

STUDENTS loved to gossip about their teachers, Firenze realised, and he learnt to pretend he hadn't noticed when the younger ones solemnly informed each other "he's a *centaur*," or when the girls in his OWL classes blushed and giggled at the merest hint that he paid them any attention. But there was one whisper that always made him ill at ease, no matter how often he overheard it: the reverential, almost frightened declaration that "he lives in the Forbidden Forest."

Why should the Forest inspire such ominous tones, he wondered; why did Dumbledore insist on never allowing the students to have anything to do with it; why was it shrouded in such mystery, and made out to be so terrible? The Forest was his home; it housed so many wonderful creatures, and he hoped that one day the scholars of Hogwarts might be interested in that, and might seek to build a relationship with Firenze and his compatriots that wasn't forged on mutual suspicion.