

Anne's Story

My father was born in a sunny southern land, a short-legged, short-sighted, short-tempered man with a lust for travel and a gift for healing. A trading ship it was that brought him first to the shores of England, but a dreamy-eyed storyteller maid was the one who kept him here, for he wanted her from the moment he first saw her, with her hair all wet from the lake where she'd just bathed. So he wooed and won her, and they settled down near Eyrton village, and I, their firstborn daughter, arrived not quite a year after their wedding day.

Now you must understand that my parents, though neither had magic as you know it, yet each had a spark of knowledge, a store of wisdom beyond the ordinary. So when I began to light the fire with my laughter, and bring the rain down with my tears, they never called for a priest or screamed of devils, but only rejoiced that their daughter Anne had a gift. And one month and five days beyond my eleventh birthday, I stepped through the doors of the castle of Hogwarts for the first time, in company with a handful of my peers.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to enter that castle when its stones were still fresh from the building? To walk into the Great Hall and know that waiting for you was not a Hat, ready to Sort you into one of the long-established Houses, but the four great Founders themselves, standing on the dais to look over the incoming children and choose those they thought would most profit from their teaching? Can you imagine how terrified I was that not even Dame Helga, the Headmistress, would think me worthy to remain as one of her students?

Though "not even" is somewhat misleading, for Dame Helga always chose first from the children who awaited the teachers' judgment there in the Great Hall. Courage and ambition were all very well, she would say as she looked us over carefully, and a love for learning was of course a fine thing. But mastering the lessons she had to teach required tenacity, the refusal to give up in the face of difficulties. Her protégées must have an unquenchable thirst for justice and an unshakable loyalty to their chosen cause. And so speaking, she would choose, and having chosen, step away.

As I waited for my fate there on the stones of the Great Hall, I saw a dark-haired boy watching me from among Dame Helga's seated students. I did not like the way his bold green eyes seemed to eat me up, and so I made a terrible face at him, as I would at one of my brothers, to teach him to mind his business. Only when Lord Salazar stepped forth in his turn to choose his students, and I saw his face clearly, did I realize I had just been disrespectful to one of the Founders' own sons!

Still, to my surprise, nothing came of my rudeness, and when Lady Rowena came walking among us, the wish of my heart was granted. For she looked into my eyes and smiled, and touched me on

the shoulder. "Your mind is quick, and your thinking clear," she said. "Come learn with me, and we shall have joy of one another." And I followed her back to her table with the others she had chosen, and put the son of Lord Salazar who studied magic under Dame Helga out of my mind. He was nothing to me, nor I to him.

Those were marvelous times indeed in the castle of Hogwarts, when the great cornerstone stood strong and square in the center of the Hall, with each Founder's handprint set into a plate of polished metal affixed to one of the four sides, Sir Godric's in gold, Lord Salazar's in silver, Lady Rowena's in bronze, Dame Helga's in black iron. Should Hogwarts ever suffer a mischief, the rumors went, whether by human attack or ravages of time, the Founders, or their true Heirs, need only place their hands upon those plates, and the castle would be renewed in all its fullness.

We heard rumors, too, of the place called the Heart of Hogwarts, a suite of rooms where only the Founders and their children, or those whom they had admitted to its secrets, could come. I was curious about such a place, I admit, but the castle itself was so vast that I had my fill of wonder with everyday living. Besides, how could a simple Muggleborn witch such as myself ever be so favored? Lady Rowena's daughters were kind and friendly, but enough older than I that we seldom spoke, and I had little congress with the other Founders' families.

Most especially I had no congress whatsoever with the second son of Lord Salazar, whom I had learned was called Alexander. He was not like his older brother Matthias, who would likely have complained to his father and had me sent away from the school if I had made my face at *him*, but neither was he anyone I cared to show attention. Let the other girls fuss and primp in hopes of catching his interest if they liked. I planned to make my way in the magical world as I would have done in the Muggle one—by myself.

And yet, for all my trying, the younger son of Salazar Slytherin refused to leave my mind. I became aware as I grew older that it drew notice to me to be *un* friendly to Alexander, so I began to show him some guarded degree of friendliness, and to my surprise he proved an entertaining conversationalist and a most companionable individual. One did not have to guard certain portions of one's person with him, certainly, as was necessary with Sir Godric's son Paul (though never when his mother the Lady Hestia, his sister Maura, or his older half-brother Emrys were nearby!).

I will never know how all my good intentions went for nothing, but that is exactly what they did, for before I had finished my seventh year of schooling I was allowing Alexander Slytherin to hold my hand, to sit with me in the evening dusk and talk for hours, even to hear my music and my stories, which were things I had shared with only the closest of my female friends before this. And then, one night, on the tallest tower of the castle, he drew me gently close to him and kissed me, and my world changed forever.

Lord Salazar was not pleased. Of course he was not, for he had expected that both his sons would marry into families which owned land, which had money to dower their daughters, and, most important of all, which had already established themselves as magical. He did not intend, or so he said with disdain when Alex brought me to his father and mother, to find himself saddled with a magicless grandchild. It was precisely for this reason that he had never been entirely in favor of allowing wizards and witches like myself, who sprang from the Muggle world, into Hogwarts.

It is possible that I lost my temper at this juncture. I do seem to recall shouting certain phrases which nice young ladies are not meant to know. Lady Therese, Alex's mother, looked vaguely impressed by my language, but Lord Salazar simply looked justified. This, he told his son, was what he would have to look forward to if he wedded me—a lifetime of outbursts, burned meals, and crockery flung at his head, exactly as any peasant wench might do to her husband if he were fool enough to allow it. Whereas if he simply set me aside now—

We never learned what enticement Lord Salazar planned to offer his son, for the simple reason that we looked into one another's eyes, then turned and left the room together, ignoring the angry bellow of "Alexander Zacharias Slytherin! If you walk away from me now, you are no son of mine!" I felt my love's hand contract around mine, and had he asked it of me, I would have released him and let him go back to his father... but he did not, and I did not, and side by side we walked away from the furious baron and baroness.

Lady Rowena and her husband, Master Sylvanus who helped Dame Helga keep the grounds beautiful, were entirely understanding, as were Dame Helga and *her* husband, Captain Ignatius, master of the magical ship which brought students to Hogwarts (for, of course, this was before such things as trains). With their help, and that of Sir Godric and Lady Hestia, Alex found a home for us, in a mixed Muggle-magical village. We were married once I had finished school, and with my stories and music, Alex's ability to seek out the future, and both our skill with our wands, we did well.

Those were happy times for us, as we came and went freely in both worlds, Muggle and magical, visiting my parents' home or the great castle as we wished, to put our hands to whatever might be needed. We were careful to stay out of Lord Salazar and Lady Therese's sight, and away from Matthias, the dutiful son, but in no other way was our joy confined. Indeed, in visiting my family, we found it magnified, for the youngest of my brothers was beginning to show signs of the same gift which had brought me to Hogwarts and to Alex.

And then, in my twenty-third year, I quickened, and the rejoicing was great indeed, for I was the first of the Founders' daughters or daughters-in-law to show signs of new life. Lady Rowena laid her hands upon me to confirm the babe was safe and well, and in so doing smiled warmly, and asked if I wished to know. I looked at Alex, whose smirk told me he had already peered into the future to see if he would hold a son or a daughter in his arms, and so after making a terrible face at him I said yes.

Margaret Ravenclaw came to stay with us while I grew great with our daughter (whose name, we decided, should mean 'love', for surely no child had ever been so loved even before her birth), as magic or no magic, the chores of the household remained. Maura Gryffindor and her husband, a wizard named Joshua with a clever hand at crafting magical toys, visited often as well, for we lived in the same village. Alex seemed entirely content, but I surprised him sometimes looking wistful, and I knew he was thinking of his blood family and what our daughter might mean.

With all the ladies of the Ravenclaw family in attendance, I passed through my lying-in safely and with very little pain, and so in joy Alex and I first beheld our beloved daughter, shrieking in rage at having been expelled from her warm and comfortable retreat. Brenna spun a bit of the baby's

abundant red hair around her finger to calm my child as she washed her, and Sophia laughed happily as she measured out the swaddling clothes, and Margaret crooned a sweet lullaby as she cut the cord. Thus was born Amanda Slytherin, first grandchild of the Hogwarts Founders.

Sadly, my husband's wishes in regards to our daughter were not to be gratified in one way. Lord Salazar and Lady Therese took no more notice of her birth than they would have a mare dropping a foal in the fields. The rest of the family, though, on both sides, mine and Alex's, made up for this neglect most amply. Never was a child more cosseted than my green-eyed Amanda, and she ate up the attention gleefully. So our lives remained no more complicated than those of any young couple with a child, until the autumn of the following year.

At Dame Helga's specific request, Alex and I were in attendance when the new students arrived at Hogwarts, though we remained out of sight while the Founders made their choices. Lord Salazar was taking his turn when his gaze fell upon a sturdy boy with sandy hair and a wicked twinkle in his eye. He began to ask the boy questions, and his smile grew broader with every clever answer the boy returned. In the antechamber where we watched, Alex and I clasped hands fervently around Amanda's sleeping form, for this moment could prove the most important of many lives.

At last Lord Salazar declared himself satisfied. This boy, he proclaimed, would be an ornament to his House, among the strongest and greatest wizards he had ever had the pleasure of teaching. And yet... and yet, he could not quite place the young man's breeding, though his face was surely familiar. Was he perhaps a member of the magical clans which lived in the greenwoods and kept mostly to themselves? Did he come from the mountains where few ventured on account of giants? Could he even be a native of one of the secluded islands which lay out to sea?

He was from none of these places, the boy made fearless reply, but from a farming village in the south of England, where his father did his best with hands and herbs to heal those who had been hurt, and his mother made her stories and songs come alive with only the magic of her voice and her fiddle and mandolin. His name was Nicodemus of Eyrton, he said, and indeed Lord Salazar should know his face, for he favored his oldest sister Anne, and she had married Lord Salazar's son Alexander and borne to him a daughter called Amanda.

The anger of Salazar Slytherin in that moment was terrible to behold, as he realized how neatly he had (as he put it himself) been entrapped. He drew his wand with a snarl of rage, and the children scattered, screaming, as Alex and I burst forth from our retreat. But before anything untoward could happen to my brother, or to anyone, Sir Godric stepped forward one pace and pointed his finger at Lord Salazar's wand, and in an instant it was reduced to ashes. Violence against the innocent, said my husband's godfather, had no place at Hogwarts, and never would.

The scene which followed does none of the participants credit to recall, and so I shall draw a veil across it. I may say with justice that tempers were lost on all sides, insults and threats exchanged, and many tears shed. But, as the world knows, the final outcome of the quarrel was that Salazar, Baron Slytherin, his wife Lady Therese, and their eldest son Matthias shook the dust of Hogwarts from their feet and departed in anger, Salazar turning back at the gate to shout what I assumed from Alex's face was a curse in the language of snakes.

Emrys, the son of Lady Hestia Gryffindor by her first husband, was our mainstay in this difficult time, for he had learned magic from Lord Salazar and knew his methods of handling those students whose ambition might lead them into dangerous paths. Sadly, some of those methods proved to have been instead *encouraging* explorations into the darker magics, experiments that Alex and Emrys denied permission to continue, and some of the older students who had been closest to the Baron followed their mentor away from the school. Still, for all the enormity of the upheaval, Hogwarts itself survived surprisingly intact.

The peace we had formerly known, though, was shattered forever. Days on end would pass when I did not so much as see my husband smile. We gave up our cottage in the village where Maura and Joshua lived, not without a pang at losing the companionship of their little son John for Amanda, and resided instead at Hogwarts while the students were present. The summer months we spent in the home of Adam Hufflepuff and his capable lady Brittany, who lived in a town in Wiltshire, and there it was I discovered myself, for the second time, with child.

The thought of a sibling for our Amanda—a brother, as Lady Rowena was only too happy to confirm—banished some of the pain from Alex's eyes for the first time since his father's departure from Hogwarts. Amanda herself fairly danced with joy, for though she was not yet three, she understood well how wondrous a thing a baby could be. He would be her precious gift, she told me in the careful speech of an intelligent toddler, and she solemnly promised that she would take the very best care of him and never let him come to any harm.

But on the night our son Matthias was born, Salazar Slytherin came to our door and laid upon us a cruel and vicious curse. Alexander's choice to remain faithful to Hogwarts had left him with only one heir, he said, and thus we too should know what it was to lose a child. However many offspring we might have, before they reached adulthood, all but one of them would die. And this curse would continue on our family, no matter how long it should last, until finally one of our surviving descendants should die childless and end our line altogether.

Alex was horrified by what his father had done, but by the time the words were spoken, it was already too late. No magic which might be worked by a witch or wizard with scruples had ever been found which could lift or turn a fatal curse. Many times over the following months I had to remind my husband that I loved him, that I would not have given him up even had I known what was coming. And so we returned to our lives, prepared to love our son and daughter for as long as we might have them.

I see no point in rehashing the tedious years of our niggling, painful war against the Bloody Baron (as Salazar had come to be known for his crimes), or the Battle of Hogwarts which ended it. Alex wept bitterly, but he was, we were all, relieved. Salazar lay dead at the hands of Sir Godric's chosen champion, a friend of ours named William who had lost his Muggle parents, artists in clay, to the Baron's purges. Only the lingering imprint of my father-in-law's unhappiness with the "undesirables" at Hogwarts remained. There, we hoped, the matter might rest, and rest forever.

In the summer of the year she was seven, Amanda brought home with her a boy of her own age with very fair hair and a pointed, intelligent face. They had met in the forest, she said, and the boy, the second son of a local lordling surnamed Beauvoi, had let slip to my daughter that he could

make his arrows strike any target, simply by wishing it so. Alex let young Dafydd try his wand, and I had to snatch Matt out of the way of sparks. Clearly our daughter's new friend was a wizard, and a powerful one.

Fortunately for all concerned, the boy's parents were understanding, as were his siblings, though his younger sister Angharad pouted somewhat when she came to understand that she would not necessarily develop magic of her own. Amanda and Dafydd grew in friendship, and though when it came time for them to enter Hogwarts on their own account they were selected by different teachers—Amanda, to my secret delight, was chosen by Lady Rowena, and Dafydd to his own joy by Sir Godric—still they remained comrades and often studied together, the red head and the fair bent over a single book.

Matthias started his own career at Hogwarts in due time, and with some trepidation Alex took him on as a student. Emrys, to all our bafflement, had disappeared entirely a few weeks after the Battle of Hogwarts, telling us only that he was needed elsewhere—or had he said *elsewhen*? We could never be quite certain. What was certain, though, was that Matt was a quick and clever student. Alex and I thought we could be pardoned for showing pride in our son and daughter, who were proving so well that the name of Slytherin meant more than ruthless ambition.

We should have known better. Barely a week after Amanda's seventeenth birthday, some three months after Dafydd, with her father's and my strong approval and Matt's grudging acceptance, had asked if she would marry him and had his offer gleefully accepted, my daughter and her betrothed, who had been amusing themselves on a day free from classes with my son, Apparated onto the front steps of Hogwarts (for this was before the Anti-Apparition wards had been laid upon school grounds) and collapsed there together. Both were unconscious, Dafydd's right leg was badly injured, and there was no sign of Matt.

Dafydd regained consciousness first, and told us with his face set like rock of the chain of events in the caves below the school, where the Founders' children had once played. First Dafydd had slipped and gashed open his leg on what had seemed a harmless patch of stone, and then, after Amanda cleaned and bandaged the wound, they heard the water of the lake begin to rise. There was no time for them to run, and Amanda was an unpracticed Apparator. If she had tried to Side-Along both her brother and her betrothed, she would have fatally splinched herself.

I have never come closer to hating anyone, even knowing what I know about hatred, than I did in my feelings for Salazar Slytherin that day, and all the days and nights which followed. For although Amanda shed few tears for her brother's death and spoke few words about him, I knew as only a mother can that her soul was dreadfully wounded by the decision she had been forced to make. Alex and I feared for a time that we would lose her as well, but slowly, with help from us all, she made up her mind to live.

It took several years for me to realize how profoundly Amanda had been changed by the incident in the cave. She took to spending much time in the Hogwarts library, which grew every year as witches and wizards brought rare books there for safekeeping or donated their entire collections upon their deaths. She stayed up late upon certain nights, burning herbs and breathing the fumes, drawing runic symbols upon the surfaces of potion-filled bowls. And finally, one day when she

was nearly as old as I had been when she was born, she told me that she had found it.

Of course, I asked her what "it" might be, and the answer shocked me to my core. She had found, my daughter told me triumphantly, a way to evade her grandfather's curse. Not to lift or turn it, but to ensure that even in its fullest effect, it would do no good. For if her line died out, she said with a grin, the artifacts she and Dafydd planned to craft could give it new life, as long as those who received those artifacts were worthy of such a gift and took on their burdens with full knowledge and acceptance.

I fear I was not as politic in my response as I could have been, which has been my failing from the start. What possible good, I asked my child bluntly, would bringing our line back to life do to anyone while Salazar's curse remained active upon us? Would she doom some poor child of the future to the same horrific moment she had experienced herself, being forced to choose between two loved ones? Unless she could find a way to turn the curse from herself and her descendants, her artifacts would be worse than useless—they would do harm.

That, I thought, was the last of the subject, and for many years thereafter it seemed I was right. Dafydd's siblings, and Amanda's courtesy cousins, found spouses to their tastes, and begot children, and watched them grow. Alex and I were privileged enough to live to see our grandson, William (yes, named for the hero of the Battle of Hogwarts—Amanda was less tactful than her father in making her opinions known), wed a beautiful lady named Flora. She was the sister of the wife of the original William's grandson... and unlike that sister, Flora happened to be a Muggle.

Alex did not live to see Flora's child born, but I did, and smiled through my tears when William told me they would name him Alexander. Shortly thereafter, my time came as well, and I left my earthly life behind with few regrets, except perhaps that I had not been able to properly matchmake for all my brothers' and sisters' descendants as well as for those of my friends. My son, as I had hardly dared to hope, was there to greet me as I passed through the gates—but to my shock and dismay, Alexander, my husband, was not.

Matthias calmed my worries quickly by explaining that his father was not being punished for any wrongdoing of his own. Instead, as he showed me, Alex and his compatriots had accepted being chosen to keep watch over our world, and to do their best to heal some of the damage done by Salazar Slytherin. He told me also that by virtue of my marriage to Alex, certain rights appertained to me. I would never be a Guardian myself, but if I so chose, I could (if you will forgive the pun) guard the Guardians, and ensure their story was told.

This was my choice, as I think it would be of anyone who truly loved, and so for a thousand years I have waited and watched, as has my daughter Amanda, though from a much closer vantage point. Her soul, as I had long suspected, was indeed torn by her brother's death, and her soul-piece eventually found an anchoring point within the very artifact I tried to convince her not to make—for when did a child ever listen to her mother when that mother spoke sense? She was thus bound, as a revenant, to her gravesite beneath Hogwarts castle.

Dafydd, too, remained near the world, though in his case the anchor was not any portion of his soul but his beloved Amanda, the holder of his heart. He swore, with the quiet determination

which so characterized him, that he would never rest until she did. And her rest, as I should have known from the first it would, hinged upon her turning back the curse which lay upon our descendants. Even when the last of those descendants died childless, killed by his cousin in bad faith, Dafydd and Amanda never gave up hope that someday they would find peace.

Today, that hope is fulfilled. For Amanda's wait was rewarded when a woman who looked much as my daughter once did, a woman with a brave and loyal heart and a wise and clever mind, realized that the only way to defeat evil is to hold to that which evil cannot understand. So when she faced the descendant of my beloved's brother who calls himself Flight-From-Death, she thought only of her love for her child, and her willing sacrifice, made without a trace of hate, of anger, even of fear (for herself), turned the deadly curse back on its caster.

Amanda knew of the things which had passed, and so she began to search for a living body which held no soul (she would eventually find that of a young Muggle girl who had been bodily revived after drowning in a swimming pool) to take advantage of it. But she had failed to understand the meaning of Lily Evans Potter's sacrifice. She knew *what* had happened that night, but not *why* ... and unless she could put aside the fury and hatred of all those years, and overcome her natural fear of death, then her own sacrifice would be in vain.

Though I could not speak directly to Alex, nor he to me—the laws under which we exist usually forbid it—I knew his anguish at the thought that our child's long captivity might be for nothing. But neither I could not tell Amanda her mistake, for I too am cut off from the living world except under special circumstances. And while Dafydd might be able to speak with her, he would need a living host to do so, a host both related to him by blood and not entirely repugnant to his soul. Can you see why we despaired?

But then my beloved recalled that long ago, the name of Slytherin had been renowned not for evil and ruthlessness, but for clever solutions to seemingly insoluble problems. So he began to plan. And not very long after our daughter found the body which would allow her a second chance at turning away the curse upon our line (for though our last natural heir perished centuries ago, Amanda's artifacts do exist), an aspect of his plans bore fruit. The last living scion of the line of Dafydd Beauvoi's brother came under the influence of the family known as the Pack.

So you see, my friends, our joy today comes through you. Without you, my Amanda would never have learned what she needed to know, and she would have been forever lost with her second death. For if she had died in hatred, her soul would be shattered beyond healing, and the curse upon our line would remain forever. But now, since she has given her life in love, that curse is turned from us. It lies instead on the sole living heir of its caster... and would you not agree that no more worthy recipient could be found for it?