

## Chapter 7

24th of August, 1991  
Hogwarts

Severus Snape stood before the gargoyles guarding the Headmaster's office, exhaling a long, weary sigh. Summoned by Dumbledore, he couldn't suppress the twinge of irritation. Why did the Headmaster insist on these ridiculous personal passwords? Perhaps each one was linked to a magical signature, but why did his have to be so humiliating? He muttered under his breath, "No, Naruto, I am not your friend. Grrr. Grrr. Edgy." His cheeks flushed with embarrassment as the gargoyle pivoted and the staircase revealed itself.

Climbing the spiral stairs, Snape reflected on Minerva's warning: Albus had been... eccentric lately. Was old age finally catching up with him? And what did this mean for Severus, who owed his post and his freedom to the Headmaster?

"Ah, Severus," Dumbledore greeted warmly as Snape entered the office.

Something was off. Dumbledore looked merely old—not the venerable, incredibly old-looking man he had always known, but simply an aged figure. About seventy, if he had to guess. Had he... No, the man was too righteous to have used the Philosopher's Stone for himself.

"You called for me," Snape said, his voice a blend of curiosity and wariness.

"Yes, for two things," Dumbledore replied. "First, the start of the year is approaching. I wanted to know if everything was in order."

Severus almost recoiled in surprise. Dumbledore concerned with administrative details? That was usually Minerva's domain.

Dumbledore stood and began to stroke Fawkes, the phoenix preening under the gentle touch. "Is there anything you would like to change in the school?" he asked, his tone casual but his eyes keen.

"In the school? Why? We can't change anything without the board's approval and the budget..."

"Yes, just indulge an old man."

Severus scowled. "First, I would change the students," he said with a sneer. Then, as if struck by a rare moment of candor, he added, "We need to focus more on practical defensive spells. Too many students leave Hogwarts woefully unprepared for real-world threats. Second, we must address the glaring deficiency in basic literacy and numeracy. It's absurd that students can brew complex potions but struggle with basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. We need to integrate fundamental skills like accounting and practical math into the curriculum. Finally, we must establish better integration programs for Muggle-born students. They need resources to understand our world, and we need to support them better to foster their magical education and their sense of belonging."

Dumbledore hummed thoughtfully while still petting Fawkes. The phoenix trilled softly, adding to the surreal serenity of the moment. A heavy silence settled over the room, broken only by the soft rustling of Fawkes' feathers. Then, without warning, a sock launched itself at Snape from a pile in the corner.

Snape reacted instantly, his wand drawn in a flash. "Protego!" he shouted, a shimmering shield appearing before him. The sock bounced off harmlessly, but then it twisted in mid-air and darted at him again.

"Confringo!" Snape cast, but the sock dodged, weaving through the air with uncanny agility. It managed to slip past his defenses and wrap around his arm, tightening like a vice. He slashed at it with a Severing Charm, but the sock was resilient, slithering up to his neck. With a growl of frustration, Snape grabbed the sock and tore it away, but not before it left a nasty red mark on his skin.

"Incendio!" he bellowed, flames erupting from his wand and consuming the sock in a burst of fire. Ashes floated to the ground as Snape panted, clutching his neck.

"What in Merlin's name was that?" Snape demanded, his voice hoarse with exertion.

Dumbledore shrugged nonchalantly. "Ah, yes, my socks have been a bit rebellious lately. A side effect of some experimental enchantments, I'm afraid."

Snape glared at him, still catching his breath. "You called me here for this?"

"No, Severus, there is another reason," Dumbledore said, his eyes narrowing slightly. "I need you to show me your Dark Mark."

Snape hesitated, his brow furrowing in surprise. "Why?" he asked cautiously. It wasn't that he didn't trust Dumbledore with his life; it was just that this request touched a part of him he loathed to expose. The Dark Mark was a symbol of his past mistakes and revealing it felt unsettling.

"Please, Severus," Dumbledore insisted, his voice gaining a steely edge that brooked no argument.

Severus gulped, feeling a knot tighten in his stomach. Reluctantly, he rolled up his sleeve, exposing the Dark Mark etched into his pale forearm. He extended his arm towards Dumbledore, the mixture of shame and discomfort evident in his eyes.

Dumbledore stepped closer, his gaze fixed on the mark with an intense scrutiny. He began casting complex recognition spells, his wand movements precise and deliberate. The incantations flowed from his lips in an ancient tongue that Snape didn't recognize. As the spells took effect, the Dark Mark began to glow faintly, revealing intricate patterns and layers of enchantments hidden beneath the surface.

Snape watched in silence, feeling the weight of the moment. Dumbledore muttered to himself, phrases like "NFL parasitic network" slipping out, cryptic and filled with the weight of deep arcane knowledge. The Headmaster's face was a mask of concentration, his brow furrowed in thought.

Dumbledore's quill scratched rapidly across the parchment, taking notes at a speed that spoke of long-practiced efficiency. Snape shifted slightly, thinking the inspection was over and it was time to leave, but Dumbledore, with a mere gesture and a commanding look, made him sit back down. The

power of Dumbledore's presence was enough to keep Snape rooted to his chair.

Severus felt a wave of discomfort, like a student awaiting a verdict, which made him feel both vulnerable and foolish. He scolded himself internally for being so affected, but he couldn't shake the feeling.

Dumbledore turned to a blackboard and began writing complex Arithmancy equations, the symbols and notations weaving together in a dizzying array of geometric patterns. Snape watched, bewildered. The equations were beyond anything he had encountered in his studies.

"What is this Arithmancy?" Snape asked, feeling a rare moment of inadequacy.

Dumbledore glanced at him, a flicker of surprise crossing his face. "It's basic Algebraic Geometry," he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Snape's cheeks reddened with a mix of embarrassment and frustration. It was rare for anyone to make him feel this way, but he found himself oddly not vexed, but rather, enlightened.

Dumbledore continued to scribble, the equations forming a coherent whole that seemed to dance off the board. He occasionally muttered under his breath, as if piecing together a particularly tricky puzzle. Snape could only watch in silence, feeling a strange mix of awe and frustration at his own limitations.

After a few more minutes of intense focus, Dumbledore finally stepped back from the board, nodding to himself with satisfaction. He turned to Severus with a calm, knowing smile. "Thank you, Severus. You may go now."

Snape rose, feeling a mixture of relief and curiosity. "Have a good day," Dumbledore added, his voice returning to its usual warmth.

— — —

**25th of August, 1991**

## Hogwarts

Quirinus Quirrell hustled through the winding corridors of Hogwarts, his robes flapping like desperate bat wings. He arrived last at the staff meeting but still managed to beat Albus Dumbledore. He paused at the door, straightened his turban, and donned his usual mask of anxious humility. Inside, the room buzzed with lively chatter.

"Absolutely, Filius! And I'm planning to introduce them to some rare magical plants from the get-go. Nothing like a Venomous Tentacula to get their attention!" Pomona Sprout responded, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

Across the room, Rubeus Hagrid's booming laughter echoed as he regaled Sybill Trelawney with tales from his latest escapades in the Forbidden Forest. "Yeh shoulda seen the size of 'em Acromantulas, Sybill! Big as a carriage, they were!"

Trelawney, swathed in her usual layers of shawls and beads, looked more out of place than ever. Quirrell couldn't help but wonder why she was here. Protecting the Stone? He almost snorted in derision but caught himself just in time. If she was part of the security, this would be easier than he thought.

Minerva McGonagall, the epitome of stern efficiency, was deep in conversation with Severus Snape. "We must ensure there are no scheduling conflicts for the NEWT students, Severus," she said, her tone brooking no nonsense.

Snape nodded curtly, eyes scanning the parchment in his hands. "Of course, Minerva. I've already made the necessary adjustments."

Quirrell made his way to a seat, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. His nerves were already frayed, and he didn't need extra attention. McGonagall noticed him first.

"Ah, Quirinus," she greeted, her tone softening slightly. "Good to see you. Have you finalized your plans for Defense Against the Dark Arts this year?"

Quirrell nodded, plastering on a nervous smile. "Y-y-yes, P-Professor McG-Gonagall. I-I'm l-looking forward to it."

"Don't look so nervous, Quirinus," Flitwick said, his cheerfulness infectious. "It's going to be a fantastic year!"

"Indeed," Sprout added with a warm smile. "We're all here to support each other."

The camaraderie was almost tangible, and it made Quirrell's skin crawl. He nodded and stammered a few more pleasantries, trying to blend in.

"Have you heard about the new first-year students?" Hagrid's eyes twinkled with excitement. "They're supposed to be a bright bunch this year."

"Oh, yes," Trelawney said, her voice ethereal. "I foresee great things for some of them. Especially those born under the sign of Leo."

Everyone but Hagrid rolled their eyes at Trelawney's declaration. Hagrid, ever the gentle giant, nodded enthusiastically. "Tha's right, Sybill! Yeh've got quite the gift."

Quirrell suppressed an eye roll and forced a faint, nervous chuckle. He took a seat near the back, where he could observe without drawing too much attention.

Suddenly, the doors burst open with a dramatic flourish, causing everyone to jump. Dumbledore swept into the room, his presence as commanding as ever, dressed in robes that shimmered with every color of the rainbow, adorned with twinkling stars and crescent moons. His hat, a towering creation of purple and gold, seemed to defy gravity. He carried a staff topped with a crystal orb that glowed softly. In this absurd attire, nobody seemed to notice that he looked a bit less pale and younger than usual.

"Good evening, my soldiers... er, teachers," Dumbledore greeted with a grand gesture, a twinkle in his eye.

Quirrell's heart pounded as Dumbledore suddenly unsheathed his wand and pointed it directly at his turban. Panic surged through him, and for

once, his stammer was not an act. "W-w-what?" he managed to stammer, true fear in his voice.

A green spark shot from Dumbledore's wand, and Quirrell almost drew his own wand, ready to defend himself. But the harmless spell merely flicked a small spider off his turban. Quirrell exhaled a sigh of relief, trying to mask his intense stress.

Dumbledore smiled benignly. "Just a spider, Quirinus. No need for alarm."

Quirrell forced a weak smile, his heart still racing. The anxiety was nearly overwhelming, but he had to maintain his composure.

Dumbledore then began the meeting, his voice warm and authoritative. "As you all know, we are here to discuss the protection of a certain... valuable item. Initially, I did not want to reveal what we are protecting or why, but..." He paused, his eyes shimmering with sincerity. "I trust you all deeply, and I believe it is important that we stand together in this."

He continued, his voice growing more earnest. "Trust and friendship are the cornerstones of our community here at Hogwarts. Over the years, we have faced many challenges, and we have overcome them not just with magic, but with the strength of our bonds. It is this unity, this unwavering support for one another, that makes us strong."

McGonagall's eyes softened, and Flitwick nodded, visibly moved. Pomona Sprout even got up to hug Dumbledore, a rare display of affection in such a formal setting. Quirrell had to admit, Dumbledore knew how to play his audience.

With a dramatic flourish, Dumbledore reached into his pocket and pulled out the Philosopher's Stone. The room filled with gasps and murmurs of awe. Quirrell's eyes widened, the Stone so close that he almost felt compelled to grab it, but he restrained himself.

"This," Dumbledore announced, holding the Stone aloft, "is what we are protecting. The Philosopher's Stone."

He continued, "We will protect it together. I will take each of you one by one, starting with Professor Snape, in reverse order, to put your protections in place."

Dumbledore then pulled a small box out of his pocket and unshrunk it with a flick of his wand. The metallic box looked bizarre, covered in strange, eldritch symbols. Quirrell squinted, trying to decipher the writing. Something about a sunken god called Cthulhu? Creepy...

As Dumbledore set the box down, it began to shake ominously. Filius Flitwick, curiosity piqued, asked, "What is that, Albus?"

Dumbledore smiled creepily, his eyes seemingly fixed on Quirrell—ah, no, it was it the portrait behind him?

"This, Filius, will be a nasty surprise for anyone with ill intentions."