

- Chapter 1 -

Alone – for the very first time

Toireasa stood there, wondering. Next to her, there was a hissing and smoking something, trailing the Hogwarts Express. Her grandmother had told her it was a steam engine. A term that didn't do justice to the impressive machine. Much more properly was...

"Now? What name did my granddaughter choose for this Muggle-thing?", whispered a friendly old voice. A soft, gentle hand was laid on her shoulder.

"I'd like *steam-dragon*", replied Toireasa to her grandmother. "If you close your eyes, you can imagine this. A dragon is surely as big as this."

"Bigger", laughed the older woman, who was too small to see over Toireasa. But this didn't mean that Toireasa was especially huge for her eleven years. Her – still relatively young– grandmother was just a rather small person, though this was only true for her physical size. The moment she reached for her wand, dodging fast was probably a good idea, especially if one had done any mischief.

"I'd like to see a dragon", mumbled Toireasa in a dreamy voice.

"If you exceed your parent's expectations in your fifth year, I'll be able to convince them", the woman promised in a waggish tone. "Till then you'll have to make do with such Muggle-things."

"But this isn't the same", she grouched a bit. "At first you'll think '*Wow awesome*'. But if you think about it, you'll see how poor and complicated their solutions even for the simplest things are."

"This is because Muggles are poor in principle", another female voice added. "Although some things are rather useful. Like the Hogwarts Express. It's just necessary to enhance things a bit."

"A good day to you too, daughter-in-law", greeted grandmother slightly reproachfull – it was completely ignored.

Instead, Toireasa was hugged briefly.

"I hope you had two fine weeks with your grandparents. They didn't spoil you too much, did they?"

"Yes, I had, mother", she assured quickly.

"They didn't take you to the Muggle-town, did they?"

"No, mother. We just had to pass London to get here."

"Now really, daughter-in-law", hissed grandmother ironically. "You should question her when I'm not present. She won't tell you the truth while I'm standing next to her."

She twinkled waggishly at Toireasa.

I'm just worried, grandmother Caitlin. You live too close to the Muggles. I don't want her to get in touch with these...

"You should know me better, Pádraigín", Toireasa's grandmother said slightly hurt, emphasising the forename. "You know my attitude on this subject."

"Of course, mother-in-law", said Toireasa's mother. "But you'll have to admit that your ideas are sometimes a bit strange. Take the occasion, when you wanted to introduce this vampire to Toireasa for instance!"

"A vampire!", gasped Toireasa surprised and too thrilled – it was a mistake.

With glowing eyes she grabbed the hem of her grandmother's emerald-green cloak. It caused an angry look from her mother.

"Don't raise your hopes. I stopped this nonsense."

"We'll talk about this later, Pádraigín. Sir Erikal is an honourable, respected gentleman, strong-minded and with a flawless reputation. If he invites someone for a drink, it doesn't mean that the guest will be the drink. Not every half-breed is unworthy life."

Toireasa decided to change the subject quickly. Her mother and grandmother might agree on Muggle-issues, but on the subject of werewolves, vampires, centaurs, half-ogres or other half-breeds it was only a matter of time, until the arguments were backed by severe jinxes.

“By the way, where are Aidan, Risteárd and Dad?”, she finally asked her mother.

Fortunately her mother was willing to let herself be distracted.

“Your father has to change a Muggle's memories. He witnessed our arrival with the portkey. Your brothers wanted to watch it. They should ... oh – here they come.”

Toireasa looked to the wall, that represented the barrier between platform nine and three-quarters and Muggle-London. There her father, a tall, athletic man with a stern-looking face, and her two older brothers just appeared.

Aidan, who was only one year older than Toireasa, grinned like a Cheshire cat.

“Hello, little sister. Now you've missed something! A Muggle, absolutely convinced that he was hallucinating. Ran around completely confused. Babbled something about aliens”, he reported excitedly. It was seconds before he recalled his manners: “How do you do stepgrandma Caitlin?”

“How do you do stepgrandson Aidan? I hope you enjoyed your holidays and you're looking forward to Hogwarts?”

“Of course, grandma”, replied her brother, but his good spirits sunk a great deal. Hogwarts always reminded him of his bad marks last year.

“Your brother also had a bad start”, Toireasa's grandmother comforted him,. “hadn't you, Risteárd?”

“Not that bad, grandmother Caitlin”, restricted the mostly silent boy, while shaking hands with Toireasa's grandmother.

Toireasa liked Aidan a great deal better than Risteárd. Fifteen-year-old Risteárd was too much like his father. Serious, reclusive, very ambitious, always neat and avoiding every mistake, and absolutely boring. She definitely preferred Aidan. Well, most of the time they quarrelled and there were also some bloody noses and disgusting, ulcerous knobs, but normally the hatchet was buried quite fast. Unfortunately this changed last year. Since Aidan had spent his first year in Hogwarts – apart from fun and chaos – he became much more like his older brother.

And the lecture from their parents, caused by his bad school report, made it all worse. Aidan had to study half of the holidays. He had to read quite a few books in order to learn the theory of the magic and rejected most of the adventures Toireasa suggested. Only in few good moments the old scrappy brother could be seen.

Meanwhile it was almost eleven o'clock. The steam-dragon seemed to sense that the departure was near, because the hissing grew louder and louder. It was time to say goodbye.

“I hope your grandmother has checked, whether you've got all your stuff?”, asked her mother finally.

“I've got everything”, answered Toireasa, though her grandmother hadn't checked it. She hoped, the fond, old woman would send her all the things she might have forgotten in the hurry, in secret later.

“Then make us proud. You are a Davian after all.”

“I'll try, mother”, she answered, as it was expected from her.

Satisfied with this answer, her mother turned to say goodbye to Aidan and Risteárd. It was a much more heartily goodbye, Toireasa noticed a bit jealous. From her father she only got a short: “Have a good trip!”, before he helped Aidan with his luggage by levitating it into the train.

Fortunately there was grandma. It took some hearty hugs and the promise to write at least once a week, before the old woman released her.

“Don't forget, you are a Keary at heart”, whispered grandmother in a rush, before Toireasa sprinted into the train.

The moment she had entered the train with all her luggage and the cage of her small owl, the train started to move. She turned and waved at her parents, who in fact were her stepparents. Then suddenly she noticed how lonely and lost she felt. Aidan and Risteárd were somewhere on the train with their friends from the last year.

Slowly she pulled her trunk along the corridor in order to find an empty seat. The compartment, in which she found Aidan was packed with students his age and she didn't want to join Risteárd. In the middle of the train she thought to have discovered an empty compartment just to find it occupied by a ginger-haired girl in worn-out clothes and so she continued searching. According to her parents one should avoid ginger-haired students. The whole lot of them were troublemakers and bad company for her. Moreover a hex lay on ginger haired-witches, they had told her.

Finally she reached the last waggon. There, in the last, slightly dirty compartment a boy,

approximately her age, lay over three seats, apparently sleeping. Apart from him it was empty. From his clothes she concluded that he must be Muggle-born. Such odd raw blue trousers and a black tee-shirt – no wizard would ever wear this by his own free will! At least not together. Oh well - like grandmother told her – in Hogwarts she would meet many Muggle-borns. It shouldn't be that bad. She opened the compartment door.

“Excuse me! Are these seats occupied?”, she asked politely.

The boy winced slightly, opened two grey eyes and smiled. Drowsily he ran his hand through his short dark brown hair.

“It wasn't before I fell asleep. And now it's quite silent in here. I think it should be possible for you to find an empty seat. Can I help you with your luggage?”

“Don't worry”, she laughed. “My trunk is bewitched. It doesn't weight more than a bag full of feathers.”

Then she lifted it by herself to the luggage rack.

“Even feathers can be heavy”, was the boy's answer, which irritated Toireasa a bit. After that, he laid down and fell asleep again only moments later.

She sat down opposite him and placed the cage of her owl next to her. She rather wanted to talk. About Hogwarts and their next year. But she held her excitement back. The boy looked somehow weary. It would have been very rude to wake him. She took one of her schoolbooks – *Wanderings with Werewolves by Gilderoy Lockhart* which was new on the book-list for the first graders this year – and began to read to distract herself.

Every now and then she looked up. The boy's sleep was very disturbed. His eyes moved rapidly behind his eyelids and occasionally his whole body was twitching. After a few hours Toireasa had enough. She wanted to talk and it appeared that she would do him a favour by rescuing him from his dream.

She nudged him cautiously. He twitched back as though she had touched him with a fire spell and stared at her completely lost. Then he shortly shook his head and set up straight.

“Thanks”, he whispered in a low voice and fell silent again. He didn't explain for what he thanked her.

He just stared at her silently, hardly blinking, like a serpent. She decided to say something, before she felt like a rabbit.

“I'm Toireasa Keary-Davian and you are...?”

“Tarsuinn McNamara”, he introduced himself.

Now at last, he blinked again.

“Is it your first time in Hogwarts, too?”

“Yes.”

“Are you looking forward to it, too?”, she kept on asking. His voice sounded quite friendly, but his eyes showed no sign of emotion whatsoever. Even worse than she had seen it at Risteárd sometimes. “Somehow it's the same everywhere, isn't it”, he answered indifferently, smiling at her for the first time.

“You're joking! Your parents must be Muggles, aren't they?”, she blurted out. “Hogwarts is definitely the greatest thing that can happen to someone our age.”

“Pardon, my parents are what?”, he ignored the note about Hogwarts.

“Muggle – just non-magic people”, she explained.

“I see! According to my sister, my father was a wizard and my mother earned her money with divination – crystal balls, hand reading and all kinds of such stuff.”

“Why did your sister tell you ... oh”, embarrassed she broke off. “They died!?”

“I think so”, he replied indifferent, “My sister told me, they died in an accident. I grew up with her.”

“I'm sorry!”, she offered her excuse, “And I didn't want to offend you by regarding you as a Muggle. The clothes – you know ...”

“You don't have to apologize. I seem to be a bit clueless. I know this train takes us to a school. But to be true, I have no idea where it is and what awaits me there. I only heard some things on the platform and on the train.”

“And? What do you think?”

“Could be interesting”, he smiled again. “Especially Hogsmeade sounds like fun. I heard two friends – Fred and George – talking about it. They are a bit weird, too. One always finished the other's sentence.”

“Unfortunately only third graders and above get permission to visit the village”, she explained. “But I'll ask my older brother to bring me something along. As long as he gets the money, he will do it for me. He won't just give me presents for nothing.”

“Small presents might be fine, but it's nothing to being there by yourself, don't you think?”

“Not at all. But a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Eventually we should study at school and not enjoy ourselves.”

“If you think so. I believe fun is part of the game. For example ...”

“Oh, here you are little sister”, interrupted Aidan by opening the compartment door. Her brother seemed to be rather excited. “I was afraid you might have missed the train after all.”

“Hello Aidan. This was the only empty compartment left. This is Tarsuinn McNamara”, she pointed towards the boy. “He is also a descendant from a wizard family.”

“Never heard anything about the McNamaras.”

“We don't make a claim on publicity”, assured Tarsuinn ironically. “It simplifies life.”

With that he stood up and stretched out his hand to Aidan, who hesitated shortly before he shook hands.

“Let's hope you'll make it to the right house”, commented Aidan on the handshake and turned back to Toireasa.

“Did you know?”, he asked excitedly.

“No, what is it?”

“Harry Potter isn't here. I just checked the whole train. But nothing. There are rumours he will stay away for ever. If that's true, it will be a great start of term. I'll have to tell the others. Particularly Draco.”

And then he was gone. Toireasa closed the compartment door behind him.

“It would really be good news to Slytherin”, she muttered in a hushed voice.

“Why?”

Toireasa wasn't aware she had spoken loud enough for anyone to hear.

“Well – My brothers think, their house – Slytherin – has only lost the house cup last year because of Harry Potter. He is the headmaster's favourite boy, you'll have to know.”

“Oh, I see. What's Slytherin?”

“Do you know anything at all?”, she spat out aghast. “Didn't your sister tell you anything?”

“I doubt she has ever been to Hogwarts. She was busy raising me.”

“Oh well! It's not such a big thing. I can explain it to you. In Hogwarts there are four houses, which compete to win the house cup. They're called Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. Every house prefers other virtues in their students – except for Hufflepuff – they'll take anyone.”

“And the other houses?”

“Gryffindor admires bravery above everything else. This leads to action without thinking or sufficient knowledge. My parents always claim that they cause more harm with their bravery than achieving something positive, though they want to do the right things.”

Ravenclaw admires cleverness most. Knowledge is power, regrettably most of them are not prepared to use this power. They collect knowledge for the sake of it, but then don't dare using it.

Slytherin on the other hand is the best house with the highest and most extensive requirements. One has to accumulate knowledge and also have the courage to use it at the right moment for the right goals. Only Slytherin will teach you this and therefore only descendants from noble and most ancient wizarding families will be taken.

Hey! Maybe both of us make it to Slytherin, or at least Ravenclaw.”

“It doesn't really matter to me in which house I'll be sleeping in”, he noted quite unimpressed.

She ascribed it to his ignorance.

“No problem. The sorting will be done for us. Don't worry.”

“Definitely not about this. But you surely want to become a Slytherin, don't you?”

“Yes, I do”, she confirmed. “But Ravenclaw won't be too bad either. I've been reading my brothers'

schoolbooks for some years now. Of course, I don't understand everything and most of the charms aren't working or at least not properly, but the first year shouldn't be a problem at all. My mother helped me there a great deal. She reckons, I'd pass first year's examination already!"

"I can't keep up with you", he told her, but didn't seem to be notably depressed. "I mastered only a few small tricks."

"Show it", she demanded nosily.

"Sure", he agreed at once.

He stood up determinedly, clambered onto his seat and tried to take his luggage, a kind of big backpack, but he never reached for it.

A dark-grey something suddenly jumped from the luggage rack directly onto Toireasa's lap. A startled gasp was all she managed, as terrified as she was. Motionless she stared upon a grey unfamiliar creature. Without further ado, it began to stretch against her body and to examine her face with its wet nose. It tickled madly, but she didn't move. Her grandmother had always told her not to provoke unknown creatures with aggressive movements. Fortunately she was rescued only moments later.

„Tikki!“, she heard Tarsuinn's angry voice. "How many times I'll have to tell you, not to attack someone like this? Please, come here!"

Without taking down his backpack, he sat down again and reached out his arms for the grey creature, which jumped immediately toward him. He caught it oddly clumsy, placed the creature named Tikki on his legs and began to tousele its small ears.

"Once again, Tikki", he said insistently. "First a neat introduction, a polite request and only thereafter sniffing and begging for caresses. Not the other way around. Got it?"

The creature looked at him with completely innocent eyes. This gave Toireasa some time to look at it more closely. It looked a bit like a marten or a weasel, but was more massive and chubbier. Both, body and tail were about a foot long. A pointed head, big alert eyes and small, constantly jerking ears gave the impression of vigilant intelligence.

"I'm sorry", Tarsuinn told her. "Tikki likes it to frighten people. One day she will regret it painfully. But she never believes me."

"No Problem", she replied immediately. "I like animals. I was just a bit surprised."

"Okay then", he seemed to be happy about it. "So this is Tikki. Tikki, this is Toireasa."

Tikki wanted to jump back to Toireasa's knee at once, but Tarsuinn hold her.

"May she sniff you?", he asked. "She loves to do so."

"Of course", she laughed. "You're very polite and careful. You don't have to go over the top."

At this he let Tikki off, who jumped over and began immediately to investigate Toireasa's smell. She stroked the grey fur on the animal's back tentatively. It was very soft and Tikki seemed to enjoy it a lot. At least she finished the examination of Toireasa's smell, curled in her lap and enjoyed being caressed with closed eyes.

"What kind of animal is that", she asked fascinated. "I've never seen something like her before.

"Tikki is a small Indian mongoose."

"I thought in Hogwarts are only rats, owls, cats and toads allowed", she asked astoundedly. He had to have quite good connections if he was allowed to take this animal to Hogwarts.

"Mongooses are viverrids", he answered. "So it should be okay. Depends on how seriously they take it."

"And if they take it serious? Don't you worry they'll take her and send her home?"

"Then I'll sleep somewhere else. But actually it's not possible to take her from me, because as a matter of fact she doesn't belong to me. She just follows me and looks after me. I can't stop her."

"But she listens to you."

He smiled at her.

"Only if she wants to. Normally she decides what we'll do. If she wants to be stroked and I ignore her, she'll chew on my hand as long as it takes to get my attention."

A short, concerned look at his hands was enough to tell that he exaggerated. There were some thin scars on the back of his hand, but she couldn't see any bite marks. Probably with chewing he meant the affective biting like cats did every now and then.

"It's just the same with Keyx", Toireasa pointed to her small owl. "Before you've given him

something to eat, to drink and patted him a bit, it is quite painful to take what he'd brought.”

“So – you also get mice as proof of love?”

“Oh, that too”, she grinned. “I have to make sure that mother doesn't see them. She's grumbling terribly every time she finds one under the sofa.”

Keyx gave a wispy, majestic sound.

“Quite a small voice. Will he grow any further or does he belong to such a small kind?”, he asked interestedly. “He sounds quite cute.”

“Shush”, she whispered and looked upon her European scops-owl which looked suspiciously at Tikki.

“Never say Keyx looks cute, is small or something alike. He doesn't like that at all.”

Tikki moved suddenly in her lap and jumped to the cage. She curiously eyed the small owl.

“Tikki”, Tarsuinn said in a sharp voice. “That's a pet. No food. Do you understand?”

She turned away apparently disappointed and began to strol through the compartment, begging for attention, but never came close to the cage again. Tarsuinn seemed to be used to this. No matter how close the grey, energetic animal darted or jumped past him, he ignored even near collisions completely. It was fun watching it and every now and then she tried to catch the fur ball. In no time this became a little game. She never succeeded in catching Tikki. No matter how fast her hands gripped, Tikki was faster and avoided her. Even as Tarsuinn tried to help her, they had no chance against the fast-reacting animal.

The time passed by and they jerked in surprise, when an older student suddenly opened the compartment door.

“Surely you are first years!?”, she remarked half-asking.

Toireasa nodded.

“I'm Deborah Wisdome, the Head Girl this year”, the girl with the Hufflepuff emblem and the silver badge introduced herself proudly. “We'll arrive at Hogwarts in a few minutes. You should change into your robes now. Hagrid, the gamekeeper of Hogwarts, will be waiting for you on the platform when we arrive and lead you to the school. The older students take another route. So stick with him and ask, before doing something stupid. If you need help over the year and can't tell it a teacher, you can come to me. And ... oh ...”, she interrupted herself, “... we've already arrived. Hurry up.”

Then she left hastily.

Toireasa felt the train slow down. She took her trunk from the luggage rack, opened it and took out a school robe. Tarsuinn did the same, but he didn't open his backpack.

“What's up? Didn't you hear her? We are supposed to put on our robe.”

“Why robes? It doesn't even rain.”

“That's traditional in Hogwarts.”

He looked embarrassed.

“I didn't expect this, because it shouldn't rain. My robe is at the bottom, it will take time to get it...”

Toireasa, without hesitation, threw one of her own towards him.

“Oh – thanks”, he stammered and flushed a bit “but isn't this for girls?”

“There's not much difference. Put it on. It's already dark outside anyway”, she urged. “But you'll give it back as soon as you can, okay?”

“Naturally. I'll also wash it before I return it”, he promised.

“I'd prefer if the house elves would do it”, she laughed by the thought of it. “I'm sure, they can do it better.”

“Better than the brownies?”, he asked waggishly.

“Spare me these German man-servants. We had one once. He wasn't able to cook anything except sauerkraut, dumplings, escalopes and fried sausages. Not even plum pudding!”

“Oh, *that's* horrible”, he answered in a tone that seemed to mean exactly the opposite, and put the coat over his shoulders.

“It looks like we are the same height”, he said satisfied. “Thanks again.”

“You're welcome. But let's go, otherwise we'll be the last ones.”

They had hardly left the train when they heard a deep, booming voice.

“Firs' years! Firs' years over here! Yer can leave your luggage on the platform”, it droned beyond all the excited talk of the crowd of students.

She looked at the speaker and sighed disappointedly.

“I thought, he'd be bigger”, she muttered in a low voice to herself.

“Who?”, asked Tarsuinn.

“The gamekeeper, this Hagrid. He's not even ten foot!”, she explained and made a mental note to speak quieter still next time.

“Well, I think this is quite huge”, Tarsuinn remarked. “Never knew a person can get that tall.”

Tikki – who balanced on his right shoulder – agreed with a whistling sound.

“Well – Aidan described him as much taller and also wilder. Okay...”, she admitted “... he really looks wild, but not that wild.”

“So you're disappointed, aren't you?” he asked amazed.

She could understand his tone a little.

Toireasa was fascinated by big, dangerous creatures. Her parents had always taken care that she met very few, but books were never forbidden to her. And now she was at last able to meet some of these creatures; the first one wasn't even that huge – and didn't look dangerous at all. More like a shepherd, who gathers his beloved herd. He smiled all the time and his attention was mainly directed at the first years. But Toireasa's inquiring look didn't miss that the gamekeeper, every now and then, had a short look over the crowd of older students, as if he was looking for someone. Then he waved at an older girl – who had the magnificent long, curly hair Toireasa had always wanted. Her own hair was always described as a dirty blond and it began to split the moment it had reached her shoulders.

The unknown girl waved back happily, whereupon the gamekeeper formed a silent question with his lips. It was impossible to decode the words due to the thick beard of the man, but the long-haired girl seemed to know what he meant and shrugged her shoulders with a desperate expression.

The giant didn't seem to like the answer at all, but got a grip to himself quite fast and smiled again at his eleven year old protégés.

“All right – shou'd be all. Follow me. We'll take a different route than the others. Stick together and **mind yer step, now!** We don' want to reach the lake like a big avalanche.”

Then he led them to a thin, slippery path down a cliff. Toireasa could hear the silent ripple from a lake.

“So – in a moment we'll get there. **In a sec yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts.** Those at the front of the line, please don' stop and enter one of the boats. Be careful and **no more'n four to a boat.** And yer back there don' push, otherwise the last'll throw the firs' ones into the lake. Yer year is quite a bit larger then the last two.”

Toireasa was glad to be quite at the back of the crowd with Tarsuinn. So she had a moment to stop and look at the romantically illuminated Hogwarts which towered nobly above them. But there was a problem. She hesitated.

“What's the matter?”, asked Tarsuinn slightly concerned. “Why did you stop?”

“No one told me we would go over the lake by boat. Aidan said, we had to walk around it.”

“And?”

“I can't swim”, she admitted horrified.

“Don't worry. I can and you're supposed to go by boat rather than swimming.”

He bent down, touched the border of the nearest boat – Tikki took the opportunity and jumped into it – and smiled encouragingly at Toireasa.

“Just do it like I do. Crouch down, hold on to the edge and enter the boat but keep low. If you sit down quickly and sit still, you'll be alright and it's almost impossible to overturn.”

He entered the boat.

“Only almost?”, she asked a little shivery.

“Oh well”, he smiled. “There are mean people, who rock or push on purpose or let go at the wrong moment.”

He reached out his hand to her.

“Trust me”, he asked and although his grin wasn't trustworthy at all, she crouched down, held on to the edge, gripped his hand and climbed into the boat. It rocked slightly and she sat down quickly next

to him. She barely noticed, that she hadn't let go of his hand.

“Everyone in?”, shouted the gamekeeper and looked intently around. He had a boat to himself.

“Yeh there!”, he shouted suddenly. “Yeah you with that camera. Sit down, before yeh'll fall into the lake.”

In one of the boats at the front, a small boy with blond hair sat down suddenly, so that his boat rocked heavily and two girls yelled loud in panic. But it steadied quickly and no-one fell into the lake.

“FORWARD!”, shouted the gamekeeper.

Almost simultaneously the boats started to move across the lake on their own.

It was a slow journey. It didn't rock much and Toireasa relaxed a bit.

“I'm wondering”, whispered Tarsuinn into her ear. “How do we move? I mean...”

“Magic I suppose”, she said shortly and tried to ignore that he leaned a bit over the edge and put one hand into the water.

“I don't think so”, he said. “There're people under water. They push us and there's also some kind of water-animal which pulls us. Look!”

It cost her quite an effort to bend sideways, so she could see his hand. It was only few inches above the water. Then suddenly five human fingers – webbed fingers – broke the water surface and touched Tarsuinn's fingertips very softly and only for a second. Then they vanished again. This happened a few more times.

“They must have applied some lotion against the cold water. So smooth...”, he mumbled.

“You should be more careful. What if they drag you out of the boat?”, Toireasa raised a concern.

“Then I hang on to you”, he grinned again impertinently, but took his hand back into the boat. “But I think, if they wanted us in the water, they could easily overturn our boat.”

“Still, I would prefer you not to test it”, she pressed out. Did he have to tease her like that if he saw how difficult it was for her to master her fear?

But fortunately he didn't do any further experiments. Maybe his hand hurt him by now, which she still clasped very hard. A short glance toward him showed her, that he kept on staring to the castle. As if he was mesmerized.

Finally they arrived in a cave beneath the building which served as embarkation point.

Toireasa breathed again. The moment she had solid ground beneath her feet, the world looked much rosier again – and so did the future. A fleeting feeling, because she found herself in front of a gigantic door that made her feel very small. Hagrid knocked and seconds later both wings swung open wide.

An older witch, dressed in emerald green robes with a pointed hat, was waiting for them.

“There's the lot, Professor McGonagall”, said the gamekeeper.

“Thank you, Hagrid, you are awaited in the Great Hall. Students! Please follow me.”

The gamekeeper vanished in a side corridor, while Professor McGonagall led them through a huge entrance hall and up a marble staircase. They passed a door through which they could hear a great babble of voices. Finally they stood packed in a small room.

“May I have your attention?”, the teacher requested unnecessarily. Every whispered conversation had stopped immediately, when the first word had left her lips.

“Welcome to Hogwarts”, she began and although she looked at the students without a smile, one got the impression that she meant it. “The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts.

You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room. The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule-breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the House Cup, a great honour.

I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours. The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting. The first impression is known to be very lasting and it

would be a bad first impression, if you used the waiting time to chatter loudly. I will pick you up, when it is time.”

Then she vanished with her cloak flying behind her through the door, which closed behind her.

“I think, I shouldn't be here at all”, whispered Tarsuinn quietly. His face reflected something between amazement and amusement.

“All of us are nervous”, whispered Toireasa tensely.

“You don't understand...”

It seemed to be her turn to be brave.

“Don't worry about the sorting. Okay, Aidan told me quite a few horror stories about it, but most of them contradicted each other every few days. And Risteárd told me it's not so bad.”

“I hope you're right”, he answered uncertainly. McGonagall didn't seem to be very humorous.

“It'll all turn out okay. After all...”

She never finished the sentence.

“Ickle Firsties!”, it howled triumphantly and through one of the walls a figure entered the room at high speed. The head was absurdly inflated, it had a malformed face and with outstretched arms it darted through the room, knocked over some knight's armour and made a great hullabaloo. All students, Toireasa among them, jumped aside in shock – all except Tarsuinn, who hadn't moved at all. “It's not very useful to knock over things, if we ought to be silent”, he said loudly and looked directly at the figure. It stopped inches before his nose and the head shrunk to a normal scale, so a small, virulent but confused looking ghost remained.

“It's just a ghost”, someone whispered relieved.

“Yes – but it's a poltergeist”, commented someone else warningly.

“This must be Peeves”, a third voice added.

“So – you've got to be silent?”, the ghost asked hoarsely.

He considered for a moment, then he started to giggle nastily and clear.

“So here we go...”, he announced and began to throw a helmet at the group. Luckily the helmet didn't have any sharp edges. Toireasa was able to dodge it, though it was only just, and noticed with amazement that Tarsuinn stood there hardly involved. He seemed to say something, but due to the racked it was impossible to understand him. He was an excellent target. A fact, the poltergeist apparently became aware of, too.

“PEEVES!”, someone roared suddenly in an icy voice above all the noise. Another ghost appeared through the wall. Dressed like a mediaeval nobleman, he looked quite elegant, but the ill-natured red eyes and the shining blood on his clothes documented an unpleasant demise.

“PEEVES!”, the new ghost shouted again. “We had an agreement and a promise. You broke the agreement so I'm going to deliver on my promise now. Come here, Peeves!”

But the poltergeist didn't even think of it, turned tail and ran. He was closely followed by the other ghost who didn't seem to be disappointed, but rather the opposite. Toireasa thought she had seen a triumphant smile.

At last it became silent again. Some tried to erect the fallen knight's armour, but it was useless. The parts didn't fit together and some were just too heavy.

“What for heaven's sake is going on here?”, Professor McGonagall's strict voice came from the door. Nobody had noticed the arrival of the teacher while they tried to repair the damage. All of them froze for a moment, but then dozens of explanations sputtered from the crowd of children.

“A Ghost ... two ... blood ... knight's armour fallen ... with the helmet ... horrible ... aimed at us ... Peeves ... through the wall ... not our fault ... tried to ... hit me ...”

Toireasa doubted that anyone could extract any useful information from this chaos. But the long-term experience with children seemed to enable Professor McGonagall to do so.

“So Peeves”, she said loudly with a becalming gesture. “This explains a lot. Please calm down, all of you. Peeves is a constant annoyance and this won't be the last time you will run across him.”

She looked short but seriously over the – now silent – students.

“But now you will arrange your clothes once again, line up in a row and then follow me into the Great Hall. You are already awaited impatiently.”

At these words she turned and strode away. It was just now that Toireasa realized, that McGonagall

carried an old, worn out chair in her left hand and a much older, crumpled hat in her right hand. Surely this had something to do with the ceremony. But what to do with it? She jerked her shoulders silently and decided to let come what may come. What else could she do?

Being swallowed by the ground would be a good solution she thought, as she paced off the line of older students. Ahead – directly in front of the teacher’s table - they stopped. Professor McGonagall placed the chair in front of them and laid the hat onto it. Toireasa didn't have the nerve to look at the long line of teachers. Instead she directed her full attention to the hat. At first nothing happened, but then the hat erected itself and started to sing something. Toireasa listened only half-heartedly. She was too excited and looked around in the hall. She spotted her brothers and thereby the Slytherin table. There she wanted to be!

The song ended and the following applause dragged Toireasa's attention back to the hat. Half-hearted and out of politeness she began to clap.

Professor McGonagall opened a long scroll.

“I will call each of you separately. If you hear your name, please come to the front, sit down on the chair and put on the hat. The hat will then choose your house... Creevy, Colin.”

The small boy, who without fail had to take photos in the boat, stepped ahead. She was sure, he would become a Gryffindor or a Hufflepuf. It wasn't long until the hat confirmed her guess with a loud “GRYFFINDOR!”

Bull's-eye! Brave, but no brains.

Encouraged by her first success, to distract herself and to kill time, she tried to predicted who was sorted into which house. Sometimes her guess was completely wrong. Then, much sooner than expected, it was her turn.

„Davian-Keary, Toireasa.“

She forced her legs to move ahead. She wanted to say, she was actually called Keary-Davian, but the undivided attention from hundreds of students and a dozen teachers banned every word from her lips. Silently she stepped forward, put on the hat and jumped, with so much drive onto the chair, which was a bit too high, that it rocked for a moment. Silent giggles from some of the older students were to be heard.

“Well? Whom have we got here?”, whispered a voice into her ear. “Someone who thinks is very smart and believes to know it all?”

I want to be in Slytherin, she thought strained.

“Why do you want this?”, the voice whispered again. “The other houses have plenty to offer you.”

I want to be in Slytherin.

It's Ravenclaw, where a bright future would await you.

I want to be in Slytherin.

“Ravenclaw could satisfy your thirst for knowledge.”

I want to be in Slytherin.

“And show you ways, you don't see yet.”

I want to be in Slytherin.

“I do not deny – Slytherin has plenty to offer you as well. But trust me, Slytherin would not be your first choice, though you are of pure blood. A painful path awaits you there.”

I have to be in Slytherin.

“You have to? No one has to ‘have to’ here. You make your choice, I just sort your head to the right table.”

My brothers are in Slytherin.

“You don't have brothers in Slytherin”, disagreed the hat. “I must know it. No relative of you put me on within the last seventeen years.”

My parents expect me to be in Slytherin.

“How do you know what your parents want?”

Only Slytherin will give me the power to change the countenance of the world.

“Are you sure of it? There are other aims in life, too.”

They are my aims. Slytherin will give me the strength and power.

“You may have a point”, the hat agreed for the first time.

Slytherin, Slytherin, Slytherin, Slytherin.

“...and so I send you to – SLYTHERIN!”

Relieved Toireasa sank into the chair. It took a grindstone's load off her mind. The Slytherin table exploded with applause and she walked relieved toward it, after having given back the hat. Her brother tapped her appreciatively on her back. She had to shake some outstretched hands, before she could sit down.

The sorting proceeded in the meantime. Soon a Luna Lovegood was sorted and became a Ravenclaw. Then she waited for Tarsuinn. She hoped, he would also become a Slytherin. But to her blank astonishment the name next called was: “O’Hara, Phyllis”, who was sent to Hufflepuff a minute later.

Toireasa frowned thoughtfully. Did Tarsuinn tell her a false name? She looked at the boy. Obviously being left out didn't seem to bother him. On the contrary – while everyone else concentrated on the progress of the sorting, he looked around in the Great Hall interestedly. His mouth stood open in amazement. Nobody seemed to see it.

At least Toireasa thought so – until she looked shortly at the ancient man in the middle of the teacher's table. He had to be Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts and one of the greatest wizards of the time. Despite his age his eyes and posture were alert and she could easily sense that most of his attention was directed at Tarsuinn. Had he also recognised that the boy had been left out? The sorting proceeded in the meantime. By now more than eighty students had been sorted into their houses and only two were left.

“Weasley, Ginny”, proclaimed Professor McGonagall right now and the ginger-haired girl – the same she had already avoided on the train – stepped forward. She was the only one where the hat couldn't stop itself and proclaimed a bit more than just the name of the house.

“Oops! There's a girl too?”, the hat announced pretending to be taken aback. Everyone laughed – more or less nice. “So than – be a GRYFFINDOR.”

The loudest cheers of the day came from the table furthest to the Slytherin table, followed by some bangs of fireworks going off beneath the table. Three boys with ginger hair jumped to their feet and welcomed their – brightly blushed – sister happily.

So, only Tarsuinn was left.

Professor McGonagall looked slightly irritated and checked her list.

“Did I overlook your name? Well, come here.”

He stood there, rooted to the spot. The hall fell silent again.

“I don't think that's such a good idea”, he said in the expectant silence and for the first time Toireasa thought she could detect panic in his voice.

“Don't worry”, comforted McGonagall and gestured him to come.

He walked forward, hesitating. She offered him the hat – still reading the list.

“Your name is ...?”, she asked.

“Just put on the hat”, the headmaster interrupted smiling. “If we don't get something to eat soon, some of us will be too weak to lift their fork and knife. Especially the older ones.”

It earned him quite a few giggles (also from Toireasa). He took it like an applause. And so Tarsuinn dared to put on the hat at last.

“My name is Tarsuinn McNamara, Ma'am”, he said in a low voice.

His head suddenly jerked down, as if the hat tried to look above its flap into the boy's face.

By now McGonagall had checked the list and shook her head.

“This name is not listed here”, she said apparently surprised. She grabbed for the hat but Tarsuinn fell sideways from the chair, out of her hands' reach. At first Toireasa thought, he had tried to stop McGonagall taking off the hat, but as hard as he hit the ground it couldn't have been planned.

Moreover it looked, as if the hat had moved aside at first.

“Hold still”, ordered McGonagall and walked towards him.

Again he avoided her.

“I can't”, he shouted desperately and tried to take off the hat by himself. It seemed to be impossible.

“I haven't come to a decision yet”, the hat contributed to the conversation.

“He's not listed”, McGonagall replied, obviously trying to save her dignity. Apparently she felt

responsible for putting the hat on the head of this boy, who was not invited into the school. Of course, it wasn't the teacher's fault, Toireasa realised suddenly. It had been her cloak which made the illusion perfect. She sank on her chair. If it leaked out, she would be doomed. What a terrible start. It was her fault that someone had sneaked into Hogwarts. She had even talked with the boy for hours without realising anything.

Only two people in the whole hall seemed to be amused by the scene, Professor Dumbledore and a dwarf-sized wizard two seats to his right. The first had slowly risen, trying hard not to smile.

“Herewith I have to announce the probably upcoming downfall of the universe, ...”, he proclaimed inappropriately happy, “... apparently a Muggle has managed to come to Hogwarts.”

At this moment for Toireasa a world collapsed, she wanted to run from the hall. She couldn't bear the shame. She had lent her cloak to a Muggle, held his hand on the boat and hoped, he would become a Slytherin, so they could be friends. She felt so dirty! What would her family think of her? Embarrassed she looked at Aidan and received a puzzled look in return. Then he conspiratorially laid his forefinger on his lips and looked away.

Slightly relieved Toireasa looked up to the teacher's table. Some teachers had – horrified by the headmaster's words – jumped up. One – in aquamarine robes, whose picture she knew from many books (Gilderoy Lockhart) – actually had taken his wand out.

“If I may, Headmaster, I will handle the problem”, he offered confidently. “I can modify his memories of the day, so he will never remember anything about Hogwarts.”

With this he fidgeted with his wand in the direction of the boy. This caused virulent snarls from Tikki. “I think there is time, Professor Lockhart. We have to settle some issues first. Professor McGonagall – would you be so kind to accompany me and our guest to my office? It seems, my speech has to wait. But beforehand – the most important...”

The headmaster clapped his hands and at once the tables filled with many kinds of delicious food. But Toireasa wasn't hungry any more. She had hoped, Professor Lockhart would modify the memory of the Muggle at once. But now they would question him and her participation would come out. What a horrible first day!

She felt sick as she watched the Muggle boy being led out of the hall. Professor McGonagall had laid her hand firmly on his shoulder to prevent him from running. The sorting hat was still on his head. The headmaster followed in a short distance, the chair of the Sorting Ceremony wavered behind.