unfriendly character."

Suddenly, a thought struck me like a bolt of lightning. "Potter! I completely forgot to tell you something most peculiar!"

"Oh? What is it?"

I told him about the missing book *The Balance of Death* from the Restricted Section at Hogwarts—and that it had been taken by Professor Deere.

"Great Merlin!" Potter exclaimed, loud enough that several witches and wizards nearby flinched, and the portrait of Salazar Slytherin frowned down at us even more sternly. At once, Potter appeared agitated and restless. He shot to his feet.

"That changes everything, Watson! This case is far more urgent than we thought. We must leave at once!"

We left the Hogwarts Club in haste and returned to Lord Ventus' estate. As I had feared, the rain had intensified by evening. The wind whipped the dead leaves from the trees, and in the fading light, we had to be careful not to slip on the slick paths.

On the way, I asked, "Potter, what exactly is *The Balance of Death*? Why this sudden urgency?"

"*The Balance of Death* is a work by the Dark wizard Cristof Quincy, written in the seventeenth century. At first glance, it reads like the ramblings of a deranged mind. According to Quincy, every human life is governed by a fixed number of heartbeats. Once a person uses up the beats they were assigned by fate, they die. He supports this theory with observations from the animal world: a whale, with its slow heartbeat, lives far longer than a mouse, whose heart races. The mouse burns through its heartbeats far more quickly. Up to this point, the book is harmless nonsense.

"But Quincy went further. He wanted to see whether it was possible to transfer heartbeats from one person to another using Dark Magic. His goal was to prolong life.

He tried to heal his terminally ill wife that way—and in doing so, tragically caused the death of his own son. That terrible experiment is described in *The Balance of Death*.

"After the incident, Quincy was sentenced to Azkaban. There's only one known copy of the book in existence—and it's stored in the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library."

By then, we had reached the estate. Twilight had settled in, and the weather had cast an eerie atmosphere over the place.

"Look," said Potter, "there's no light in the windows. We'll have to break in."

"We can't just break into His Lordship's house!" I protested.

"We have no choice," Potter replied. "We can't afford to lose any more time."

I was stunned. At the beginning of the year, I had still been a loyal Auror in the service of the Ministry—and now here I was, about to break into someone's home like a common thief.

"Shouldn't we at least inform Inspector Lestrangle?"

"Impossible! Think of the consequences if we delay any longer."

"What consequences, Potter? You're keeping me in the dark!"

"Watson, surely you see it now: someone murdered Professor Deere and stole *The Balance of Death*. And I suspect one of the Darkshire brothers. I don't even want to imagine what they're planning."

I didn't reply, though my silence was heavy with unease.

Potter sensed my concern. "Don't worry, Watson. I have the tools we need. We'll gain entry without difficulty. We just have to make sure that nosy neighbour doesn't spot us."

We glanced toward the neighbouring house. Behind a lit window, we could clearly see the silhouette of a man.

"No doubt the neighbour, keeping an eye on Lord Ventus' property," Potter whispered.

After a few minutes, the man stepped away from the window, and we climbed over the wall into the garden. Under cover of darkness, we crept across the grounds to the front door. Despite the poor light, I noticed that there wasn't a single tree in the garden—only meticulously maintained flowerbeds and hedges.

Potter first tried Alohomora on the lock, but nothing happened.

"I thought as much. Lord Ventus has protected his home with extra enchantments."

He then pulled out a key from his coat and unlocked the door in an instant.

"This tool is my own invention," he said, holding up the key, which I couldn't clearly make out in the dim light. "We must be extremely cautious. If that neighbour sees us, the Ministry will send Aurors in no time."

Carefully, we entered the house. Potter whispered, "Lumos minimus." A faint glow emerged from his wand—just enough to guide our steps. He drew his Magoscope. "Let's check the sitting room first," he murmured, and led the way. I followed, glancing around at the elegant decor.

The rooms were both refined and inviting. It was clear that Lord Ventus Darkshire regularly hosted guests, just as his neighbour had described. In the sitting room, a group of armchairs was arranged around a fireplace, beside which stood a well-stocked bar.

Various beverages were on display: Cauldronfire Brandy, Inkwater Elixir, Elven Nectar—and in a magically chilled cabinet, an assortment of Butterbeer. Another sign that visitors were frequently entertained here.

Potter drew the heavy curtains and allowed the light from his wand to grow a little brighter.

"Please, take a seat in the armchair," he instructed. "If you wander about, you might destroy valuable evidence."

Somewhat grudgingly, I sat down and looked around the sitting room with a sulky expression. The room was luxuriously furnished, yet tasteful. Portraits hung on the walls, showing Lord Ventus among cheerful-looking witches and wizards.

But I searched in vain for images of his ancestors or family members.

Meanwhile, Potter had begun to examine the floor in front of the fireplace with great care using his Magoscope. He crawled on all fours, peering closely through the magical lens. At first, the sight of him creeping about seemed a bit absurd.

But then he cried out, making me jump. "By thunder! This is the proof we need. Lord Ventus Darkshire is involved—if he isn't the murderer himself!"

He had picked something up from the floor and handed it to me. The tiny dark granules were all too familiar.

"By the holy Quaffle—black Floo powder!" I said.

"Precisely," confirmed Potter. "This proves His Lordship entered Professor Deere's rooms through the fireplace—and killed him with a deadly curse. Now we must uncover the motive."

"I say, Potter—have you noticed that there are no portraits of his family hanging here?"

"Well spotted, Watson. And when we consider that he introduced himself to his neighbour only as 'Lord Ventus' and never by his family name, it becomes clear: he wishes to conceal his disgraced lineage. Let's check his study."

We ascended to the first floor and entered a modestly furnished study. Shelves lined the walls, filled with old, leather-bound tomes. On the desk stood an antique inkwell and a quill, ready for correspondence. Potter stepped toward the desk by the

window. He drew the curtains again, shielding us from any prying eyes outside, and lit a lamp that stood on the desktop. Its soft glow illuminated a stack of letters.

While I wandered the room, Potter began sifting through the correspondence with a focused gaze. I didn't dare interrupt. His eyes scanned each letter with great care. Then, suddenly, he paused over one of them.

"Anything interesting?" I asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

"This one is from the older brother—Lord Tremor Darkshire. The tone is curt, and it's clear their relationship was tense. Tremor is fiercely insistent about the family inheritance. This letter makes it evident that the younger brother strongly disapproved of the family's dark legacy."

Potter continued sorting through the letters, until he paused again—this time with a gleam in his eyes. I could see it in the lamp's glow: the glint of someone who had just picked up a trail worth following.

"I've got it, Watson. This letter is from a country doctor in Boscombe Valley. He writes that Lord Tremor Darkshire is dying. The message is just over a week old. It all fits together!"

"What fits, Potter? What are you getting at?" I asked, now as excited as he was.

"Let's piece this together, Watson. A week ago, Professor Deere retired from Hogwarts—and at that time, he stole The Balance of Death from the Restricted Section. This letter tells us that Lord Tremor Darkshire was moribund. I'm convinced Lord Ventus Darkshire wanted the book to prolong his brother's life using Dark Magic. He must have arranged to meet the professor using black Floo powder to collect the book in person. But something must have gone terribly wrong during the handover—something Professor Deere did not foresee. And that's how he ended up dead."

The room seemed to hum with tension. "Not even Dark Magic can stop fate," I said quietly.

Potter nodded solemnly. He looked around the study. "I'll try to open the desk drawer. Perhaps the book is still here. If not, we must Apparate to Boscombe Valley immediately. I fear the worst."

He pulled out his magical key and began working on the drawer lock. Suddenly, an ear-splitting screech filled the room.

"Blast it," cursed Potter. "The drawer is protected by a Howler charm!"

Just as Potter raised his wand to Apparate, his eyes darted across the room to me. I stood several steps away—and as he well knew, I was unable to Apparate due to my injury.

With a pop, five Aurors appeared in the study, wands at the ready.

"Don't move! Drop your wands!" they shouted.

In a flash, they had confiscated Potter's wand and placed magical cuffs on both of us. I was thoroughly searched, even though I didn't carry a wand—it remained in Baker Street, useless to me now.

We Apparated with the Aurors straight into the Ministry's atrium and were marched down into the dungeons to be interrogated. Once again, we found ourselves on Level Ten of the Ministry, in the Wizengamot courtrooms. There, we were greeted by a visibly dishevelled Inspector Lestrangle.

"Gentlemen, what possessed you to break into a private home in the middle of the night and rob me of my sleep?" he demanded.

It was clear the Inspector had been roused from bed. He held a steaming cup of Moonshine Mocha in his hands.

"Lestrangle!" said Potter. "We must act—and quickly!"

"I'm more inclined to act by locking you up immediately. Now, out with it—what were you doing in that house?"

"Inspector, we are close—very close—to solving the murder of Professor Deere!" said Potter.

"I can't believe this," Lestrangle groaned. "You wake me up in the middle of the night—for that? I closed the case yesterday. Don't come to me with more of your vague assumptions!"

"We found black Floo powder in the house where your Aurors arrested us."

The Inspector paused, clearly taken aback. He turned to the Aurors and said, "Thank you, you may leave us. I will conduct the rest of the questioning myself."

Once we were alone in the interrogation room, he asked—now visibly flustered—"And what other evidence have you uncovered?" His composure began to crack.

Sherlock Potter began recounting all the facts we had gathered. As he spoke, Lestrangle grew increasingly uneasy and began tugging nervously at his moustache. By the end, he held a tuft of hairs in his hand.

"What am I supposed to do now, Mr Potter? If word gets out that I was wrong all along and arrested the Montard family without cause, my career at the Ministry is over! I'll be reassigned to chimney maintenance for the Floo Network!"

"We'll deal with the Montards later," said Potter. "First, we must resolve this case. We need to locate the Darkshire brothers immediately before it's too late. And only you, Inspector, can Apparate us out of the Ministry's secure levels. I'll describe the location of the estate—then you can take us there."

The Inspector agreed without hesitation.

"The manor stands on the highest hill in Boscombe Valley," said Potter. "You won't miss it—it's the only building for miles. Best to bring along a few Aurors as backup..."

But Lestrangle had already grabbed us by the arms, and with a whirl, we were spinning off into the darkness.

The house in Boscombe Valley

We tumbled forward into knee-high grass. The rain fell cold and heavy on our cloaks. From the long-distance Apparition out of London, we were left a bit unsteady on our feet.

Our eyes turned toward the elevation ahead of us, where a grand manor house stood against the faint glow of the full moon, drifting clouds casting fleeting shadows over the grounds. Only on closer inspection did I notice that the house's east wing had collapsed completely. Plants and vines grew over the ruins, thick ivy climbing across the crumbling stone. In the west wing, however, a single light glowed from a ground-floor window.

"I'm sorry," said Inspector Lestrangle. "I missed your last instruction. I had already begun Apparating. Of course, I should have brought reinforcements."

"Never mind, Lestrangle," said Potter. "At least I managed to grab my wand. And between the two of us, we make a fine team. Watson will assist to the best of his abilities."

"Of course I'll help however I can," I added, though I was painfully aware of how limited my magical capacity now was.

"Let's move," said Potter. "Perhaps we're not too late."

We hurried across the lawn toward the house's entrance. Above the arched doorway, the family seal loomed in stone—a great crest carved into the masonry. As we reached the door, soaking wet, I noticed a twisted little tree in a pot beside the threshold. As Potter worked with his enchanted key on the lock, Lestrangle and I waited at his side.

Suddenly, I felt something brush my back and spun around, startled. The tiny tree was lashing out at me with its branches.

Potter and Lestrangle turned quickly. "No doubt—it's a Whomping Willow," said Potter. "The family must have saved it from the fires long ago. Now let's hurry. I've managed to unlock the door."

We slipped into the house, careful not to make a sound. The entrance hall featured two sweeping staircases that curved toward the upper floor. Paintings of the Darkshire family lined the walls, though all appeared to be sleeping. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling we were being watched. The railings and picture frames bore carvings resembling gnarled vines and twisted branches, all coated in thick dust.

The door to the ruined east wing was sealed, but the wind hissed through a narrow crack, and knotty roots crept into the hall. We turned toward the west wing, where we had seen the light. Our dripping robes left small puddles on the mahogany floor.

The corridor was filled with heavy furniture, carved with intricate leaf motifs and tangled wood patterns. The paintings along the wall showed various members of the Darkshire family. I immediately noticed a common trait: all had pumpkin-shaped heads, sparse hair, and long pointed noses—features that contrasted oddly with their round faces.

Unlike Lord Ventus, the elder brother clearly held the family's legacy in high regard. Thick jade-green velvet curtains framed the windows, and along the hallway stood several potted plants. Under the moonlight, I saw that they were unnatural specimens—leaves twisted into bizarre shapes, their fruits gleaming with a sinister shine, one entirely covered in red thorns.

Soon we reached the door to the lit room. It stood slightly ajar, and a sliver of light spilled into the corridor. We peered cautiously inside.

Inside were two tables, each bearing a body. Upon one lay an elderly man who, to my eye, appeared lifeless. On the other, a young woman rested beneath a white sheet—she was breathing steadily.

Between the two tables sat a wizard, his face buried in his hands, his wand resting across his lap. Sherlock Potter shot Lestrangle and me a sharp glance. We understood instantly. At his signal, we burst into the room.

The wizard in the chair was caught completely off guard. Before he could even think to draw his wand, Potter and Lestrangle had already raised theirs and shouted in unison:

Expelliarmus!"

The man and his wand were flung across the room.

"Inspector Lestrangle, Ministry of Magic! Don't move!" barked the Inspector. In an instant, he had cast Incarcerous, binding the wizard with magical cuffs. The man now lay immobilised on the floor.

He was short and stocky, with a round head and a long, pointed nose—clearly a member of the Darkshire family. His thin blond hair, usually slicked back, now clung in damp strands to his sweat-drenched scalp. His eyes were wide with helpless fear.

Potter and I leaned over the lifeless man on the table.

"This must be Lord Tremor Darkshire," said Potter. "But there's nothing we can do. He's dead. Let's check on the woman."

Her breath was calm and regular. "A mild sleeping draught, I suppose?" Potter asked the man on the floor. He gave a feeble nod.

"And you must be Lord Ventus Darkshire."

Another slow nod.

"Very well, Inspector," said Potter. "Let's put His Lordship in that chair. He won't try to escape."

Lord Ventus offered no resistance as we helped him into the seat and gave him a sip of Cauldronfire Brandy. It took a few minutes for him to collect himself. Then, in a trembling voice, he began:

"You surely know about my family's disgraceful past."

"We're familiar with much of it," said Potter.

"Then you already know that the Darkshires once planted Whomping Willows along the main path through Boscombe Valley to ambush Muggle travellers."

We nodded silently.

"Then I don't need to dwell on those crimes. After the Ministry uncovered our misdeeds, my family withdrew from public life, hoping our shame would be forgotten. I lived here with my mother and brother. Overwhelmed by grief, our mother died a few years after our father. I took my share of the inheritance and moved to London, hoping to escape the shadow of our family name."

"We've already visited your London estate," said Potter.

Lord Ventus looked startled for a moment, his eyes darting between us.

"Please, go on," prompted Potter.

"While my brother continued to live here in seclusion, his mind grew more and more twisted. I, on the other hand, made new acquaintances and cultivated friendships—both magical and Muggle. I travelled frequently and took pleasure in life. But Tremor...he hated Muggles. He hated the wizarding world that had shunned our family. Over time, our views diverged completely.

Eventually, I discovered that he had saved a cutting from one of the Whomping Willows."

"We already had the pleasure of meeting it," I remarked, recalling the tree that had struck out at me by the front door.

"That's not all," Ventus continued. "Tremor wanted to resume the ways of our ancestors. He began breeding twisted magical plants and was determined to restore the family's legacy of fear. The Darkshires, after all, were the ones who originally created the Whomping Willows. But those trees grow slowly. Tremor experimented with en-

chanted fertilisers to accelerate their growth. Some of his tests went terribly wrong—you may have noticed the destroyed east wing of the manor. The plants grew out of control and tore through the walls.”

“A dangerous endeavour,” said Potter. “Magically enhanced flora can have unpredictable side effects. I’ve done a bit of research on that myself.”

“We fought bitterly over his obsession. Eventually, we cut off all contact.”

A tear rolled down Ventus Darkshire’s cheek as he continued.

“Two weeks ago, I received a message from Tremor’s doctor. It said my brother was dying. He had been poisoned while experimenting with one of his accelerated growth serums. The doctor—a master of healing magical toxins—declared there was no hope.”

“Wasn’t there anything that could save him?” I asked. “A bezoar, perhaps?”

Ventus shook his head. “No. There was nothing. And I panicked. I rushed back to the manor, desperate to make peace with my brother before it was too late. And that’s when I remembered The Balance of Death. I had seen it once in the Restricted Section during my time at Hogwarts. I didn’t recall the details, only that it contained rituals said to extend life.

“I knew I couldn’t gain access to the book myself—not with our family’s reputation. Then I read in the Daily Prophet that Professor Deere was retiring. It was the perfect opportunity. I approached him, though it wasn’t easy. He trusted no one. But I knew he was a Quidditch fanatic, so I bought tickets to the Cannons versus Harpies match and hoped to meet him there. That’s when I discovered he owed a massive debt to the goblins. He’d wagered everything on the Cannons—and lost.

“So I made him a simple offer: I would pay off his debt in exchange for The Balance of Death. He agreed immediately.”

Potter turned to Lestrage. “See, Inspector? Just as I suspected.”

"Professor Deere seemed nervous," Ventus went on. "The goblins had clearly placed him under enormous pressure. I think they gave him a deadline. He kept writing, asking if I had the money. But it took time to gather. I had squandered most of my inheritance—and Tremor spent the rest on his experiments. I had to borrow from friends—wealthy witches and wizards I knew from my travels.

"Once I finally had the funds, I sent the professor a letter and a small parcel of black Floo powder. We arranged to meet in his rooms and make the exchange. But when I arrived, he suddenly demanded even more money."

"Likely because the goblins had added interest," said Potter.

"I was desperate," Ventus continued, voice trembling. "Tremor's condition had worsened. I pleaded with the professor, reminded him I had fulfilled my part of the bargain. But he refused. He told me to return when I had the rest. I lost control. I drew my wand and cast the curse. He was dead before he hit the floor. I took the book and fled."

Ventus broke off. He buried his face in his hands, unable to go on.

It took a while before he could speak again. Then, with a shaky breath, he said,

"But in the end, the book was of no use to me. I couldn't bring myself to sacrifice the girl."

"You made the right decision," said Potter quietly. "There was no way to save your brother—not even with Dark Magic. But at least you spared an innocent life."

For a long moment, the room was utterly silent. Tears streamed down Lord Ventus Darkshire's pale face.

"Well, that's that then!" said Inspector Lestrangle at last, visibly relieved by the full confession. "I'll Apparate back to the Ministry and return with reinforcements. This long-distance travel wears me out."

In the early hours of the morning, Lord Ventus Darkshire was taken into custody by Ministry Aurors. Potter and I remained at the manor house to watch over him until they arrived. Inspector Lestrange did indeed return with a full team to investigate the property further.

During his absence, my companion had resumed his examination of the study. I noticed that his eyes repeatedly wandered to a certain object on one of the bookshelves: a pipe made entirely of jade-green, double-walled glass—strikingly elegant in a classic design. When Lestrange later Apparated into the room with the Aurors, the pipe had mysteriously vanished. I looked at Sherlock Potter, who gave me a conspiratorial, mischievous glance.

Because of the prisoner's weakened state, the Ministry decided to transport him back to London by carriage for further questioning. Potter and I, meanwhile, stepped out into the cool morning air. The sky was still overcast, but the rain had stopped.

Together with Lestrange, we Apparated back to 121B Baker Street. I informed Mrs Pomfrey—who was already up—that we'd be taking breakfast with a guest. Though we were all thoroughly exhausted, we tucked into her excellent cooking with great enthusiasm. She had even anticipated our need for freshly brewed Moonshine Mocha, which revived us nicely.

We ate in near silence. Then Potter spoke.

"Inspector, will you need any more details from us about the case? I believe Lord Ventus Darkshire's testimony made everything quite clear."

"That's true," said Lestrange. But then his face turned uncertain. "There's still one problem—rather a large one. What am I going to do about the Montard family?"

Thoughtfully, Potter fished the jade-green pipe from his cloak. Lestrange looked confused but said nothing.

"My dear Inspector," said Potter. "You'll travel to Azkaban today. Offer the Montards your sincerest apologies—and give them this letter."

He produced a sealed envelope from his desk. "I wrote it two days ago, anticipating how this case might unfold."

"I doubt that'll be enough," muttered Lestrangle. "I've humiliated the Montards in public. Think of the press conference I gave!"

"Don't worry," said Potter with a wave of his hand. "Spin it as a clever ruse. Say the arrest was a decoy to make the real killer feel safe. The press will love it. You'll be hailed as a brilliant strategist."

"But the Montards—think of what they've endured!" said Lestrangle, nervously twisting his moustache.

"Just give them the letter," said Potter calmly. "Don't waste another thought on it. Off to Azkaban with you."

Lestrangle sat in silence for a moment, then bowed his head. "Thank you, Mr Potter." He stood, bade us farewell, and Disapparated from Baker Street with a pop.

I took a final sip of my coffee and asked, "What was in that letter?"

"It's enough to say that the Montards owe me a great debt," said Potter. "I once helped them resolve a...delicate matter. I swore never to speak of it—not even to you, my friend."

He stretched and added, "And now, I believe it's time we got some rest. It's been a long night."

With that, he left the room.

I remained alone in the sitting room for a while, lost in thought about my extraordinary companion. My gaze wandered to the jade-green pipe lying on the table. I couldn't help but admire its elegant shape. But as I looked at it, conflicting emotions rose within me.

How much Slytherin—and how much darkness—truly lived in Sherlock Potter?

Still, I decided that even I deserved a bit of rest. I rose from the breakfast table and went to my room.

There, my eyes fell on the small travel case I had taken to Hogwarts. At once, I remembered the letter from Scarlett Zink, which must still be inside. Suddenly, I was wide awake. With trembling fingers, I opened the case—and there it was.

The letter from Scarlett Zink slipped gently into my hands.

Sherlock Potter

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